

How to Start a Dog Park

Follow these seven steps to secure your own off-leash dog park.

Dan Emerson

Negotiating the curving parkway that winds around Minneapolis' Lake of the Isles requires the driver's full attention. It becomes even trickier when the passenger seat is occupied by Dark Star, an excited, 80-pound black Labrador Retriever who seems about ready to jump out of his skin. Dark Star yelps with anticipation as we approach his favorite local attraction: two acres of fenced-in park land where dogs of all sizes can run, chase, sniff, wrestle and in general be dogs, unconstrained by leashes.

When the first official U.S. dog park opened in 1979 in Berkeley's Ohlone Park, the idea of a city-designated facility where dogs could safely exercise off leash was a revolutionary concept. Today, more than 600 city- or county-sanctioned off-leash areas in the U.S. provide dogs with a safe place to stretch their legs, according to Vicki Kung, co-founder of the website Dogpark.com. And the list is growing: More and more communities recognize off-leash parks as valuable places for dogs and humans to relax and socialize.

While they vary in size and layout, most dog parks have one thing in common: They exist thanks to determined lobbying efforts by dog lovers, who explain the benefits and overcome objections from local government officials and neighborhood residents. Dog parks don't just happen. They become a reality only because dog owners ask for them — and keep asking.

If you've often thought your community could use a dog park but haven't gone any farther, now may be the time to get started. Here are the steps that successful lobbying for a dog park usually involves:

Organize

The best way to demonstrate the need and support for a dog park is to organize. Dog owners who band together with a common purpose can muster the grassroots clout necessary to educate the uninformed and overcome NIMBY (not in my backyard) objections. Many groups opt to incorporate as nonprofits, with formal mission statements and elected officers. In Minneapolis, where some elected officials and park board staff initially opposed dog parks, the formation of a legal corporation — Responsible Owners of Mannerly Pets — with an elected board of directors sent a message "that we were serious and not going to give up," says ROMP president Robin Hartl. (Although Hartl herself didn't mention it, the Minneapolis group may have benefited from Hartl's high profile as co-host of a popular PBS television series, *Hometime*.)

In Dallas, the White Rock Lake Dog Park group incorporated as a 501(c) (3) nonprofit, as required by the city. Group members later learned that the city has a nonprofit umbrella structure available for use by community groups — the case in a number of cities. "Doing it that way would have saved us so much time and grief," notes president Melissa Tinning.

Find a friend

Early in the lobbying process, identify one or more city officials who will support the dog park concept. "Even before you've made a public declaration, finding somebody in municipal government who is a dog person will usually help smooth the way for you," says Adrienne Lefkowitz, president of the Maryland Dog Federation and vice president of the American Dog Owners Association, two organizations dedicated to promoting responsible dog ownership. In Seattle, city council member Jan Drago became a dog lovers' hero, taking up the dog park cause to overrule the objections of a parks superintendent, according to Jerry Malmo, board chairman of Seattle's Citizens for Off-leash Areas.

Devise a funding plan

When proposing a dog park, you can develop cost estimates with information from existing parks in other cities. Dog park lobbyists in Minneapolis, for example, used cost data from Seattle's COLA to make financial projections.

Given the tightness of most local government budgets, park organizers usually need some private funding to establish and maintain successful off-leash areas. Most parks receive some local-government assistance in the form of site development and maintenance, but many dog owners' groups make ongoing fund raising a primary mission.

In Dallas, White Rock Lake Dog Park Inc. raised over \$20,000 to pay for fencing and maintaining the city's first dog park, which opened in 2001. "You have to have the private support to make the funds happen — that's essential," Tinning says. The group has obtained support from dog-related local businesses and corporations, including Muenster Milling, a Texas

manufacturer of organic dog food that made a \$25,000 commitment. Some groups raise funds by selling T-shirts and dog-related items and holding such events as dog washes.

Find the right spot

The next step is finding a suitable location that will accommodate dogs and their owners without negatively affecting the surrounding neighborhood. Ideally, a dog park should include the following amenities: One acre or more surrounded by a 4- to 6-foot fence; shade and water; adequate drainage to preserve soil quality and promote cleanliness; sufficient parking close to the site; a double-gated entry; benches; and waste disposal stations with plastic pickup bags and covered receptacles.

Given the relative scarcity of undeveloped land in most metropolitan areas, "finding a location that might work tends to be the biggest hurdle any agency is going to run into," says Rick Johnson, associate executive director of the Marin Humane Society in Novato, Calif. Often, the best place to start your search is with the local parks department, which may have unused or little-used parcels of land. Most dog parks are public facilities and, as such, are located on public land.

Prepare for opposition

To counter objections from non-dog owners and city officials, experienced dog park advocates recommend spelling out proposed rules for users before a park is even established. Typical park rules include: Dogs must be licensed, accompanied by owner or dog walker, and have current vaccinations; spaying or neutering animals is recommended; no aggressive dogs are allowed; owners must clean up after their pets. In Sanford, Fla., developing and distributing a pamphlet outlining proposed dog park rules helped park supporters head off objections, according to Mike Knipfer, president of Friends of Paw Park.

You should also prepare to address the common concern of legal liability. Off-leash areas pose potential legal problems for dog owners and governing bodies, according to Marshall Tanick, a Minneapolis attorney and national counsel for the American Dog Owners Association. Most government agencies that sponsor off-leash areas have "minimal" exposure to liability if a dog bites or injures someone while off leash, Tanick advises. He says park supporters' groups can reduce their risk by requiring dog owners who use the park to sign a document "agreeing to indemnify and hold harmless the sponsoring organization, in the event of any legal claims," Tanick says. As a minimum safeguard, every off-leash area should have prominent signs spelling out the rules for use and declaring that users do so at their own risk.

Sell the benefits

Proponents typically cite the following benefits of off-leash areas: They promote responsible pet ownership and the enforcement of dog-control laws; give dogs a place to exercise safely, thus reducing barking and other problem behaviors; provide seniors and disabled owners with an accessible place to exercise their companions; and provide an area for community-building socializing.

Citizens and city officials sometimes ask why valuable park land should be set aside just for dogs. "It's important to point out that these parks are for people — whether or not they are dog owners," Hartl notes. "We've had elderly people who say 'I can't own a dog, but I can go to the dog park and get my fix.' This is something for the whole city."

Promise to stay involved

Scarce public funds lead most cities with dog parks to rely on the ongoing volunteer assistance of dog owners. To gain approval for a dog park, it's usually necessary to make a definite, ongoing commitment to help with cleanup and routine maintenance and to make sure dog owners follow the rules. Before the Seattle City Council approved the city's first off-leash area, members of COLA agreed to work with the city parks department as stewards of off-leash areas. The group holds periodic work parties to do what's needed, Malmo says.

Based on the experience of dog park groups around the country, it often takes two or three years of planning and effort before a park finally opens. Be patient and persistent, Johnson advises. "It's important to recognize that it may take a while when you're selling a concept that is new. It all boils down to doing your homework."

"You can convince anybody of just about anything as long as you are passionate, and I've yet to meet any dog people who are not passionate about having these parks," Tinning says. "That comes across."

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For more information on dog parks, check out the June 2007 issue of DOG FANCY.