

HUMANELY SPEAKING

JUST WALKING...

By Marylee Gorham
mgorham@LakesRegionSpirit.com



...THE DOG

"Collyn," a Yellow Lab, right, and "Morty," his Boston Terrier playmate, plow through the snow in Belmont for some high energy, off-leash playtime.

cles and lead activist in the project to create a community dog park in Belmont. Second-in-Command for this worthy cause is Belmont Middle School student William Stanley, an amazing fellow who states "I never met a dog that didn't like me." William and Lisa are bound by their love of dogs and William gained the exuberant Yellow Lab,

"Collyn Clutters," as his first dog walking client.

William joined me at Concord Regal Cinema's first screening of "Hotel For Dogs," a light-hearted, kid-friendly movie about strays holed up in a derelict hotel. During intermission, I asked him about his potential involvement with a dog park in Belmont. William is a veteran dog walker—Belmont's own version of Cesar Milan—who, with his fledging dog walking business, immediately supported the idea of a dog park in the neighborhood.

Teaming with Lisa, they met with Belmont's Board of Selectmen, who were initially quite receptive to the idea. "Show us what you have in mind, and we'll consider it," was the consensus. There was even mention of providing a parcel of land that was currently not in use and unlikely to be developed any time soon.

After follow up meetings the dog park project was shelved due to liability concerns. Not to be stymied, Lisa and William

continued on page 48

Not all dog owners are stalwart in their commitment to effectively exercise the family pooch on a regular basis and the most driven of us might even slack off a little in favor of a cozy sofa rather than battle the biting cold of a classic New Hampshire winter.

Most, however, enjoy the sunny interaction between themselves and man's best friend—throwing a stick during a brisk walk while encouraging the dogs to run with abandon as they investigate, sniff and enjoy the great outdoors. The trick is finding a safe place to off leash your hound—especially if you live in an apartment or otherwise don't have the proverbial "back forty" to entertain the dog.

The Lakes Region is perhaps the most beautiful part of the Granite State. Naturally I am biased as I live here with my three Boxers. To say finding accessible, welcoming places to walk my pack is tricky, in spite of the acreage we are lucky to live on, is an understatement. Sometimes the Boxers, or their owner, just might enjoy a change of scenery.

Meet Lisa Clutters, a mover and shaker in dog walking cir-

JUST WALKING...

continued from page 21

approached Dana Chase and Wendy French, board members of the Belknap County 4-H Fair Association, with the idea of using a portion of the fairgrounds for the park. Wendy, the association's president, stated that "in general, the foundation allows the Fair Association the use of Foundation property but new uses must be cleared by the Foundation board who, in

January 2009, requested more information to address some concerns."

To address the issue of liability, a NH state senate hearing took place in January to discuss proposed legislation. Senate Bill 19, sponsored by Senator Betsi DeVries, D-Manchester and Senator Sheila Roberge, R-Bedford, would enact protection under the law relative to government immunity from lawsuits for municipal dog parks stating that: "A municipality or authorized agent of the municipality which, without charge, permits any person to use a facility operated by the municipality for the purpose of exercising or playing with his or her dog or dogs, shall not be liable for personal injury or property damage resulting from the person's participation in such activity, in the absence of gross negligence."

Europeans are far less worried about themselves, or their dogs, behaving badly, than here in the states. One might say that the French are famous for it—dogs ride happily, and without incident, on public transport, sit at tables in outdoor cafes, enter and stay at some of the finest hotels in the world, and to be sure, cock their legs on the trouser's of the occasional waiter while snarling at the woman in the ridiculous hat two tables over—without anyone treating anyone else with a lawsuit.

Meanwhile, in rural New Hampshire, dog owners continue to bump up against municipal fear of naughty dogs resulting in Laconia, Meredith and Belmont failing to host a dog park. There are, however, a few dog parks dotted about the land. Portsmouth Dog Park on South Mill Road, Mine Falls Dog Park in Nashua and Derry's Dog Park are all managed by their respective cities. Additionally, Rochester's Dog Park, located off Taylor Avenue, is managed by its own association (www.rdogpark.com) and Concord's Dog Park is overseen by the City of Concord and Friends of the Concord Community Dog Park.

Colleen Burns is a regular at the Concord Dog Park along with her year-old Golden Retriever "Bizbee"—traveling from her home in Tilton to exercise her dog. "We love that Bizbee can be off leash, visiting with other dogs, playing and running full tilt, in a safe place," said Colleen. When asked if there were any problems with dogs at the park, Colleen responded "oh absolutely not, all the owners are very responsible, pick up after their animals, and don't allow any fighting or aggressive behaviors. Besides," she added, "the dogs are always so glad to see each other."

If you are interested in getting involved with starting a dog park in the Lakes Region, something truly good for all of us—two legged and four legged alike—visit: www.happytailsdogparknh.org for more information.

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