

RE: WEST PARK DOG PARK  
TOM MIREE 1/7/2013

## Off Leash Dog Park Considerations for the Community

But as you might predict, even though most folks think that it's a nice amenity for the dogs, once a particular location is identified, controversy often begins. Neighbors are concerned about barking, noise in general, waste disposal, and vagrants hanging out there.

Characteristics of a good site for an off leash dog park include sufficient land for the expected demand (an acre or more), existing shade, accessibility for disabled humans, isolation from residences or other places where people have a right to expect quiet, good drainage into a system where stormwater will be heavily diluted or filtered before reaching a stream, a place where a 6 foot fence will not seem out of place, a water source for both people and dogs, and already well-established grass.

On the latter point, a mudhole doesn't keep anyone happy for very long, and new turf won't stand up to running dogs. Usually the dog park needs parking nearby as well.

### Rules for the Off Leash Dog Park

If a local government wishes to establish an off leash dog park, it should set up rules of engagement well in advance. Doing so helps to manage expectations and may also keep opposition from becoming too boisterous.

We're not saying that every proposed off leash dog park is a good thing. To the contrary, we've seen several that were ill advised and never quite fit in with the neighborhood.

Rules that will be helpful include:

1. Setting up a system whereby users "register" or somehow otherwise show that they can comply with the rules.
2. Requiring that the owner or caretaker always remain in the park with the dog
3. Requiring each human user to sign a liability waiver in case of being bitten or attacked by another person's dog
4. Requiring owners to pick up and properly dispose of pet waste in the appropriate container provided by the park
5. Requiring spaying or neutering, as well as current vaccination records
6. Banning vicious animals, regardless of breed
7. Requiring that dogs be licensed, if licensing is mandatory in the affected jurisdiction
8. Encouraging or requiring that dogs actually arrive on a leash and then are taken off the leash immediately after entering the fenced area
9. Informing residents to leave the females in season at home
10. Disallowing human smoking or eating while in the park

Occasionally one sees a separate large dog park, with an off leash dog park for smaller animals in another location. This may increase the congeniality of the experience, particularly if a large number of dog owners are concentrated in a small geographic area.

## Dog Park Advice for Public Officials

Off leash dog park advocates can be a persistent crowd, but don't allow yourself to be bullied into doing something unwise.

Consider carefully the land use conflicts, likely complaints from neighbors, adverse impacts on water quality, safe pedestrian access, potential for parking unless the location is a dense and walkable urban neighborhood, and the cost of maintaining the park.

Probably you will need to ask the dog owners to kick in some financial support for the venture, unless your tax base is really flush.

Figure out who's responsible for maintenance and how much it will cost before spending a penny. Fences, grass, water fountains, benches, trees, and anything else in your off leash dog park eventually will need tending and even replacement. Exactly whose financial and logistical problem will that be?

You may want to set up a committee or council of the users, so that you are not subjected to the vigorously expressed opinions of just one or two owners about what is actually happening in the facility.

Of course, the committee might potentially become an advocacy group that demands more and more service too, so weigh the membership carefully.

Try to appoint this group yourselves, rather than relying on the owners to self-select their representatives. It's important that the off leash dog park council keep the interests of the community as a whole in mind rather than becoming a fanatical interest group.

If you require licensing of dogs (and if not, why is that exactly?), your license records can tell you where you have a concentration of dogs and therefore of need. Balance the desire for an off leash dog park with other recreational and conservation uses of your parks, open space, and vacant lots.

One advantage of the dog park is that it becomes a convenient way to distribute information about pet care, clinics, training, grooming, and so forth.

Just make sure that you get paid if any of this information really constitutes advertising. But often veterinarians and other service providers are really dedicated to the good of the pet population, and can add value to the civic scene.

The positive side of these facilities is that fun and socializing really does occur, greater exercise calms some dogs into better behavior behind their own fences, and there is potential for senior citizens or others who cannot care for a dog to enjoy others' pets.

If your neighborhood enjoys dogs, and they seem to lack adequate place to rough-house in most private yards, the off leash dog park may be a happy solution. And for urban neighborhoods who need to attract certain types of residents, the dog park actually can become a community development tool.