



TIPS FOR BUILDING SUCCESSFUL DOG PARKS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

With the growing popularity of dog parks, community leaders are more frequently being asked to consider providing a dedicated area for people to exercise with their pets. Contrary to popular belief, dog parks are *parks for people...with dogs!*

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 multigenerational destinations for all ages and abilities, and the relatively low construction and maintenance costs help yield the greatest amount of recreation opportunities for the investment. Selling the concept to a reluctant community can be challenging, but your dog park will serve both residents and visitors to your community. Many 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 provide outdoor exercise for the majority of park users who do not otherwise participate in organized sports/recreation, and compared to children’s playgrounds or other activities that may be dependent on “good” weather, dog parks are used year-round regardless of what Mother Nature has in mind. Dog parks also provide a much needed social hub. For empty nesters, millennials, and the other nearly 50% of US homeowners who have a dog, off-leash areas are a necessity. Creative programming ideas such as “Bark in the Park” fundraisers, holiday themed events, pet adoption festivals and more can all help to boost community engagement and sometimes even offset the cost of building or maintaining a dog park.

Community Support & Volunteer Groups: Informal groups, Go Fund Me pages, and 501C-3 non-profits can help generate the interest needed to develop and support local parks. Groups must work with local agencies, instead of trying to fight them, in order to be successful. Partnering with local pet-friendly businesses such as animal hospitals, doggy daycares, or pet stores to donate labor, materials or funding creates goodwill and can help get the rest of the community on board with the idea. Volunteers can be a tremendous asset to help stretch already strained maintenance budgets. They’re able to coordinate projects such as brush clearing, spreading surfacing material, repairing fencing, keeping waste bag dispensers stocked, hosting poop clean-up parties (yes, there is such a thing!) and other smaller scale projects that help keep the dog park in good working order.

Choosing a Location: As in real estate, a good location is key to success! A homeowner near the proposed park may be concerned about barking, loose dogs, and smells, but all of those issues can be resolved with careful planning. Trees and foliage provide a natural sound barrier and the truth is there may be some barking (particularly when excited dogs are driving up to the park), but most canines *don't* bark while playing – they typically growl and/or whine. Loose dogs can be contained by appropriate fencing (more on that below), and smells can be alleviated with irrigation. Once established, a dog park becomes a huge asset to the entire community and studies have shown they also help to increase property values. The biggest consideration with location is to avoid building dog parks adjacent to schools or playgrounds to reduce potential conflicts with children. When it comes to size, a suggested minimum area of 1/2 an acre or more is a good starting point due to how popular they become, though many smaller urban dog parks are also very successful. Because dog parks become loved and used so quickly, overcrowding can be a problem. When feasible, it makes sense to plan the park in an area that could be expanded if/when necessary, and be sure to consider parking too. Dog parks see an increase in use on the weekends, so overflow parking spots, even if unpaved, are appreciated by the park users. There is also some flexibility with dog park locations that wouldn't be a good fit for other forms of recreation. Overgrown, neglected, hilly and unmanaged areas can become great dog parks; there's no need to excavate natural slopes or remove trees, they make the terrain that much more interesting for our canine friends.

Overcoming Legalities: Some communities today still have archaic ordinances forbidding pets to be off-leash in *any* public areas. This means the city may first need to amend local laws to allow your dog park to even exist. Instead of attempting to rewrite your community's entire dog ordinance, consider requesting a special use permit or special exemption. This authorization may help to at least get your park established and can fast-track your community becoming more pet-friendly.

Professional Design Assistance: Consider using the talents of an experienced Dog Park Consultant (like us!) or Landscape Architecture firm. They know how to best utilize a space and will factor in considerations such as weather, access, utilities, drainage, vegetation, visibility, and parking. They are also very experienced at presenting plans to the community and public officials, and can act as an important third party advocate for the park. Make sure they have experience specifically in designing dog parks and be sure to ask lots of questions – if they aren't able to answer them knowledgably, you should move on.

Fencing: Good fences make good dog parks! Fences should be 4'-6' and be absolutely escape proof; bury several inches of the fence beneath the surface to help prevent dogs from digging their way out. Chain link is a popular option as it's affordable and readily available; if you're considering fencing with slats, just make sure the spacing between is no more than 1-2" apart. Self-closing double gates with a 10' x 10' transition space are a must to reduce the possibility of dogs escaping unexpectedly; also consider having a dedicated entrance and exit so those transition areas don't get crowded. Help prevent aggression and fighting by providing a visual barrier between adjacent dog park sections and when possible, avoid using 90 degree angles which can prevent more submissive dogs from being cornered. For budgeting purposes, the average installed costs are about \$25-\$30/LF for heavy duty chain link fencing, 6' high, with gates and accessories. Don't forget to include a maintenance entrance for large equipment!

Water: Drinking fountains are absolutely essential for the health of both dogs and people after exercising. Without fountains, users may be forced to provide bowls or buckets of standing water which are unsanitary; they can spread disease to other dogs and create mosquito havens. Ensure your pet fountains are all stainless steel to prevent rust and have add-on options such as hose bibbs for park maintenance, freeze resistant valves, ADA accessibility, and custom plaques to honor park donors. Other water features such as spray fire hydrants are water efficient ways to help keep four-legged park users cool; they're much more cost effective than expensive spray pads but ensure you have proper drainage as mud can quickly become a problem.

Agility Equipment: Without exercise equipment for dogs, your off-leash area is much like a children's park without a playground. Choose components that offer a variety of activities like ramps, tunnels, jumps and weave poles to accommodate different skill levels of both dogs and their owners. Equipment can be in its own section, or integrated into the main play area. In a larger park, you can arrange components 10' - 15' apart and 6' - 10' in smaller parks. If you don't have a recommended layout, just make sure everything is evenly spaced in a random fashion to allow users to create a different course each time they visit. These activities make your dog park more of an exciting and fun destination, and will increase the time users stay at the park along with how often they visit. Because dog urine is highly corrosive, components should be manufactured with rustproof materials like heavy gauge aluminum and stainless steel hardware. Avoid products made from brittle PVC, galvanized steel (which rusts), or lumber and equipment with step strips and/or perforations. Public parks are also vandalism prone, so choose products with heavy duty materials that have been created specifically for outdoor recreational use. The equipment should be mounted into the ground with concrete footers or surface mount plates and feature vandal-resistant hardware as well. For the safety of dogs and park users, immediately remove any unauthorized equipment; injuries caused by unsafe agility components that are brought into the park without permission may lead to expensive lawsuits.

Park Furniture and Shade Shelters: Dog parks help build strong community and social ties. To encourage conversation with other pet owners, consider placing benches next to one another. To alleviate congestion and encourage use of the entire park, avoid installing seating areas near park entrances and make sure your furnishings have a powder coat finish to help protect against rust. Recycled plastic furniture is another alternative as it is highly durable and won't rust, rot or degrade over time. Customization of benches and other fixtures allows you to highlight your community or park name, and selling these benches to sponsors can also help offset the cost of outfitting your park. Shade shelters or gazebos are highly recommended to help shield park users from rain, UV rays, and hot sun, even in northern climates. Fabric shade shelters are inexpensive and may not even require a building permit (but be sure to check with your city!). However, the fabric does need to be removed seasonally in regions with heavy snow or hurricanes. Larger hard-roofed park shelters are a more permanent solution and can become an important gathering and social location in your park.

Surfacing and Accessibility: Off-leash areas should have wide gates and accessible surfacing materials to allow mobility devices and strollers (be sure to check park rules regarding children). Besides paved surfaces, other materials such as synthetic dog park turf and certified engineered wood fiber (EWF) from Fibar® are approved by federal standards and will help make your dog park a place everyone can enjoy. While grass is ideal, it can become worn out by enthusiastic canines so reinforcing high use areas with more durable surfacing options can help to maintain your existing grass. For instance, EWF interlocks to stay in place far better than ordinary mulch/chips and helps to eliminate the mud problems that can often close a park. The grass adjacent to the fence line is especially susceptible to damage; creating a hard surface perimeter provides a walking track and lessens maintenance as well. Irrigation systems are beneficial regardless of surfacing, and can significantly reduce smells from urine, especially in arid climates.

User Control: Since many communities restrict use to residents or to those with passes, some form of an easy-to-monitor control system can be used. Dog tags, parking passes, card swipes, electronic pay stations, and radio frequency ID (RFID) tags have all been successful to help monitor park users. When residents are required to purchase a dog park pass, the fees should only be used for dog park maintenance and improvements, instead of going into the city's general funds.

Sanitation: Pick-up stations and receptacles are absolutely critical for a clean facility. A good rule of thumb is one waste pick up station near the entrance/exit and one or more inside the park - this will of course vary depending on size. Using several small receptacles will make waste removal and maintenance much easier than large ones, particularly with dog waste - it's heavy! When possible keep receptacles and stations in a shaded area to help reduce odors.

Restroom Facilities/Lighting: While dogs are not too particular about where they go, their owners will expect some sort of facilities, even if it is just a portable toilet. This becomes critical at larger destination parks. If a restroom just isn't an option, installing a hand sanitizer station is a much appreciated amenity. Timed lighting helps to keep the park safe and extend the hours of use, and can help to prevent vandalism. Consider using the services of a specialist to avoid spill lighting into the neighborhood. If you're looking for an eco-friendly and low maintenance lighting solution, go solar! Unlike traditional park lights that are all on the same power grid (if power is even available, which it may not be at more rural locations), if one solar light goes out, the others will still stay on.

Signage: Good signage can be an effective user education tool, while 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 brief and provide a contact phone number in the event of a maintenance issue or other problem. Materials like fiberglass and lexan are easily cleaned of spray paint or markers, since any flat surface can become a graffiti target. Look for customizable sign options that allow you to highlight the specific rules in your community.

These tips should help make your dog park more successful from concept through the grand opening. © Dog-On-It-Parks Inc, 2017