



TIPS FOR BUILDING SUCCESSFUL DOG PARKS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

Park managers today are more frequently being asked to consider dedicating a portion of their parks to be used as off-leash areas for people and their pets. While not always without controversy, these areas often become one of the most popular areas within a park system. Good planning will help you eliminate or reduce many of the problems associated with creating dog parks.

Here are the 20 most common considerations to address as your community moves towards opening a very successful dog park:



Big Benefits to the Community – Dog parks are truly a multigenerational park activity for all ages. Despite what opponents say, dog parks are more for people than for dogs, because they attract the adult users who vote to support parks and who are more vocal in the community. Relatively low construction costs and low maintenance costs also yield the greatest amount of recreation opportunities for the investment, and there is a low (if any) user cost. Dog parks also provide outdoor exercise for the majority of park users who do not otherwise participate in organized sports.

Community Support – Informal groups, petitions, and 501C-3 non-profit groups promoting dog parks in your community can generate interest and successfully work within the system to create and support local dog parks. However, overzealous or disorganized groups can quickly sink a well engineered plan. Groups must learn to work *with* local agencies, instead of always trying to fight them, in order to be successful. Donations of labor and materials or funding from local businesses generate goodwill and can help get the rest of the community on board with the idea.

Volunteer Groups – Volunteers can be a tremendous asset to the dog park to help stretch already strained maintenance budgets. Volunteers can coordinate projects such as raking leaves, spreading surfacing material, installing or repairing fencing, installing agility and exercise equipment, brush clearing and more. Advance sign-ups are critical so that volunteers commit to specific times and show up when expected. Volunteer groups are also often responsible for monitoring the area for trash and dog waste, and replacing pickup bags in the dispensers.

Know the Users – Selling the concept to a reluctant community can be challenging; however, your dog park will serve a wide variety of residents. There are nearly 73 million dogs in the US, and 59% of the households have at least one dog. Most park facilities are currently geared towards a narrow range of users such as ages 2 to 12 for playgrounds, or ages 12 to 35 for most ball fields. Dog parks are one of the few multi-generational park activities that offer recreation for almost every age and ability level.

Choosing a Location – As in real estate, a good location is a key to success. While neighbors' concerns are sometimes over-exaggerated, they still need to be considered. They may be concerned about barking, loose dogs, smells and inadequate parking, but all of these issues can be resolved. Once established, a dog park becomes a huge recreational asset to the local families as well as the entire community, sometimes even increasing property values. Be sure to avoid locating dog parks adjacent to schools or playgrounds to reduce potential conflicts with children.

Allow Adequate Space – The popularity of most dog parks may require a minimum area of half an acre or more, although many smaller urban dog parks are also very successful. Overgrown, neglected and unmanaged areas can become great dog parks; consider re-purposing existing ball fields, lawn bowling or tennis courts, or equestrian arenas, even if doing so is just temporary or seasonal. Inadequate parking can be a big problem especially on weekends, so overflow parking spaces should be considered even if they are unpaved.

Overcoming Legalities – Some communities today still have archaic ordinances forbidding pets to be off-leash in *any* public areas. This means the city government may first need to amend local laws to allow your dog park to exist. Instead of attempting to amend your community's entire dog ordinance, consider requesting a special use exemption. A temporary "special use" authorization may help to at least get your park established, and often those temporary locations end up becoming a permanent fixture in the community.

Professional Design Assistance – Consider using the talents of an experienced Dog Park Consultant (like us!) or Landscape Architecture firm. They know how to best utilize a space and will factor in weather, access, utilities, drainage, vegetation, visibility and parking. They are also very experienced at presenting plans to the community and public officials, and can act as an important third-party advocate for the park.

Fencing – Good fences make good dog parks. Fences should be five feet or higher and be absolutely escape-proof; bury several inches of the fence beneath the surface to help prevent dogs from digging their way out. Self-closing double gates with a 10' transition space are a must to reduce the possibility of dogs escaping unexpectedly. Help prevent aggression and fighting by using closely spaced fence slats between adjacent dog park sections to reduce visibility, and also try to avoid using 90-degree corners which can help prevent more aggressive dogs from trapping unwilling victim dogs. Don't forget to include a maintenance entrance for large equipment like mowers, and consider planning multiple entries into the park to help reduce worn areas. Typical installed costs are about \$25-\$30/linear foot for heavy duty chain link fencing, 6' high, with gates and accessories.

Water – Drinking fountains are absolutely essential in any dog park for the health of both dogs and people after exercising. Without drinking fountains, users may be forced to bring buckets of standing water which can be unsanitary; they can spread disease to other dogs or can create mosquito havens. Consider water-spray features or dog wash stations, but ensure you have provided proper drainage as mud quickly becomes a huge problem in dog parks. Irrigation systems can help maintain turf grass in any climate, and reduce smells from urine especially in arid climates. Consider installing two adjacent drains to prevent flooding if one drain happens to become clogged.

Exercise Equipment – Without exercise equipment for dogs, your off-leash area is much like a park without a children’s playground. Exercise components are for *people* to use in a non-competitive environment with their dogs! Choose components that offer a variety of activities like ramps, tunnels, jumps and weave poles to accommodate the many different skill levels of both the dogs and their owners. Equipment can be in its own area, or be an integral part of the main play area. Arrange components 15-25' apart from each other and arrange them in an evenly spaced, but random fashion which allows users to create a different course each time they visit the park. These activities make your dog park more of a destination and will increase the time users stay at the park and how often they visit.

Because dog urine is highly corrosive, components need to be manufactured with rustproof materials like aluminum, HDPE plastic and stainless steel. All hardware should be stainless steel, and avoid any products made from brittle PVC pipe, steel (which rusts) or lumber. Public parks are also vandalism prone, so choose heavy duty materials that have been created specifically for public dog parks. Unsupervised children sometimes play on dog park equipment, even though it’s not intended for their use, so it needs to be extremely durable and safe. For the safety of dogs and park users, immediately remove any unauthorized equipment; injuries caused by unauthorized (but condoned) equipment can quickly lead to expensive lawsuits.

Park Furniture – Dog parks help build strong community and social ties. To encourage conversation with other dog owners, consider arranging your benches in an L or U shape. Locate benches away from congested entrance areas to better distribute use throughout the park. Tables with a single center post will help prevent the corrosive effects of dog urine, and make sure your furnishings have rust-proof aluminum frames. Recycled plastic furniture is also a popular choice for dog parks as it highly durable and won’t rust or rot over time.

Accessibility for All – Off-leash areas should have wide gates and accessible surfacing materials to allow wheelchair and stroller access. Besides paved surfaces, other materials such as rubber matting, turf and certified engineered wood fiber are considered to be ADA accessible and will help to make your dog park a place everyone can enjoy regardless of ability.

User Control – Since many communities restrict use to only their residents or to those with passes, some form of an easy-to-monitor control system should be used. Dog tags, parking passes, card swipes, electronic pay stations and radio frequency ID (RFID) tags have all been successful to help monitor park users. In some cases when residents are required to purchase a dog-park pass, the fees should only be used for dog-park maintenance and improvements, instead of going into the city’s general funds.

Sanitation – Pickup stations and receptacles are absolutely critical for a clean facility. Make sure the bags you offer are oxo-biodegradable and are designed to break down in landfills. Receptacles can be located on the outside of the fences to make trash pickup easier for maintenance staff, and using several small receptacles will make unloading easier than large ones. Consider using signage and/or color coding your receptacles for specific uses like “Trash Only” or “Dog Waste Only.”

Lighting – Timed lighting helps to extend the hours of use, but consider using the services of a sports lighting design specialist to avoid spill lighting into the neighborhood. Solar lighting has become very popular in dog parks and is an efficient and affordable solution.

Restroom Facilities – While dogs are not too particular about where they go, their owners will expect some sort of facility, even if it is just a portable toilet. This becomes critical at larger destination parks. Video cameras on the building (even fake ones, or just signs that say video cameras are being used) can greatly help to reduce vandalism in your park.

Surfacing – While grass is ideal, it will become worn out by enthusiastic canines. Consider reinforcing high-use areas with crushed rock, decomposed granite, artificial turf, rubberized grid or a certified engineered wood fiber. Wood fiber interlocks to stay in place far better than ordinary chips and helps to eliminate the mud problems that can often close a park. The grass adjacent to the fence line is especially susceptible to damage, so consider creating a gravel perimeter track and only maintaining the grass in the middle of the park.

Shade – Shade shelters or gazebos are highly recommended to help shield park users from rain, UV rays and hot sun, even in northern climates. Fabric shade shelters are quite inexpensive and may not even require a building permit. However, the fabric roof needs to be removed seasonally in locations where snow is likely. Larger hard-roofed park shelters are a more permanent solution and can become an important gathering and social location in your park.

Signage – Good signage can be an effective user-education tool, while bad signage will be completely ignored. Signs should have friendly and colorful graphics, and the text should take a positive tone instead of a long list of “Don’ts.” Keep the rules brief and provide a phone number to contact parks staff in case there is a maintenance issue or other problem at the park. Materials like fiberglass and lexan are easily cleaned of spray paint or markers, since any flat surface can become a graffiti target. Fast removal sends a signal to vandals that graffiti is not tolerated and shows park users that you care.

These tips will help make your dog park more successful, from concept through the grand opening. If you have any additional suggestions on how to create better dog parks, please send your tips to us at sales@dog-on-it-parks.com.

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