

And Justice Fur All...

by Lisa Clutters

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With state and local budgets being cut and spending being frozen across the board, why would any Parks and Rec department get behind the initiative to dedicate a park solely to dogs?

The off-leash dog park concept is not a new one. The first dog park sprung up in Berkley California in 1979. Humans have had a close bond with the dog ever since domestication. In today's modern day and age with dogs serving as "starter children" and lovable companions for empty nesters and the elderly, we as Americans spend more than \$43.2 billion (yes, BILLION) dollars on our beloved furry friends every year. Based on a 2007-2008 Survey of the American Pet Products Association there were an estimated 74.8 million pet dogs in the US. Data for the same time frame shows New Hampshire accounted for 173,798 registered dogs.

I am one of those childless halves of a couple who has a two-year-old yellow lab named Collyn. He embodies all the wonderful characteristics of a lab; friendly, loves to run and could clear a coffee table with a single swipe of a happy tail. My husband and I are fortunate to have a home with a decent sized back yard, but it's not fenced in and to do so would cost a couple thousand dollars we don't have. So, in the name of being a good "mom" I want to take my dog to the park to play with the other "kids". I want a safe, nearby place in my town of Belmont, NH. My tax dollars support other people's children in the school system, but I am not upset that I'm paying into the school budget, because that is in my opinion, the very definition of community in that people support their neighbor. In addition to great schools, great dog parks have made the checklist of dog owners when considering buying a home. People are looking more to free / low cost things to do for family entertainment in this economy. They are seeking outdoor recreation space and are looking to their local parks.

Dogs are social, pack animals. Any behaviorist will tell you that the key to a happy dog is exercise and to be well socialized and to begin the socialization process early in puppy hood. We know that recreation is a vital part of stress



relief; we all strive to achieve a balance between work and play. There are several hurdles in selling the concept to both non- dog owners and some dog owners alike. People are scared of new things; they form opinions on inaccurate information and go into defensive mode, especially when they perceive a threat to their safety or personal property. The top misconceptions are that dog parks are noisy, smelly and dangerous places. Let's explore these in order; the majority of a dog's communication is non- verbal, there are materials that can be used to manage the odor from urine and fecal

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matter. At a properly run park this is a non-existent issue, significantly less if the park is operated as a carry-in / carryout park. You know as a professional that you can never eliminate risk 100%, but you manage and minimize it by putting in safety protocol and making upgrades. There is actually a company that is solely dedicated to evaluating risk of dog parks, so if anything, that tells you how popular the concept is and growing. Educating the owner is key, our plan for Happy Tails Dog Park of the Lakes Region is to offer training so that the owner knows what to look for in terms of signs of aggression, what to do and not do in an emergency, etc. Our mission is to educate and empower the owners. According to Primex, more than 200,000 human children go to the ER every year with playground-associated injuries. The solution would not be to eliminate playgrounds; there would

be such public outcry from parents. So we as a society accept that they are a wanted amenity in the community. Action is taken to minimize the risk, because they are not going away.

Ironically, our biggest challenge has not been any of these three issues; it is actually the mentality that if one has the physical space to run a dog, then there is no need for a dog park. The challenge is to get the thinker to see the benefits of socialization. If you the reader take anything away from this article, please know this... that a dog park is built for the owner of the dog first and foremost. Yes, the dog receives wonderful benefit of exercise and socialization, but it is the community of owners who share each other's experiences. The Dog Park is a gathering spot and meeting place.



After reviewing several NH City and Towns' Recreation Department Mission statements, they all seem to have the common thread of promoting inclusiveness for ALL residents. My opinion is that if a group comes to a governing department or town body with a reasonable request in which that group agrees to take all responsibility for funding, maintenance and operation, then they should be given serious consideration and not be dismissed. It is not often in life we get the opportunity personally or professionally to hold someone's dream in our hands.