Outlook

Public Health Risks of Off-Leash Dog Use on Youth Little League Fields in Rollingwood

From David Smith <david@dpsmithlaw.com>
Date Wed 11/12/2025 5:32 PM
To Makayla Rodriguez <mrodriguez@rollingwoodtx.gov>

4 attachments (4 MB)

2020 - Detection of gastrointestinal parasitism at recreational canine site in the USA.pdf; JEPH2017-5984086.pdf; JVIM-30-1838.pdf; animals-11-01685-with-cover.pdf;

Dear Members of the Rollingwood City Council, Park Commission, and Community Development Corporation-

I am writing as a concerned resident, parent, little league coach, and someone who has owned dogs for most of my childhood and adult life. I want to again bring to your attention a serious public health and safety issue regarding the current policy allowing off-leash dog access to the youth athletic and little league fields during times when baseball and softball games are not scheduled. These fields serve as vital recreational spaces for our community's youngest athletes—boys and girls aged 4, 5, and 6—who participate in T-ball and coach-pitch games and practices. Since the City Council first began allowing dogs off leash on the existing little league fields 3, 4, and 5 in 2017, the off-leash dog use on these field has dramatically increased from a few occasional residents and their dogs to a full blown regional off-leash dog area used by dozens of off leash dogs and their owners daily. Unfortunately, his shared use has led to repeated and unavoidable exposure of these children to dog urine and feces, which contaminates baseballs, cleats, gloves, and playing surfaces. Based upon my first-hand experience, as well as that of several other little league coaches, children frequently handle contaminated equipment and inadvertently touch and likely ingest traces of fecal matter, posing significant risks of zoonotic disease transmission.

While I appreciate efforts to accommodate pet owners, the potential harm to our vulnerable young children outweighs these benefits. Peer-reviewed scientific studies consistently demonstrate that off-leash dog areas, including parks and fields, harbor high levels of pathogens and parasites in feces and soil, many of which are zoonotic (transmissible to humans) and particularly dangerous to young children due to their developing immune systems, hand-to-mouth behaviors, and close contact with the ground. Below, I highlight key findings from several rigorous published and peer reviewed studies:

- A 2017 study in Greater Lisbon, Portugal, analyzed 369 fecal samples and 18 soil samples from three urban dog parks, finding that 33% of fecal samples were positive for parasites, including hookworms (16.5% prevalence), Cryptosporidium spp. (11.9%), and Giardia spp. (11.4%). Soil contamination with hookworm eggs was detected in all parks (27.8% overall), primarily in grassy areas. These agents pose zoonotic risks such as cutaneous larva migrans from hookworms and visceral larva migrans from Toxocara spp., with heightened dangers for children through incidental ingestion or skin contact (Duarte et al., 2017, *BioMed Research International*).
- In a 2021 study of off-leash dog parks in Florence, central Italy, researchers examined fecal, soil, and water samples from 26 parks and 83 dogs. While bacterial pathogens like Yersinia spp. (8.4% in feces) and Listeria spp. (4.8%) were detected, fungal agents (e.g., Microsporum spp. in 61.5% of park soils) and helminths (Toxocara canis eggs in 2.4% of feces) were of particular concern. These can cause dermatophytoses (ringworm) and toxocariasis in humans, with children at elevated risk due to environmental persistence (arthrospores viable for over 30 months) and play behaviors (Ebani et al., 2021, *Animals*).
- A 2016 study from three regional dog parks in Northern California tested 300 dogs and detected enteropathogens in 38%, including Giardia (9%), Cryptosporidium (5.3%), Campylobacter (2.7%),

and Salmonella (1%). Notably, 54% of infected dogs showed no symptoms, allowing silent shedding into the environment. Zoonotic strains like Campylobacter and Salmonella were present in nearly 10% of dogs, underscoring transmission risks via contaminated fields, especially to children who may not exhibit immediate symptoms (Menezes et al., 2016, *Journal of Veterinary Diagnostic Investigation*).
- A 2020 DOGPARCS study (Stafford et al., Parasites & Vectors) found intestinal parasites in 20.7% of 3,006 dogs and 85% of 288 U.S. off-leash dog parks, including zoonotic Giardia and hookworms that contaminate soil and pose direct transmission risks to children playing on shared fields.

I have attached pdf copies of these 4 scientific studies and ask that they be included in the public meeting materials for the upcoming join City Council RCDC meeting on November 18.

Additional research reinforces these concerns. A 2017 review of off-leash dog parks emphasized that while direct human transmission data is limited, dogs frequently shed zoonotic agents like Giardia, Cryptosporidium, and Toxocara into shared spaces, with children under 15 facing 3–5 times higher bite risks and greater exposure to fecal-oral pathogens. Recommendations include separating dog areas from children's play zones to mitigate these hazards (D'Angelo et al., 2017, *Zoonoses and Public Health*). Similarly, a 2020 U.S. study across southeastern dog parks found gastrointestinal nematodes (e.g., hookworms, roundworms) in 20% of dogs and 85% of parks, highlighting these venues as hotspots for environmental contamination and human infection (Schurer et al., 2020, *Parasites & Vectors*).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) warns that young children are especially susceptible to zoonoses like toxocariasis, which can lead to vision loss or neurological issues, and cryptosporidiosis, causing severe diarrhea. In Rollingwood, where these fields are central to family and youth athletic activities, allowing off-leash dogs to use little league fields 3, 4, and 5 as an off-leash dog park undermines our commitment to child safety and public health.

Compounding these health concerns is the fact that professional park planners, as part of the 2018 Rollingwood Park Master Plan, explicitly recommended removing off-leash dog use from the little league fields and instead creating a dedicated, separate off-leash dog park area to mitigate conflicts and hazards. This forward-thinking guidance aligns with best practices for balancing community needs while prioritizing child safety and environmental integrity.

I respectfully urge the City Council to act swiftly by prohibiting off-leash dog access to the little league fields and advancing the implementation of a standalone dog park as outlined in the master plan. Such measures would protect our children's health, enhance the usability of our parks, and foster a safer environment for all Rollingwood residents. This would protect our little league participants while honoring our community's love for pets.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss this further and am happy to provide additional documentation.

-dps

David P. Smith

Attorney and Counselor
Law Office of David P. Smith PLLC
3321 Bee Caves Road, Suite 208
Austin, Texas 78746

512.717.9829 office
512.413.4420 mobile
david@dpsmithlaw.com