



Gone to the Dogs

Why parks for pets (and their two-legged owners) are one of the fastest growing trends in military communities

By Nora VandenBerghe



Close your eyes for a moment and think of a local park. What comes to mind? A children's playground? A baseball diamond? A biking or walking trail? They all provide recreation opportunities, but what dog parks offer in comparison may surprise you.

Recent statistics show that nearly 40 percent of all American homes include at least one dog. In fact, there are currently more canines than children in the United States.

So it should come as no surprise that what started with a single dog park established in Berkeley, California, in the late 1970s has grown to more than 1,200 parks across the United States and Canada. Off-leash areas are not limited to public parks; they can be found at military posts, homeowners' association properties, pet-friendly hotel grounds, apartment communities, and more.

While dog parks clearly provide a designated space for dogs and their owners, they also fill a unique niche in the community. Compared to other forms of recreation, dog parks are one of the few multigenerational activities the entire family can enjoy together. From an economical perspective, dog parks are also one of the most affordable ways for a Property Manager or Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Director to improve the quality of life for members of the community.

Benefits for the whole family

Families are always looking for inexpensive activities in which everyone can participate. Most public dog parks



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are free of charge and conveniently located within walking or driving distance of the town center. Off-leash areas provide an inclusive environment offering recreation for almost every age and ability level. And if the proper surfacing is used, such as certified engineered wood fiber, dog parks can also be ADA accessible, which is particularly important to those with limited mobility.

An outing to the dog park can easily fulfill the minimum daily activity recommendation for adults and children, particularly if the park has agility equipment. Dogs, much like people, require exercise—without it, they are prone to obesity, joint disease, and other health problems. The addition of dog park agility equipment, from companies such as Dog-ON-It-Parks, has distinct advantages. The recreation-level components are designed for people to exercise in a noncompetitive environment with their dogs. A selection of different activities, such as tunnels, ramps, jumps, and weave poles, will easily accommodate the different skill levels of dogs and their owners while providing heart-healthy exercise.

In addition to the physical benefits of a daily exercise

regimen, spending quality time with a pet can help prevent behavioral problems such as barking, chewing, and anxiety. Running a dog through an agility course can strengthen the pet-owner bond and provide an opportunity to reinforce positive behavior. This interaction helps to build a dog's confidence and ultimately leads to a happier, well-behaved, and more responsive dog.

According to Connie Knoob, the Outdoor Recreation Director of the 355th Force Support Squadron at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, the new dog park there provides a place where both visitors and residents can enjoy themselves with their pets.

"Dog parks are especially important with the high deployment rates nowadays where children and spouses are left behind," said Knoob. "They need a place to play with their animals and spend time together." Since the dog park was built at the Agave Gulch FamCamp in the summer of 2010, she estimates that there are anywhere from five to 10 dogs and their owners in the park each hour.

Cost-effective recreation

Off-leash areas are cost-effective. A typical playground with safety surfacing can cost upwards of \$100,000 while a first-class dog agility park can be built for about half the price. The relatively low construction and low maintenance costs yield great recreation opportunities for the investment.

In many communities, the overall cost of a dog park can be offset through the overwhelming public support the park can generate. Off-leash associations or other volunteer groups often organize community events, spearhead fundraising efforts, and even have park clean-up parties. These volunteers can be an asset to both the dog park and local agencies as they can help to stretch budgets and provide labor.

As in real estate, a good location is the key to success. Repurposed land is often a popular location for a dog park. This might be a partially fenced ball field or an overgrown or unmanaged lot. Using underutilized land is a sustainable and affordable way to add instant benefit to the community.

Another factor to consider is the traffic and exposure dog parks can bring to local businesses, which may be interested in sponsoring some of the operational costs, such as pick-up bags, in trade for advertising in the park.

Pets and their military families

The positive impact pets have on people has been well documented. Pets help to reduce stress and depression. A family pet can also provide a sense of security during times of adversity, which can be particularly significant to military families during long deployments or when adjusting to a new transfer.

Carrienne Jurin of Edmonds, Washington, remembers her family's transfer from Washington, D.C., and being housed in the Everett Navy Lodge for a week while looking for a new home.

"Gibby was our three-year-old Golden Retriever," Jurin said. "We were so thankful the Lodge allowed us to have Gibby, but coming from our home with a fenced yard to a place where we could only exercise him on a leash was really difficult. He was very nervous from the move, so between house hunting and trying to walk him enough to relieve his anxiety, an off-leash area would have helped tremendously."

A 1994 study entitled "Companion Animal Attachment and Military Transfer" documented how keeping pets and their military families together reduced the trauma and consequent family problems associated with location transfers. Military families know that the stress of moving is often compounded by having to start over in a new community. Strong pet-owner relationships can ease this process.

The King family is currently stationed on Naval Base Guam with their dog, Ansel. As a military spouse, Katie King noted, "It meant a great deal to our family to have a dog park on the island. Having my husband underway

within the first six weeks of our arrival, it was a positive experience to visit the park and get to know the regulars there. People leave doggie bags, toys, and sometimes water dishes for community use, and visiting the dog park is one of the highlights of Ansel's day."

Dog parks provide a central meeting place for people with a shared interest. Although they are established for dogs, these parks also function as a social outlet for people. Dogs help to foster social ties, acting as ice breakers, encouraging conversation, and building rapport. "Which dog is yours?" "How often do you use the park?" "Are you new to the area?" Questions like these can easily forge the beginnings of a friendship and help someone feel welcome in a new home.

The bottom line is that well-designed and appropriately equipped dog parks are increasing in popularity in both military and civilian communities. And in a time of limited development resources, dog parks are a cost-effective solution to the needs of people, communities, and their pets. ■

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