

TO: Parks Advisory Commission

FROM: Owen Jansson

DATE: 7/26/21

RE: Support for Rabinowitz Proposal for Dog Off-Leash Hours in City parks

The City of Ann Arbor should allow dogs off-leash from 6:30 a.m. to 8 a.m. in many of the parks in the City, but especially those in residential neighborhoods where most dogs and their owners live. There need to be certain parks excluded based on very small size (ie, “vest pocket” parks), designation as a natural area, or other factors that may be identified. The intent here is to provide a residentially-localized recreational opportunity for dog owners to exercise their dogs off-leash by taking advantage of an otherwise unutilized time slot in our City parks. It represents a very practical way of meeting a currently unmet recreational need while avoiding any competition or conflict with other recreational uses of our parks. In addition to the benefits it will provide to dog-owning residents, it will also benefit the City as a whole, to wit: the City has committed itself to achieving a net zero carbon footprint by 2030. Reducing carbon emissions as much as possible means, among other things, encouraging activities that reduced the need for car use where more environmentally sound options are available, in this case opting for neighborhood off-leash recreational opportunities in place of driving to a dog park. The City is to be commended for its net zero program, but to reach that goal it will need to redefine, or ratchet down, the “locally” in “think globally, act locally” to recognize and implement practices at the neighborhood level. Early morning neighborhood park off-leash hours are one way to meet that objective.

With proper signage and enforcement there is no serious reason such a program could not be implemented. If the City wished to put additional strictures/due diligence measures on the above off-leash program it could require purchase of a special tag based on proof of the dog’s completion of a basic training/obedience program conducted by an organization or individual registered with and accepted by the City as a canine trainer. It would need to be explicit that the City, and any trainer or training organization if they are involved, are not liable for the conduct of any off-leash dog and that that responsibility lies solely with the dog owner.

As New York City’s current experience attests, off-leash hours in city parks can and do work, and Ellen Rabinowitz’s proposal should at the very least be tried on a City-wide basis for a few years to see how it works. As a former member of PAC and of the sub-committee back in the ‘90’s that looked at the need for opportunities for dog owners to recreate with their dogs off-leash I know that the idea of dog off-leash hours in City parks was dismissed out-of-hand by City Hall with no compelling argument made to defend that position. It is well past time to revisit this question. There will always be nay-sayers who predict the sky will fall if such a proposal is ever implemented, to wit: packs of dogs terrorizing park users, the parks so full of dog poo you won’t want to go there anymore, an increased responsibility for the Parks department that would be unduly burdensome, and that ultimate bugaboo – liability! And, of course, there will be those who argue that “dogs don’t need to be off-leash, and anyway, aren’t our City parks for people?” – forgetting the fact that exercising dogs off-leash is every bit as much about the recreational benefit to the owners as it is about the physical and behavioral benefits to the dogs.

I hope that now, a quarter of a century later, the City will take a second, more enlightened and more progressive look, at meeting this recreational need.