



## TIPS FOR BUILDING SUCCESSFUL DOG PARKS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Park managers today are more frequently being asked to consider dedicating a portion of their parks to be used as off-leash areas for people and their pets. While not always without controversy, these areas can easily become one of the most popular areas within a park system. Good planning will help you eliminate or reduce many of the problems associated with creating dog parks.



Here are the 20 most common considerations to address as your community moves towards opening a very successful dog park:

**Big Benefits to the Community-** Dog parks are truly a multigenerational park activity for all ages. Dog parks are more for people than for dogs, despite what opponents say. Dog parks attract the adult park users who vote to support parks, and who are more vocal in the community. Relatively low construction costs and low maintenance costs yield the greatest amount of recreation opportunities for the investment. Low (if any) user cost. Dog parks provide outdoor exercise for the majority of park users, which are those who do not participate in organized sports.

**Community Support** – Informal groups, petitions, and 501C-3 non-profit groups promoting dog parks in your community can generate interest to successfully work within the system to create and support local dog parks. However, overzealous or disorganized groups can also quickly sink a well engineered plan for a dog park. Groups must learn to work with local agencies, instead of trying to always fight them, in order to be successful. Donations of labor, materials or funding will make officials more cooperative.

**Volunteer Groups** – Volunteers can be a tremendous asset to the dog park to help stretch already strained maintenance budgets. Projects that volunteers can participate in can include leaf raking, wood fiber spreading, fencing, exercise equipment installation, brush clearing and more. Advance sign-ups are critical so that volunteers commit to specific times, and helps ensure volunteers actually show up when expected!

**Know the Users** – Selling the concept to reluctant community can be a challenge. However your dog park will serve a wide variety of residents. There are nearly 73

million dogs in the US and 59% of the households have at least one dog. Most park facilities are geared towards a narrow range of users such as ages 2 to 12 for playgrounds, or ages 12 to 35 for most ball fields. Dog parks are one of the few multi-generational park activities that offer recreation for almost every age and ability level. Based on the number of park users and initial cost, a dog park provides more recreation opportunities per dollar spent on construction and maintenance than any other park activity.

**Choosing a Location** – As in real estate, a good location is a key to success. While neighbor's concerns are sometimes over-exaggerated, they still need to be addressed. There may be concerned about barking, loose dogs, smells and inadequate parking. All of these issues can be resolved. Once established however, a nearby dog park becomes a huge recreational asset to the families nearby as well as the entire community, sometimes even increasing property values. Be sure to avoid locating dog parks adjacent to schools or playgrounds, to reduce potential conflicts with children!

**Allow Adequate Space** – One of the biggest mistakes can be not allocating enough space for off-leash use. The popularity of most dog parks may require a minimum area of 1/2 an acre or more, although many smaller urban dog parks are also very successful.. Many successful dog parks however have been created by repurposing existing hockey rinks, ball fields, lawn bowling, tennis courts or equestrian arenas, even if it is just temporary or seasonal. Overgrown, neglected and unmanaged areas can become great dog parks. Inadequate parking can be a big problem especially on weekends, so even unpaved overflow parking spaces should be considered.

**Overcoming Legalities** - Some communities today still have archaic ordinances forbidding pets to be off-leash in *any* public areas. This means that city government may first need to amend local laws to allow your dog park to exist. Instead of attempting to amend your community's whole dog ordinance, consider requesting a special use exemption. A temporary special use authorization will at least get your park established, and no elected official will jeopardize his career by later attempting to close a popular dog park.

**Professional Design Assistance** – Consider using the talents of an experienced Dog Park Consultant or Landscape Architecture firm to help plan your dog park. They know how to best utilize a space, taking into consideration weather, access, utilities, drainage, vegetation, visibility, parking, and other factors. They are also very experienced at presenting plans to the community and to public officials, and can act as an important third party advocate for the park.

**Fencing** - Good fences make good dog parks. Fences should be five feet or higher and be absolutely escape proof. It is smart to bury several inches of the fence beneath the surface, since some dogs have an ability to find any possible weakness in the confinement. Multiple entries into the park will reduce worn areas. It is very important to have self-closing double gates with a 10' transition space between the gates, to reduce the possibility of dogs escaping unexpectedly from the fenced off-leash area. Closely

spaced wood slats in the fence between adjacent dog park sections will reduce visibility between sections to eliminate dogs from fence fighting. Don't use narrow openings at the entrance which may prohibit wheelchairs or strollers from entering the park. Avoid creating any 90 degree corners in your fence system which can be used by aggressive dogs to trap unwilling victim dogs. Don't forget to include a large maintenance entrance for large equipment like mowers. Longer, linear parks are better for playing fetch with sticks or balls. Create smaller areas for small or shy dogs. Typical costs are about \$25-\$30/linear foot for heavy duty chain link fencing, 6' high, with gates and accessories.

**Water** – Drinking fountains are absolutely essential in any dog park for the health of both dogs and people after exercising. Without drinking fountains, users may be forced to bring buckets of standing water, which can be unsanitary, can spread disease to other dogs, or can create mosquito havens. Consider water spray features or dog wash stations, but ensure you have provided proper drainage. Mud quickly becomes a huge problem in dog parks. Irrigation systems can help maintain turf grass in any climate, and reduces smells from urine especially in arid climates. Consider two adjacent drains to prevent flooding of one drain gets clogged with dog hair.

**Exercise Equipment** – Without exercise equipment for dogs, your park is much like a park without a children's playground. You would have just a fenced area. Exercise components are for people to exercise in a non-competitive environment...with their dogs! Choose components that offer a variety of activities like ramps, tunnels, jumps and weave poles to accommodate the many different skill levels of both the dogs and their owners. Equipment can be in its own area, or be an integral part of the main play area. Arrange components 15-25' apart from each other, and do not install components in a circle, but arrange them in an evenly spaced but random fashion which allows users to create a different course each time they visit the park. These activities make your dog park more of a destination and will increase the time users stay at the park. Because dog urine is highly corrosive, activities need to be made from rustproof materials like aluminum, galvanized steel, plastic or stainless steel. All hardware should be stainless steel and avoid any products made from brittle PVC pipe. Public parks are also vandalism prone, so choose heavy duty materials that have been created specifically for public dog parks. While not intended for children, unsupervised children sometimes play on dog park equipment, so it needs to be extremely durable and safe. For the safety of dogs and park users, immediately remove any unauthorized equipment. Injuries caused by unauthorized but condoned equipment quickly can lead to expensive lawsuits.

**Park Furniture** – Dog parks help build strong community and social ties and are fantastic places to meet neighbors and other interesting dog owners. Consider arranging your benches in an L or U shape to encourage conversations. Tables with a single center post will avoid the effects of dog urine. Locate benches away from congested entrance areas to better distribute the use through the park. Allow at least a 6' clear runway along the fence for unimpeded access for dogs to run the fence line. Climbing areas like mounds, hills and contours can add interest but can also become erosion problems. Large boulders can create mountains for dogs to play "King of the Hill"

**Accessibility for All**– Off-leash areas should have a wide gates and accessible surfacing materials to allow wheelchair and stroller access. Besides paved surfaces, other materials such as rubber matting and certified engineered wood fiber are considered to be ADA accessible.

**User Control** – Since many communities restrict use to their residents only or to those with passes, some form of easy to monitor control system should be used. Dog tags, parking passes, card swipes, electronic pay stations, and radio frequency ID(RFID) tags have all been used successfully to help monitor users. In some cases user fees are charged, but those fees should only be used for dog park maintenance and improvements, instead of going into the city’s general funds.

**Sanitation** – Pickup stations and receptacles are absolutely critical for a clean facility. Stations should dispense individual bags stapled to a card instead of on a roll since kids will take the rolled bags and stream your whole roll of expensive biodegradable bags across the park. Receptacles can be located on the outside of the fences to make trash pickup easier for maintenance staff. Several small receptacles will make unloading easier than large receptacles. Consider signs and/or color coding your receptacles for specific uses like “Trash Only” or “Dog Waste Only”.

**Lighting** – Timed lighting helps to extend the hours of use, but consider using the services of a sports lighting design specialist to avoid spill lighting into the neighborhood.

**Restroom Facilities** – While dogs are not too particular about where they go, their owners will expect some sort of facilities at the dog park, even if it is just a portable toilet. This may not be as important in small neighborhood dog parks, but becomes critical at larger destination parks. Video cameras on the building (even fake ones, or signs that say video cameras are being used) can greatly help to reduce park vandalism.

**Surfacing** – While grass is ideal, it may become worn out by enthusiastic canines. Consider reinforcing continually worn out areas with asphalt, concrete, crushed rock, decomposed granite, artificial turf, tanbark, hog fuel, rubberized grid, or a certified engineered wood fiber such as what is approved for children’s playgrounds. Wood fiber interlocks together to stay in place far better than ordinary chips, and will be wheelchair accessible while eliminating the mud problem. Depth should be 3-6”, but never use a GeoTextile or landscape fabric since digging dogs will soon be tearing it up, and dragging it throughout the park. Since excited dogs can quickly destroy the grass adjacent to the fenceline, consider creating a gravel perimeter track, and only try to maintain the turfgrass in the middle of the park.

**Shade** - Shade shelters or gazebos are highly recommended to help shield users from rain, UV rays, hot sun, even in the northern climates. Fabric shade shelters are quite inexpensive and may not even require a building permit. However, the fabric roof needs to be removed seasonally in locations where snow is likely. Larger hard-roofed park shelters are a more permanent solution, and can become an important gathering and social focal point in your park.

**Signage** – Good signage can be an effective user education tool, and bad signage will be completely ignored. Signs should have friendly and colorful graphics, and the text should take a positive tone instead of a long list of “Don’ts”. Keep the rules as brief as possible and provide a phone number to contact parks staff in case there is a maintenance or other problem at the park. Use materials like fiberglass and lexan that are easily cleaned of spray paint or markers, since any flat surface can become a graffiti target. Fast removal sends a signal to vandals that graffiti is not tolerated in the community, and shows park users that you care about the park. Park users will tend to self maintain the park more when they think the park operators care.

These tips should help make your dog park more successful, from concept through the grand opening.

If you have any additional suggestions on how to create better dog parks, please send your tips to us at [topdog@dog-on-it-parks.com](mailto:topdog@dog-on-it-parks.com)

© *Dog-On-It-Parks Inc, 2010*