



Parks & Recreation

NRPA's monthly magazine

CURRENT ISSUE

[HOME](#) | [PARKS & RECREATION MAGAZINE](#)

November

Dog Parks

November 2, 2018, Department, by Anne-Marie Spencer

Member to Member

Promoting vibrant, active people, dogs and community

According to numerous reports, spaces where dogs can play off-leash are the fastest-growing feature in parks today. Dog parks are sought after by pet owners for multiple reasons. They provide socialization for both pets and their owners. They bring people of all walks of life together in a space where they can form bonds and friendships based on their shared love of dogs. For dogs, especially ones whose owners work long hours, regular dog park visits can provide an outlet to expend stored energy.



While demand stems from a growing number of individuals owning a pet, the value and benefits of these spaces extend beyond pets and their owners — making a statement about a community’s commitment to offering amenities that attract a richly diverse and active population. To better advocate for off-leash dog parks, it is important to understand the demand for these spaces and the benefits for dog owners and the broader community.

As populations grow, and leash laws become more restrictive, many municipalities see dog parks as a way to allow pets to play without impacting traffic, infringing on private property or potentially creating unwanted litter on public streets. While dog parks are certainly welcomed by dog owners, the

value and benefits of these spaces extend far beyond the dog community.

Multiple Benefits

Dogs encourage people to walk more, and research studies show that at the individual level, being outdoors in a dog park offers diverse therapeutic, physiological, psychosocial and psychological benefits. It has been found that owning a pet is directly linked to fewer visits to the doctor and improved overall health.

Dog walking has been examined as a mechanism for promoting moderate physical activity, providing physical health benefits that link to a decrease in risks of cardiovascular diseases, such as hypertension and high cholesterol. In addition, it has been found that individuals who own a pet are more likely to participate in outdoor activities and are generally more active, healthier and more sociable, even with individuals they don’t know well.

Dog parks provide important community benefits as well, and are important outlets for humans, as they provide recreational opportunities and bring together dog lovers of all ages and socioeconomic status. Dog parks promote walkable neighborhoods, an enhanced sense of community and safety, because the pet owners are not walking on busy streets. They also provide a place for owners to converse and get information about dog-related services and about the community in general. They serve as a conversation starter, and nearly half of the people who responded to a survey indicated they had become acquainted with other people in the neighborhood through their pets. From a pet ownership perspective, public dog parks allow dogs to get ample off-leash exercise and social activity with other dogs, promoting a decrease in the level of troublesome behavior.

Rejuvenate Underutilized Parks and Spaces

Dog parks can be created to suit any size space. Even in airports, where space is at a premium, dog parks are cropping up as a much-needed amenity for travelers and their pets. They can also be used to

rejuvenate underutilized parks and spaces. The city of Gahanna, Ohio, used Pizzuro Park, an underused space in a floodplain, to create a dog park with four areas: two for large dogs, one for small dogs and another for agility-based activities. The dog park has made Pizzuro one of the most visited parks in Gahanna. Stockbridge, Georgia, also used a repurposed floodplain in its Clark Park to create an oasis for dogs and their owners, designating about an acre of the park's nearly 12 acres for the new dog park. The city used the space creatively, installing plantings and paths to absorb rainfall at the lower elevations of the park and placing the agility equipment at a higher elevation. Where needed, an underdrain system was installed to help divert stormwater to a pond, creating more effective drainage after heavy rainfall.

No matter the size, all dog parks start with community support. Be sure to hold meetings within the community where you are planning the dog park, and allow community members to share their thoughts. Be prepared to deal with concerns, as well as encourage advocates, by having a master plan in place to share proposed hours, rules and maintenance. Much of the concern about dog parks comes from people not understanding how the space will operate, so being able to address these concerns early will help build advocacy. If there is a dog expert who can be present, invite them to address concerns that non-dog owners may have. Dog parks encourage social behavior in dogs and park rules help address most potential issues, so being able to articulate this is an important step in neighborhood support.

In addition to providing owners with a place where their dogs can get the daily movement and activity they need, community dog parks also can be a place to train and familiarize them with the skills required to master playful obstacles or compete in the sport of agility. Dogs love the opportunity to run and play, while owners also enjoy the opportunity to socialize with each other, so including a mix of amenities that promotes enjoyment for both is an important step in creating a well-loved dog park. Amenities help dogs build confidence, strengthen muscles and build challenge by incorporating elevation changes, jumping and moving through unfamiliar spaces. They also help the owner get exercise. Dog owners will also appreciate shady places to sit, access to water fountains and restrooms, and waste/litter receptacles to help ensure the space stays clean. Be sure the dog park rules are posted prominently at each entrance.

Don't forget the importance of marketing the space to ensure usage of the dog park, as well as promote knowledge of rules, hours and other useful information. Add the information to your park website, and if you have staffing to manage it, create a Facebook or other social media page to help promote the site, events at the dog park, contests and serve as a place for photo submissions of people and their pets having fun! The Charleston County Park & Recreation Commission operates three dog parks and hosts several events, designed to bring pet owners together and generate revenue to support maintenance of the dog parks. Their popular Yappy Hour event includes live music, food and beverages and is one of many events that helps to ensure the dog parks remain clean and welcoming.

Dog parks are one of the fastest-growing amenities in public spaces, and the benefits of these off-leash spaces are clear. As people continue to move to urban centers and the trend of bringing the family pet along gains strength, the demand for spaces to exercise and socialize with their pets continues to expand. By including dog parks in our overall master plans, we can help extend health benefits to people and improve the quality of life and community capital across the country.

Material Considerations for Comfortable, Active Dog Parks

- Accessible route of travel from parking lot to and through the space

- Separate areas for large and small dogs
- Dog park rules posted prominently at entrance
- Separate entrance to park transition area, as well as to small and large dog areas
- All areas fenced with a solid base to discourage digging
- A good mix of agility equipment to accommodate large and small dogs
- Strategically placed lighting for extended hours
- Dog waste bags and receptacles
- Shaded benches to encourage socialization
- A mix of surfacing to emulate nature and offer walking paths
- High-low water fountain to accommodate both dogs and their owners
- Trash receptacles to promote park cleanliness
- Bike parking to encourage alternate modes of travel
- Trees and shrubs to provide aesthetics and shade

For more information on planning a dog park, request the free resource, [*Unleashed: Off Leash Dog Park Design Trends and Tips*](#).

[*Anne-Marie Spencer*](#) is the *Corporate Vice President of Marketing for PlayCore*.

Detailed references:

- Anderson K. Barking up the right tree: Tips & trend from today's dog parks. Recreation Management. Vol 2010; January 2010.
- Center for Outreach, Research, and Education. Unleashed: Off leash Dog Park Design Trends and Tips. PlayCore. 2018
- Coleman KJ, Rosenberg DE, Conway TL, et al. Physical activity, weight status, and neighborhood characteristics of dog walkers. Preventive Medicine. 2008;47(3):309-312.
- Cutt H, Giles-Corti B, Knuiman M, Burke V. Dog ownership, health and physical activity: A critical review of the literature.
- Health & Place. 2007;13(1):261-272.
- Hart LA. The role of pets in enhancing human well-being: Effects for older people. In: Robinson I, ed. Waltham book of human-animal interaction: Benefits and responsibilities of pet ownership. Tarrytown, NY: Pergamon; 1995.
- Taryn Graham, Troy Glover. On the Fence: Dog Parks in the Unleashing of Community and Social Capital Leisure Sciences, 36:3, 217-234
- Wood LJ, Giles-Corti B, Bulsara MK, Bosch DA. More than a furry companion: The ripple effect of companion animals on neighborhood interactions and sense of community. Society and Animals.