

# Dog Perks

Pet-focused amenities such as on-site 'bark parks' have become must-haves for apartment communities.

Story and photos provided by  
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“W

e LOVE dogs!” “Pet friendly! With an off-leash dog park for our community!” “Woof. Let’s play!” “We speak dog!” – These are just a few recent advertisements for pet-friendly communities. With pet ownership at an all-time high and with nearly 57 million households that consider dogs to be family, welcoming animals into multifamily communities has become more popular than ever.

A recent survey by Apartments.com noted that well over 50 percent of pet guardians factored in the distance to pet-friendly amenities such as dog parks, animal hospitals and other conveniences when deciding where to live. And these are not just strong considerations – they are often deal-breakers, which means communities that either don’t accept pets or don’t have easy access to those services will lose potential residents and revenue stream. With that in mind, you can attract new residents and their four-legged family members by adding a few affordable perks to your community.

#### MARKETING FOR FOUR-LEGGED RESIDENTS

Whether you have a large space for a dog park or a smaller size run or pocket park, offering this amenity to your residents immediately adds value. According to a Petfinder housing study, dog parks and other pet-friendly comforts also help to improve resident retention and overall satisfaction.

This is where marketing your community makes all the difference. If you already have an off-leash area, consider featuring a few photos on your website or highlight a “Pet of the Week” on your Facebook page. Potential residents don’t make quick decisions about where to live – they do their research online first, and these few things can quickly set your community apart from the competition. Also, providing new residents with a welcome kit that might include a tennis ball, treats, portable water bowl or some handy non-toxic wipes for dirty paws is a wonderful way to welcome the entire family.

#### COST-EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY BUILDING

Contrary to popular belief (and you

might have to argue with a dog on this one), dog parks are more for people than their pets, which is why so many communities use their parks to host events and gatherings. And from regular “Yappy Hour” nights to partnering with a local pet trainer who may offer a free obedience course or even an adoption event with discounted fees, there’s no shortage of ways to help your residents socialize while making the most of your investment.

Another benefit is the low cost. Dog parks are much more affordable to build than you might think. Compared to the cost of a children’s playground with the required safety considerations, a basic pet park can be built for a third of the cost and will serve a much wider segment of the population. With millennials, who are waiting longer to have children and buy their own homes, and seniors, whose pets provide love and companionship, to people who rely on their service animals, a dog park offers an outlet for healthy recreation and a way to help provide a sense of community and belonging.

Outside of the social benefits, dog parks also help to improve the overall quality of life for canines. Dogs that receive daily exercise are not only healthier and happier, they exhibit less nuisance behavior such as barking, chewing and destruction of property – all things that can make a neighbor or property manager feel, well, not so neighborly.

#### DESIGNING THE SPACE

When it comes to the actual park design, sometimes it helps to get creative. Many communities have found that unused tennis courts make great dog parks because they offer adequate space and are already fenced, which may free up room in the budget for amenities such as agility equipment, fire hydrants, watering stations and benches. Other potential spaces include green belts, rooftops and even repurposing a section of a parking lot or garage.

When selecting dog park equipment, keep a few key points in mind. First is safety. Are the agility components not taller than three feet high? Do they offer a slip-resistant texture and entirely

flat walking surfaces? Anything with perforations or “step strips” can be potentially unsafe, as can equipment that is steep or too high.

Another consideration is durability. Help maximize your budget by sourcing products with solid warranties that are manufactured specifically for heavy-duty outdoor use and made with rust-resistant materials. This step can help save on costly repairs and replacements of poorly made equipment down the road.

Lastly, be sure to accommodate dogs of all sizes. Incorporating adjustable components and agility equipment designed for small dogs are both great ways to make sure every breed from basset hounds to Labradors can enjoy the park.

If you are new to the dog park world, be sure to ask questions! A reputable company will be able to patiently guide you on all aspects of design, from fencing to appropriate spacing between agility components, surfacing solutions and everything in between. Also, consider product lead times. If you have a deadline for the project or a grand opening, work backward from the estimated date of delivery and be sure to give yourself a cushion for installation and any challenges that may occur, such as bad weather or transit-related delays.

Once your dog park is open, celebrate with a ribbon-cutting event and some fun festivities for your residents, such as a costume contest, doggy photo booth or an agility competition. This will set the tone that the park is more than just a convenience, it is a social hub for pet owners and an amenity that sets your community apart. Now that’s something to bark about! ★

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