

# RECREATION MANAGEMENT

IDEAS AND SOLUTIONS FOR RECREATION, SPORTS AND FITNESS FACILITIES

## Four-Legged-Friendly Parks

Well-Planned Dog Parks Unite the Community, Whether Canine or Human

By Joe Bush

There's a growth industry in parks and recreation, and it's something other than waterparks and SoulCycle and climbing gyms.

Dog park construction is part of a dog industry that one estimate values at \$7.5 billion. There were approximately 83 million pet dogs in the United States in 2013, and an estimated 1,200 dog parks in operation. The first official dog park opened in 1979 in Berkeley, Calif., but there has been a boom in the past decade.

Between 2005 and 2010 there was a 34 percent increase in dog parks in the 100 largest U.S. cities, and with that rise, there's been a boost in designers, equipment manufacturers and philosophies on how to best plan, build and maintain an area beneficial to both beast and man.

"I've noticed more money and thought are going into parks, therefore supporting dog park design companies," said Becca Barnett, social media manager of BringFido.com, a dog travel directory. "That would have been a surprising focus, just 10 years ago."

Because dogs need their owners to bring them to the parks to socialize and exercise, it's not only dog data that matters, said Nora VandenBerghe, sales and marketing manager for an Everett, Wash.-based company that specializes in dog park products and solutions.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NAMPA DOG PARK

"With millennials waiting longer to have children, adults who don't participate in organized sports, people with service animals and just families looking to spend quality time together, dog parks help to fill a niche," she said.

"Recent studies have also noted that when people are looking to move to a community, a dog park is often a strong consideration, so they not only help to build a sense of community, dog parks can actually draw potential new community members and tourists traveling with their pets to the area."

Municipalities are finding that when they ask their residents for feedback in the planning stages of new recreation spaces, dog parks are popular choices. They are not revenue generators, but neither do they have to be very expensive to create, design, build, install and maintain. It's about as close to a feel-good project as there is, like children's playgrounds. Dogs like to walk, but they love to run, and chase, and climb and play in water. All that is enhanced when their leashes are unhooked. Park visits are great for owners as well, for some of the same reasons as it's healthy for their pooches; bonding with the dog, exercise and socialization.

### A Tail of Two Cities

In 2007, the Cincinnati Park Board and the Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (3CDC) collaborated to redevelop Washington Park. Part of the redesign included the addition of a dog park. David Vissman, senior operations manager for 3CDC, said the 12,000-square-foot space in the middle of the 8-acre downtown park is the result of citizen input.

More than a score of neighborhood meetings made it clear that residents wanted more than just sidewalks to pace their pooches. "Especially in a downtown environment, green space is needed as much for dogs as people," Vissman said.

He said the requests have been backed by attendance: The dog park is the busiest part of the park, year round. The park staff clears snow from the parking area to the dog park because it is the only part of the park that gets heavy traffic in the winter.

Vissman said the board and 3CDC haven't rested on those laurels, though. There has been marketing from the start, like weekly Yappy Hours in the summer, during which dogs enjoy free treats and their owners sip on provided beverages. A popular dog park needs constant maintenance and oversight to stay popular, and Vissman said there are crews visiting three times an hour, picking up poop when owners don't, collecting litter, sweeping pebbles that stray from their area, and making sure the drain by a water feature is clear.

Vissman said users make the maintenance easier. "It seems like the community is taking more ownership of the dog park," he said. "We'll have people ask, 'Do you have (pooper scoopers) in here?' So we're going to try this spring to put out pooper scoopers and see if they



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disappear on us." After nearly a decade, there are plans to add tunnels and mounds in 2017, Vissman said, and maybe some shade umbrellas after the loss of a large tree last year. He said the dog park's only drawback is that it is too small to have separate spaces for different-sized dogs.

Cody Swander is superintendent of the Nampa (Idaho) Parks Department, an organization whose dog park does have the separate spaces for larger and smaller dogs. Opened in 2009, the 6-acre space also has benches, shelters, drinking fountains for both species, and a drainage ditch for water play.

Swander said the creation of the park was controversial. The Boise suburb, population approximately 85,000, is in a desert climate, and many influencers wondered why people couldn't merely take their dogs to rural spaces and let them run. A piece of city-owned land that was undevelopable due to a high water table kickstarted the planning.

A committee that included residents, park board members and staff came up with a design that was drafted by a volunteer. The committee hired a company to do a rendering, so there was something tangible to pitch. When they got the green light, they kept costs low by using a contractor only for the fencing.

"The parks department built this park," said Swander. "The irrigation system, the grass planted, trees planted."

It has been a hit, and Swander and his staff have used two annual events to raise money for improvements. The Pooch Party Splash and Stroll is held at another of the city's parks, one with a waterpark. A 1-mile walk with owners and their dogs ends at the waterpark, where dogs splash around like kids. There are booths and dog/owner photos and coupons and an off-leash area. The proceeds from the \$25 registration fee plus sponsorships and pet-related vendor fees have raised \$100,000, Swander said.

"It's insane," said Swander. "It's a hoot. Everywhere the kids get to play, it's the dogs' for the day."

The money is paying for construction of a pond for the dog park, complete with a launch for throwing and retrieving balls. Swander said because duck hunting is so popular in southern Idaho, there are bird dogs aplenty.



PHOTO COURTESY OF DOG-ON-IT PARKS

"I anticipate it will be heavily used," Swander said. "Someone with their Chihuahua might not get enjoyment from the pond, but it's unbelievable how many water fowl retrieving dogs there are in this community."

Swander said the other fundraising event is a March food truck gathering in another part of the town, again with all proceeds for the dog park. Though most of the money raised will help build the pond, the events will continue, this time to reach the goal of paying for permanent bathrooms at the park.

The Nampa dog park, like the one in Cincinnati, draws a lot of attention from Nampa's parks and recreation staff, more than a regular park, Swander said. Cleanup is key, he said, and if he could design a park knowing what he knows now, he'd plan fencing that would allow parts of the park to be closed off to let the turf rest.

"We do put a lot of resources into the grounds," Swander said. "Dogs are very, very hard on natural grass. The biggest expense for us has been to fix low areas for drainage problems. We've added French drains and subterranean drainage. That's part of the reason the property was not buildable because of water table being so high there. One of the things we've found is with the dogs raring and tearing on the grass we've had to keep it as dry as possible.

"It's a mixed bag. With southern Idaho's desert climate you have to keep irrigation on it just to keep the grass green, but it's a fine line between enough water to keep the grass green and standing puddles so the dogs don't tear a new mudhole."

The success of the dog park has encouraged plans for another across town. Slightly larger than the first, Swander will suggest that it have the capability to partition areas for care and rest.

"One of the things I thought we did really well is we incorporated walking paths into it," said Swander. "There's quite an extensive walking loop and multiple options around this loop. That's what we see users other than the dogs utilizing. It's crushed asphalt and it gets a ton of use. Very few people sit on the benches, very few people lounge while letting their dogs run around. They're either actively playing with their dog, throwing the frisbee, throwing the ball, or they're walking for exercise themselves.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BARKPARK BY ULTRASITE

"Dog parks are for citizens that have dogs. Getting them out and moving, we see as a success. Getting them health improvement, getting them out of the house. We've seen a lot of social interaction with people that may not get out a lot. Some I've talked to say, 'My best friend I met at the dog park and now we make sure we come together so that when we're finished we go get coffee or go get lunch.' Those are successful indications that the dog park is an amenity for the citizens and not just for the dogs."

## Fetching Dog Parks

What else distinguishes a good dog park? Roseanne Conrad of the National Dog Park Association says safety, supervision, cleanliness, a well-thought-out and posted set of rules, and areas for small dogs and large dogs are all minimum standards for dog parks.

"Like with anything else, the good ones will grow and get better, the bad ones will fade by the wayside," Conrad said. "The key is to make the dog owners have ownership in the park, keeping it clean and safe for all."

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Larger parks offer dedicated areas for large & small dogs, a



Barnett, of BringFido.com, said an acre surrounded by a chain-link fence four to six feet high with a double-gated entrance is a good start. The double-gated entrance prevents dogs from escaping and allows dogs to meet before being in the same enclosure. There should also be some shade and a sitting area for owners.

"A good park maintains the grounds and provides easy access to water, poop bags and covered receptacles," she added. "Beyond the basics, grass is the preferred turf, and creating separate enclosures for small and large dogs gives more peace of mind to owners. Hurdles, hill climbs, tunnels and jump hoops are all great training equipment options, and sprinklers or pools are popular."

Mimi Hampton Marler, marketing manager for a Red Bud, Ill.-based manufacturer of dog park equipment and site furnishings, said dog owners must be accommodated. After all, not only do they bring the dogs, they may have been early advocates for the park, as well as financial donors to fill the gap between what's needed and what the municipality can afford.

"It honestly has more to do with the owners than one would think," she said. "While designing your space you must put the owners' comfort as a priority. If it is not comfortable or there isn't appropriate seating and parking, then you will not have a successful dog park. Provide seating options throughout the park in sunny and shaded areas to increase comfort, and be sure to keep them away from fencing as dogs may use it as part of an escape route. Lastly, providing adequate parking for the dog park users is critical, as most users (95 percent) drive to them."

VandenBerghe said, if possible, a third area for "shy" dogs, is ideal. Shy dogs are those that are meek or simply old, and just want to enjoy being outdoors, off leash, without any play or chase. Fencing is key for many of the aspects of a well-designed dog park, and VandenBerghe said her company suggests also adding exits separate from the entrance.

"A double-gated entry is a must, and offering a separate exit is a good idea as well," she said. "These areas tend to become crowded, particularly during peak times, and the additional stress of dogs both leashed and unleashed encountering each other in a small space can be problematic. This can possibly lead to leash aggression so anything that can be done to separate park users and help prevent those types of situations is worth incorporating into the park design."

### Rover Budget?

Other than preparing the grounds of a dog park with surfacing, grading or irrigation systems, what does it cost to equip an area that pleases both man and canine?

VandenBerghe said there is more to consider when purchasing dog play equipment. It shouldn't be more than three feet high, she said, should be free of perforations or step strips that could easily catch a dog's nail, and the walking surfaces should be highly textured for slip resistance.

"We encourage our customers to avoid products made with galvanized steel due to rust issues, as well as products made from PVC or wood which are not safe or appropriate for use in public parks," VandenBerghe said. "All of those materials degrade quickly in an outdoor setting and can become unsafe."

"The cost is often a direct reflection of available space," said VandenBerghe. "A smaller park such as something you might see in an urban setting might have \$5,000 worth of amenities, including a few select agility components, benches, a water fountain and a fire hydrant.



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natural themed play area, and water features.

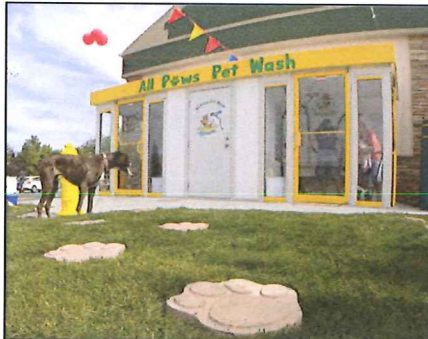


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Larger parks, such as a new 10-acre park in Fort Worth, Texas, offer dedicated areas for large and small dogs, a natural themed play area, and water features. VandenBerghe said if synthetic surfacing such as turf is incorporated into the design, larger parks can easily run well over \$100,000 for amenities alone.

John Sarver, designer and developer at an Indianapolis-based provider of dog park solutions, said he got into the business as a result of writing a book about spending outdoor time with dogs. On his third Labrador, Sarver said the best exercise for dogs is climbing, whether inclines or stairs. Their hindquarters don't get much exercise on flat ground. He recommends dog parks offer at least one climbing apparatus; more is better but he suggests that too much equipment takes away running space, which is also important.

"If you don't have the equipment in the park you typically go to the park and get on your iPhone and your dog smells other dogs and you go home," he said. "They don't get the hindquarter work and you don't get the interaction between the owner and the dog. Typically most all equipment, you have to work with the dog and the dog works with you, so it's a collaborative effort and that's what makes going to the dog park fun—that time you spend with your dog."