

Making Space in Parks for Dogs

How can parks and recreation strike a balance that pleases everyone?

By Diego Martinez

The two sides of the aisle took their seats for what promised to be another fervent debate in our nation's capital. On the agenda: the inclusion of a dog space in the renovation plans of a community park and recreation center.

In one camp, residents highlighted the merits of a dog space, including having an enclosed area for their dogs to run freely and creating a space for conversations and connections between dog-loving owners. In the other camp, residents noted how they

often clean up after other owners' dogs and that a dog park would invite more dogs into their community, enlarging their maintenance concern.

These issues are not unique to this quiet, small community in northwest Washington, D.C. As

cities continue to evolve and demographics reshape neighborhoods, ideas and visions for the futures of the communities must coexist. When community ideas and visions inevitably differ, how can we strike a balance that pleases everyone? In addition, if a dog space is included in a park's plans, how do we ensure that all parties remain engaged throughout planning, construction and beyond the project's grand opening?



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By understanding the makeup of the neighborhoods in question, using creative thinking in the planning of a dog space and securing a sponsor to manage the space, the addition of a dog space can ultimately be a community asset.

Navigating Community Engagement

City and neighborhood profiles and demographics are dynamic. People migrate in and out, reshaping the identity of the community. When considering the addition of a dog space within a larger park space, it is important to understand and project the future needs of the community.

The challenge for park and recreation planners is to capture the voices of those who not only bark the loudest, but also of those who stand in the background. Hosting a community survey during the dog space planning process allows park planners to capture as many diverse values, voices and opinions at a time when the ability to change project requirements is easiest.

For example, prior to the previously mentioned community meeting in the District of Columbia, a survey was conducted that asked participants for, among other things, demographic information, park usage, preferred park amenities, areas of improvement and the implementation of a dog space. At a quick glance, it was evident that a dog space was a hot topic; however, merely taking a tally of who was for or against a dog space was insufficient information when planning and allocating public funding.

Through simple cross tabulations of the survey results, the planning team developed a narrative



based on the residents' responses. The results showed that the lack of a dog park correlated with lower park-usage rates among respondents over the age of 50. Moreover, young families, ages 25 – 49, with low park-usage rates noted both dogs off their leashes and the lack of maintenance by dog owners as key drivers for them steering clear of the park. From the survey results, the planning team had evidence to support the idea that incorporating a dog space would satisfy the dog owners and ease the safety concerns of young families.

While not all survey results may provide a clear definition or path toward a park's future, ensuring that you capture diverse voices within the community is essential to producing accurate and useful results.

Let's Build a Dog Run!

The community has spoken, and a sizable faction is advocating for a dog space in the neighborhood; however, city space is becoming increasingly valuable and limit-

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ed. According to the municipal regulations in Washington, D.C., “the creation of dog parks in the [city] requires a certain degree of flexibility due to the density of buildings, as well as the scarcity of District-owned parkland.” The challenge becomes how to balance the dog owners' needs with the requests of other residents for a playground, fitness equipment and leisure space.

One solution for developing city parks is the inclusion of a dog run. Dog runs are functional, fenced-in space, usually a minimum of 5,000 square feet, where neighborhood dogs can run freely, exercise and socialize. Whereas a dog park is larger and may include architectural and landscaping features,

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furniture for patrons, drainage and pet-friendly surfaces, a dog run provides the essential features that will keep dogs happy and healthy, including a 5-foot fence, drinking fountains, waste bags and a surface that is both pet-friendly and sustainable.

By building a dog run, you not only address the needs of dog owners, but also of families and other residents. Dog spaces can be divisive, but if you include a dog run

alongside other amenities, such as playgrounds and blacktops, the community may feel more receptive to including a space for dogs.

The Guy Mason Recreation Center in Washington, D.C., is an example of successfully integrating a dog run. Through a thoughtful analysis of the community's needs, a 250,000-square-foot space

was developed that included a 6,400-square-foot dog space, baseball field, renovated recreation center and playground. The park and recreation center provides space for dogs to run freely and exercise, while reserving space for recreational sports, striking a balance between community needs.

While there is no one-size-fits-all for dog spaces, dog runs provide the flexibility to address multiple community needs. Ultimately, it is up to the city and park planners to develop a dog space that fits within the community's vision.

Maintaining a Dog Run

It is dusk at the community's new dog run, the last of the wagging tails have gone home, but a lingering smell remains. Whether it is dog-waste removal, fixing a fence or maintaining the field surface, how will the community address issues critical to the quality of the dog run? With tight budgets, park and recreation departments do not have the resources to consistently monitor and maintain dog spaces. Securing a dog run sponsor for maintenance, management and rule enforcement is vital to the health and longevity of a dog run.

Securing a dog-run sponsor during the planning phase allows the sponsor to be invested throughout the buildout process. In certain jurisdictions, the sponsor is responsible for submitting a formal proposal for the establishment of the dog run during preliminary community meetings. Sponsors can be residents, organizations or businesses with a nonprofit interest in the community. While any community member can volunteer to become a sponsor, hav-

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ing a broad base of engaged and committed sponsors mitigates the risks of people moving out of town, a lack of community volunteer work support and waning interest over time. According to the DC Department of Parks and Recreation, the most successful dog spaces are managed by a board of directors and have a minimum of 10 volunteers who are willing to assist with maintenance, fundraising and volunteer recruiting.


Once a sponsor is secured, it is critical to outline the roles and responsibilities between them and the city park department to manage expectations. These roles and responsibilities will serve as a reference point if the park becomes a liability for the community. Not every owner will be responsible and clean up after his or her dog. Over time, the dog run will exhibit wear and tear. It is important to outline how often sponsors are required to review the facility's state, how to communicate issues within the community and how to resolve issues.

Considerations for Planning and Maintaining an Urban Dog Space

Urban neighborhoods are trending toward adding more dog spaces. Research from the Trust for Public Land notes that off-leash dog spaces are sprouting in larger cities at a faster rate than other park types. Also, as the rate of dog ownership increases, city space for four-legged "children" to roam freely and tire out increases in demand. However, if residents seek to maintain existing amenities, such as playgrounds and blacktops, can city planners incorporate a dog space in a manner that allows all stakeholders to coexist?

Such limited space forces city and park planners to think strategically and to be creative with land allocation. Hosting temporary pop-up dog spaces offers park planners the flexibility to introduce dog spaces in neighborhoods. In addition to city-owned parkland, city and park planners may shift their attention to underutilized alleys or rooftops that can be developed into a dog space.

Something else to consider is that many apartment buildings in cities now offer amenities, such as a space for dogs to run and exercise. So, are there sufficient private dog spaces that minimize the neighborhood's need for a public dog space? Are there opportunities to engage in partnerships with private dog spaces to allocate public spaces for other recreational activities?

In answering these questions throughout the park planning process, the development of public space for either a dog run or other amenities can be a positive experience for all community stakeholders! 

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