

Dog parks 101, 2019

The Trust for Public Land - Center for City Park Excellence.



Executive summary: How to build a dog park.

We get many questions from parks agencies, park advocates, and the press about dog parks through the year, but especially around the release of our ParkScore Index in late May. People have many questions about “the right way” to build a dog park and want to bring together the right combination of people and resources to make it possible. Based on those discussions, as well as some interviews and even some personal experience, we have put together this guide. It will continue to be revised (we welcome your thoughts) and posted on our Park Advocacy resource, Parkology.org.

1. Have a plan.

With so many dog parks in public parks, there are both best practices and lessons learned that both public agencies and park advocates could learn from. The most important point is: have a plan. You can modify it as you go, but being upfront about what you need to do helps everyone understand what is required and keeps the process public and transparent.

A plan should address all of those questions that people will ask as you move through both the approvals process as well as the funding process. It should answer some of the following questions:

- What kinds of facilities you want to build?
- Should the dog park or off-leash area be fenced, or are you planning for open areas that are open during a certain number of hours during the day?
- For open areas in a larger park, are you planning to rotate from season to season?
- Are you planning water features, including drinking fountains, splash pads, or pools?
- Are you planning climbing or other agility features?
- Are you including seating and shade?

There are many options, and you should first consult what types of dog parks already exist in your

community, as well as any standards that have been developed or approved by public agencies. (We will cover this in detail in a bit.)

Public agencies should develop a standard for dog parks with a public input process based on best practices that are generally available widely. Required elements for dog parks generally include:

- **COMPLETE FENCING** around the perimeter of the designated area, or natural barriers that prohibit dogs from leaving the area.
- **DOUBLE-GATE ENTRY** – A standard feature is a double-gate entry system with a gated waiting area for the dog and human to enter, remove the dog’s leash, and then open the gate to the main off-leash area, reversing the process for exiting. This ensures that unplanned escapes will be kept to a minimum, allows for leashing and unleashing in a separate area, and enables dog owners to manage the transition into and out of the dog park.
- **SEPARATE AREAS FOR SMALL AND LARGE DOGS.** Allow for dogs of different sizes and ages to avoid interacting (and causing possible conflicts) by creating separate areas for different-sized dogs and their humans. Puppies and shy dogs then have the opportunity to interact and get used to the high level of activity that can occur in a dog park.
- **SURFACING PLAN** (including renewal) – There are many surfacing options, and the choices depend on weather, drainage, and current conditions. That said, there are many options, ranging from artificial turf to engineered wood fiber to gravel. All have pluses and minuses, and local knowledge of what works in other park facilities (such as playgrounds or other high-traffic areas) is critical. For example, artificial turf is great, but it requires cleaning and built in irrigation and sanitizing systems are increasingly common. Natural turf is softer but requires a lot more care – including a plan for renewal, including temporary closures for regrowth. Gravel, rock dust or some sort of crusher fines work well but can get stuck in dog paws and

become dusty in drier climates or seasons. Regular mulch or engineered wood fiber is increasingly used in playgrounds, but needs to be replaced often, depending on the usage patterns.

- **AN ALTERNATIVE** to fenced and gated sites are areas that are subject to time restrictions for off-leash use. Prime examples are Long Meadow in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY, or Boston Common, which have off-leash rotating areas depending on the time of the year. These parks set out specific areas as well as specific times of day for off-leash usage.
- **DOG WASTE PLAN** (bag dispensers and trashcans) – A key requirement of any dog park is dealing with dog waste, as well as general trash and recycling. All dog owners should be strongly encouraged to bring their own bags (you never know where a dog will poop!) and be encouraged to “pack it out,” to minimize the impact on the dog park as well as the ongoing maintenance and operations for the parks department.
- **A DESIGN TO ENCOURAGE MOVEMENT.** We’ve heard from many dog trainers and public health officials that a key ingredient in developing good park areas are designs that keep dogs and their people moving in the off-leash area. Many people might think that unclipping your dog’s leash once inside the double gate and plopping oneself down on a bench is all you need to do. Nope. Dogs are pack animals and love to socialize, but also need to be managed by their owners. We all need exercise, and areas for object chasing, agility and other forms of activity, mixed with socialization, are a key contributors to a great dog park.

2. Make sure your dog park is open and inviting.

Try to make your dog park inviting to everyone, not just dogs and their owners or walkers. As many case studies have shown, having a good working relationship with neighbors is critical to the success of any dog park. While welcoming elements might be considered frills, it is important to think about what makes your favorite park inviting and welcoming, as many of the same rules apply.

- **WATER FOUNTAINS OR FEATURES** for humans and pups. Having a source of water, especially in warmer climates, is key. Dogs can get overheated

easily, and we all want everyone to stay hydrated and safe.

- **SEATING FOR HUMANS.** Generally, it is a good idea to keep people and their dogs moving, but everyone needs a break. Having seating is good; it can often double as an agility feature.
- **PARKING AND BIKE RACKS.** Not everyone can walk their dog to the park; some people need to come via other means.
- **SHADE.** In general, we need trees in our parks, and dog parks are no exception. Alternatives can include shade structures, like those increasingly found shading playgrounds in warmer climates.
- **SIGNAGE.** It is very important to post clearly at dog park entrances the park’s hours, rules, volunteer opportunities, and opportunities for joining friends-of-the-park or dog park groups.
- **VISUAL ATTRACTIVENESS, ESPECIALLY FROM OUTSIDE THE PARK.** It is important to be a good neighbor to the rest of the park, the adjacent street, and local residents and businesses. Improvements such as flower plantings, attractive street fencing, and artwork are always welcome and are ways that the local friends group can make a difference in the upkeep of the park. One of the authors passes his community dog park going to and from the subway each day, and it’s a lively place with dogs and their people socializing, playing together, and engaging with passersby. (There’s a set of athletic fields and a very busy hike-and-bike trail in the immediate vicinity.)

3. Be open and communicative.

Be sure to cast a wide net and work with likely as well as unlikely allies as you work to plan, build, and run your dog park.

GROUPS FAVORING DOG PARKS should reach out to the city’s parks department to determine if there are ordinances as well as design standards (including the elements mentioned above) that need to be followed in order to create a dog park.

Groups favoring dog parks should also reach out to current users of the park, and local community leaders, to understand the history of the community and the park, prior and current park uses, and other possible plans or efforts for the park that may be

already underway. This identifies the issues and concerns of individuals or other groups, and allows all players to engage in the process with their eyes fully opened.

Public parks agencies should seek input from groups that may, at first glance, not seem to be allies. These can include:

- **PUBLIC ANIMAL MANAGEMENT AGENCIES AND SHELTERS.** These agencies can be sources of information – for example about runaways or stray dogs, dogs chained in yards, dog bites, dog adoptions, and other issues – and help by identifying potential allies of dog parks or the benefits of building one. They can provide programming, including adoptions, run-with-a-dog programs, onsite health clinics, obedience classes, licensing, and vaccinations. (All of these efforts can go a long way in addressing issues that often come up in news reports, including sick dogs, misbehaving dogs, or conflicts with dog owners.)
- **COMMUNITY-BASED DOG-ADVOCACY GROUPS.** These groups are often breed-specific or rescue-oriented. Community and other friends groups can be critical to the success of a dog park. In fact, a number of public park agencies require a friends group to help maintain and manage the dog park, or even to raise money for construction, maintenance, or improvements. More than any other partner, these groups, made-up mostly of volunteers, assume a strong ownership role in the park, helping to maintain standards of behavior and cleanliness, keeping “eyes on the park,” and managing community and park-agency issues on a regular basis.
- **NONPROFITS INVOLVED IN DOG WELLBEING.** These include adoption agencies, low-cost spay and spay-and-neuter clinics, animal shelters, area veterinarians, affinity groups, agility and obedience trainers, and more. Like the animal management agencies and shelters, these organizations are a great source of programming, both at the dog park and offsite, and can help educate dog owners and promote positive activation of dog parks.

4. Embrace the standards.

Many city parks departments have developed standards and master plans for dog parks. But even when

standards and plans are in place and other dog parks are already established, it is important for groups to reach out and communicate proposals and plans for a new dog park. Although the expenses associated with community outreach, collaboration, and coalition building can seem high, these investments are essential to establishing and maintaining a successful dog park. We’ve provided a case study below to show how.

Case Study: RUFF and the DeFillipo playground and dog park in the North End, Boston.

RUFF (Responsible Urbanites for Fido) began in response to increased complaints about dogs and dog owners in the North End neighborhood of Boston. The North End is a close-knit and tightly packed neighborhood that has been an Italian-American for several generations and, prior to that, was home to successive Irish Enclave and a Jewish communities, all these changes coming in the last 100 years. RUFF began to organize and help address issues related to dogs, including the use of leashes in parks, volunteer efforts to clean-up parks frequented by dogs and their owners, and raising funds to pay for Mutt Mitts and other supplies.

About 2015, the group began looking for public spaces to put in a pilot dog park, working closely with the Boston Parks and Recreation Commission as well as local community groups. Of all of the parks in the neighborhood, they ended up with what they thought was their last choice. The site was on multiple levels in and around the DeFlippo Playground. The park has historically been known as “Gassy,” from the days when a giant aboveground gas tank stood in the middle of the neighborhood. But, it was site for a dog park, and RUFF saw a great opportunity.

The group raised some funds and embarked on a pilot project. They purchased fencing for the site and had it installed, complete with gates that had to be manually locked and unlocked daily. To do this, they rotated through volunteers for the first few months. With a little fundraising, they installed automatic gates that unlocked in the morning and locked automatically at closing.

Through the pilot, which lasted several years, RUFF worked to address ongoing issues (like excessive barking and dog waste), held gatherings that offered education and services (licensing, dog wash, vet check-ups), and continued coordinating with both neighborhood organizations and the public parks agency. Over time, the group raised additional funds and worked out the details to build a permanent dog park, complete with artificial turf, irrigation to clean and disinfect the turf in season, additional play and safety features, and improvements to the pilot elements, including fencing.

The park opened in the spring of 2018. In the meantime, RUFF volunteers continue to do what they have been doing for the past four years: addressing neighborhood issues, daily maintenance and operations (shoveling snow, cleaning steps, and small repairs), and, most importantly, enjoying the park.

5. Unique features, cool features, ideas and suggestions for dog parks.

Off-leash dog parks are not just for playing, walking, and running. Facilities for swimming, agility and more are being added to public dog parks in cities across the United States. We have highlighted a selection and will be adding to this list on *parkology.org*. We invite your contributions as well.

- First dog park in NYC – Tompkins Square Park (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog_park)
- Millie Bush Dog park – Houston, TX – <http://www.pct3.com/dog-parks/millie-bush-dog-park>
- Laurel Canyon Dog Park – Los Angeles – <https://www.laparks.org/dogpark/laurel-canyon>
- Bear Creek Dog Park, Colorado Springs, CO – <https://communityservices.elpasoco.com/parks-and-recreation/bear-creek-dog-park/>
- Montrose Beach Dog Park, Chicago – only beach where dogs are allowed (in many parts of the northern US, dogs are often excluded from beaches from memorial day through labor day) – <http://mondog.org/>
- Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY – <https://www.prospect-park.org/visit-the-park/things-to-do/dogs/>
- Bark Park at Heritage Park, Henderson, NV – <http://www.cityofhenderson.com/henderson-happenings/>

[parks-and-trails/locations-and-features/bark-park-at-heritage-park](#)

6. Sample standards and policies for dog parks

Here are some examples of policies and / or standards that have been created by public agencies for dog parks.

- Ann Arbor, MI: <https://www.a2gov.org/departments/Parks-Recreation/play/Documents/Recommendations%20and%20Guidelines%20for%20Dog%20Park%20Site%20Selection%20updated%204-10-15.pdf>
- American Kennel Club: <http://images.akc.org/pdf/GLEGo1.pdf>
- City of Norfolk, VA Dog Park Criteria: <https://www.norfolk.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1531>
- CityLab – The Anatomy of a Large Dog Park: <https://www.citylab.com/life/2017/04/how-to-design-the-best-dog-park/522870/>
- District of Columbia – Dog Park Design Guidelines: https://dpr.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dpr/publication/attachments/dpr_DogParkDesignStandards.pdf
- Raleigh, NC Dog Park Study: <https://www.raleighnc.gov/parks/content/ParksRec/Articles/Projects/DogParkStudy.html> and final report: <https://publicinput.com/dogparks>
- Separating small and large dogs in dog parks: <https://www.dog-on-it-parks.com/blog/dog-park-design-cosiderations-large-small-dog-areas/>
- Ten tips for planning and building a dog park: <http://www.doodycalls.com/blog/ten-tips-for-planning-and-building-a-dog-park-in-your-community/>
- PetSafe: <https://www.petsafe.net/learn/how-to-design-a-dog-park>