

Establishing a **Dog Park** in Your Community

What's a dog park and how does it benefit the community?

With cities becoming more and more crowded and leash laws becoming more restrictive, many concerned dog owners are looking to the creation of dog parks as a solution to their need for a place to spend quality time with their pets. But what *is* a “dog park,” and what benefits can one bring to your city or town?

A dog park is a public park, typically fenced, where people and their dogs can play together. Similarly, a dog run is a smaller fenced area, created for the same use, that is often located within an existing park. As the names imply, these places offer dogs off-leash play areas where their owners can have the chance to socialize with other canines and their owners. Dog parks, which are sometimes managed by park users in conjunction with city or town officials offer a wealth of benefits to dogs, dog owners and the community.



More than just “room to roam,” the creation of a dog park...

- **Allows dogs to exercise and socialize safely.** Puppies and adult dogs need room to run, and enclosed play areas permit them to do so while preventing them from endangering themselves and others (for example, by running into the path of an oncoming vehicle). In addition, dogs who are accustomed to playing with other dogs and people are more likely to be well-socialized and react well toward strangers.
- **Promotes responsible dog ownership.** Dog parks prevent off-leash animals from infringing on the rights of other community residents and park users such as joggers, small children, and those who may be fearful of dogs. Parks also make it easier for a city to enforce its leash laws, as resident dog owners with park access have no

reason to allow their canine companions off-leash when outside of the park.

- **Provides an outlet for dog owners to socialize.** Dog parks are a great place for owners to meet other people with common interests. The love people share for their dogs reaches beyond economic and social barriers and helps foster a sense of community. Park users also benefit from the opportunity to ask questions of other owners and find solutions to problems they might be having with their pet.
- **Makes for a better community by promoting public health and safety.** Well-exercised dogs are better neighbors who are less likely to create a nuisance, bark excessively, and destroy property.

How to Build a Dog Park in Your Community

By now perhaps you've recognized the need for a dog park in your area, and you're eager to see one established. So, how can you get started? The following are some strategies for a successful campaign:

The First Steps ...

- **Start with a core group of committed dog park activists.** Talk with a half dozen other individuals who are concerned about the lack of off-leash spaces. This group may form a park association and will be responsible for meeting with public officials, making presentations, maintaining the park and defusing any problems that arise.
- **Hold a public meeting.** Once the core group is in place, a larger community meeting will help you get the word

out to supporters and solicit input and suggestions. Contact other dog owners, dog-related clubs, veterinarians, and local humane society and animal control officials to gather interest and support. Do so by posting, mailing, or distributing notices in areas such as neighborhood bulletin boards, pet supply stores, animal hospitals, and shelters. Encourage people to write letters of support to public officials and the media, and to make presentations to community groups whose backing would be valuable.

- **Educate your fellow dog owners on the need to be responsible.** The owner who neglects to pick up after his dog or who allows an aggressive dog to run loose can do a lot of damage to your cause.

SUCCESS STORY #1

Monmouth County, New Jersey

In the summer of 1999, a newly organized group of Monmouth County dog owners petitioned the county park system and several local municipalities to establish an off-leash dog park. The Bay Shore Companion Dog Club and New Jersey D. O. G. (Dog Owners Group) helped recruit members and collect signatures from owners of nearly 40,000 licensed dogs living in the county.

After collecting 12,000 signatures, the group presented its proposal to the county park system's Board of Recreation Commissioners and municipal park system officials. Officials agreed that a dog park would offer many benefits to residents. They talked to

other counties with successful parks about liability issues, rules, and regulations, before voting to approve funding for the establishment of an off-leash area in Monmouth county. The Thompson Park Dog Run opened on October 30, 1999, to enormous popularity.

Once the park opened, area dog owners concentrated on forming a core group to help keep up the site and prevent potential problems. Just because dogs are allowed to run free doesn't mean that owners will not be responsible for their animals' actions. There are rules to be followed, guidelines to be maintained. "Public education for dogs owners will be critical to the park's success," notes one of the organizers. The park itself provides a terrific venue for teaching people to be responsible dog owners. Members of the local dog community have already held a "Park Do's and Don'ts" seminar and plan to host future programs there.

- **Write a clear mission statement that details the need and purpose of the park, stressing the benefits to dog owners, their dogs, and the greater community.** The Redwood City [California] Responsible Dog Owners' statement says it all: "To establish a fenced-in, off-leash dog park where well-behaved canine citizens can exercise in a clean, safe environment without endangering or annoying people, property or wildlife. To develop a beautiful, well-maintained space open to all dog lovers and friends who are willing to uphold the park's rules and restrictions. To view this park as a community project, in partnership with the City of Redwood City, designed to satisfy the needs of dog owners and non-dog owners alike."

- **Choose a site.** The ideal area will be a safe, accessible location that takes into account the needs of park users as well as the effect the park will have on neighbors and the environment.

- **Create a budget.** Determine how much it will cost to construct and maintain the park - costs for grass, fences, garbage removal, lawn maintenance, drinking water, field drainage, lighting, benches, and a pooper-scooper station. Some cities are willing and able to finance a dog park; others would rather share the cost with a group committed to maintaining the park and ensuring that park rules are followed. If it is within your budget to do so, sharing expenses with the city can be a great public relations tool. It shows officials that you are committed to the project.

You will need to determine how you will generate revenue for your budget. Annual or daily fees to acquire a required permit (obtained from the city, town or through the park association) and fund-raisers are ways to generate money to cover costs. Also, consider soliciting town or city sources. By convincing elected officials that there is wide support for a dog park among taxpayers and voters, you may help encourage funding for the park.

- **Solicit the input and seek the approval of significant organizations in your community.** Meet with the proposed park's neighbors before talking to city hall. As soon as someone brings up a concern, address it and try to come up with a solution.

Ok, you've gathered your resources. Where do you go from here?

- **Create a proposal.** Your presentation will include your mission statement and goals, and should address issues such as location, funding, maintenance and enforcement. Committee members will be expected to establish and enforce reasonable health and safety rules for the park, and these should be included in the proposal as well. A good proposal will also do the following:
- **Demonstrate need.** Do this by gathering statistics on the dogs and people in your community, such as how many dogs would use the dog park, what are the demographics of the people in your city, and who currently uses city parks - and who doesn't. Downplay the "dog factor" and emphasize people issues. Dogs don't pay taxes or vote.



SUCCESS STORY #2

Sausalito, California

In early 1991, the City of Sausalito passed a law requiring dogs to be leashed at all times within the city limits. After receiving a citation and fine for walking her dog Remington without a leash, one owner led a citizen group that worked with the city council, the parks and recreation department and

the Marin Humane Society to establish a dedicated enclosed area where the dogs of Sausalito could be off leash.

During that summer, volunteers raised funds to fence a 1.3 acre area in the Martin Luther King School area, located on the north side of Sausalito, to be used as a dedicated dog park. In November 1991, the “Remington Dog Park” was officially opened with a gala ribbon cutting attended by city council members, local citizens, and their dog companions.

Although the city provides utilities, including water, electricity, and garbage removal, the park has been maintained by its users since the opening. Regularly scheduled work parties cut the grass as well as maintain and improve the grounds.

Improvements to the park in excess of \$36,000 have been made through donations solely from park users. In addition to original fencing, the park now has lighting, a storage shed, a riding lawnmower, picnic tables, benches, a dog drinking-water area, and a “scooper” cleaning station.

The park is home of champion show dogs as well as mixed breeds. Dog owners have adopted over 30 “rescue” dogs. Many owners now have two dogs as a result of this program.

Having received the highest rating of “4 Paws” in The California Dog Lover’s Companion, the Sausalito Dog Park is now used by over 300 dogs per day.



- **Demonstrate support.** In many communities, organizers found that a simply worded request, circulated on a petition, helped convince city officials that there was a indeed both a need and widespread public support for a responsibly run dog park.

- Place petition gatherers at supermarkets, pet-supply stores and other high-traffic areas.

- Enlist the support of local veterinarians, groomers, dog walkers, and others who have a real interest in seeing a community filled with healthy, well-socialized dogs.

Involve them in gathering petitions, writing letters to the editor of local papers and generally spreading the word.

- Organize local residents to contact their community representatives, parks department officials, and media in the form of letters, e-mails, and phone calls, asking for their support.

- Consider sending press releases to local media, explaining how the community will benefit from a dog park and providing information about the success of existing parks in other areas.

- You’ll need to get the neighbors’ approval too. Explain your proposal to them, as well as the ways that a dog park will benefit them, and ask them to sign a separate petition stating that they are willing to have the park in their neighborhood.

- **Get to know local officials - your city council members and the director of your department of parks and recreation.** Attend meetings, join them at fund-raisers. Find out what they need from you to move the dog park forward. To help you get started, the AKC’s Government Relations Department can provide you with brochures offering tips on working with government officials.
- **When you’re ready, request a hearing with city government to discuss your proposal.** Have two or three knowledgeable and articulate members of your group present your plan, clearly expressing its many benefits to the community and calmly addressing any concerns. Be prepared to answer questions regarding risk of dog fights, dog bites, noise level, parking and traffic needs, liability issues, and maintenance.
- **Be patient and flexible.** Dealing with city government is rarely a quick process, but don’t give up! Follow through with continued letters and e-mails, and be willing to work toward compromise.

They approved it! Now what?

Your efforts have been successful, and development of the dog park is moving forward. Now is the time to thank everyone who helped bring the park to fruition, including volunteers, government officials, and community residents. As a

result of everyone's hard work, many dog owners will soon have a new opportunity to enjoy their canine companions!

The key to future and continued success of the dog park will lie in responsible park-association members and park users who strictly enforce the rules. For the most part, this will mean getting people to clean up after their dogs, quiet excessive barking and curtail any aggressive behavior.

Maintenance will be another important consideration. In some areas, park associations work in conjunction with local kennel clubs and parks department officials to organize volunteer "park cleanup" days. Kennel clubs and other dog organizations may also be willing to donate funds for future supplies of scoopers, trash bags, and cans.

The development of a successful dog park requires a great deal of planning and effort. But your involvement and dedication will hopefully lead to the ultimate reward - the joy of creating and maintaining a special place where dogs and their families can run, romp and socialize.

Dog Park Design:

The Ideal Dog Park Should Include ...

- One acre or more of land surrounded by a four- to six-foot high chain-link fence. Preferably, the fence should be equipped with a double-gated entry to keep dogs from escaping and to facilitate wheelchair access.
- Cleaning supplies, including covered garbage cans, waste bags, and pooper-scooper stations.
- Shade and water for both dogs and owners, along with benches and tables.
- A safe, accessible location with adequate drainage and a grassy area that is mowed routinely.
- If space allows, it is preferable to provide separate areas for small and large dogs. This will enable owners of large

Rules and Regulations

Members of a dog park committee should establish and enforce reasonable health and safety rules for the park, such as the following:

- Owners are legally responsible for their dogs and any injuries caused by them.
- Puppies and dogs must be properly licensed, inoculated, and healthy.
- Animals should wear a collar and ID tags at all times.
- Owners must clean up after their dogs.
- Dogs showing aggression toward people or other animals will be removed from

SUCCESS STORY #3

Tallahassee, Florida

Members of the Ochlockonee River Kennel Club had long realized how important it was for dog owners to have a place where they could socialize with others and let their dogs run and play. At the same time, their community was facing problems at a nearby city park where owners were permitting their dogs to illegally roam off-leash. The solution seemed simple - build a dog park! A public committee was formed, and an ORKC board member volunteered to serve on behalf of the dog community.

While the city of Tallahassee was receptive to the idea, it was clear that little could be done without funds for fencing, pooper-scoopers, and the like. ORKC, which donates to various organizations every year, soon agreed to give the city the \$4,000 that would be needed to fence the two-acre park. Other clubs and fanciers followed suit, donating money for watering holes, cleanup facilities, shade trees, and benches. The city even donated old fire hydrants to add to the fun.

The park has been extremely popular since its opening, and city officials, who originally agreed to open the park on a trial basis only, are now enthusiastic about developing more.

dogs to allow their pets to run freely, while protecting smaller dogs who may not be suited to the enthusiastic play of larger breeds.

- Signs that specify park hours and rules.
- Parking close to the site.

the park. Animals who exhibit a history of aggressive behavior will not be permitted to enter.

- Puppies using the park must be at least four months old.
- Owners should not leave their dogs unattended or out of sight. If children are permitted in the dog park, they too should be under constant supervision.
- Dogs in heat will not be allowed inside the park.
- Owners must carry a leash at all times. Dogs should be leashed when entering and leaving the park.
- Violators will be subject to removal from the park and suspension of park privileges.



Help AKC **fight**
anti-dog legislation

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