

# Dog parks 101, 2019

The Trust for Public Land - Center for City Park Excellence.



## Executive summary: How to build a dog park.

We get many questions from parks agencies, park advocates and the press about dog parks through the year, but especially around the release of our ParkScore Index in late May. People have many questions about “the right way” to build a dog park and want to bring together the right combination of people and resources to make it possible. Based on those discussions, as well as some interviews and even some personal experience, we have put together this guide. It will continue to be revised (we welcome your thoughts) and posted on our Park Advocacy resource, [Parkology.org](http://Parkology.org).

## 1. Have a plan.

With so many dog parks in public parks, there are both best practices and lessons learned that both public agencies and park advocates could learn from. The most important point is: have a plan. You can modify it as you go but being up-front about what you need to do helps everyone understand what is required and keeps the process public and transparent.

A plan should address all of those questions that people will ask as you move through both the approvals process as well as the funding process. It should answer some of the following questions:

- What kinds of facilities you want to build?
- Should the dog park or off-leash area be fenced or are you planning for open areas that are open during a certain number of hours during the day?
- For open areas, are you planning to rotate from seasons to season in a larger park?
- Are you planning water features, including drinking fountains, splash pads or pools?
- Are you planning climbing or other agility features?
- Are you including seating and shade?

There are many options and you should first consult what types of dog parks already exist in your

community as well as any standards that have been developed or approved by public agencies. (We will cover this in detail in a bit.)

Public agencies should develop a standard for dog parks with a public input process based on best practices that are generally available widely. Required elements for dog parks generally include:

- **COMPLETE FENCING** around the perimeter of the designated area or natural barriers that prohibit dogs from leaving the area.
- **DOUBLE ENTRY GATE** – A standard feature is a double-entry gate system with a gated waiting area for the dog and human to enter, remove the dog’s leash and then open the gate to the main off-leash area, reversing the process for exiting. This ensures that “unplanned escapes” will be kept to a minimum as well as allowing for leashing and unleashing in a separate area that allows dog owners to manage the transition into and out of the dog park.
- **SEPARATE SMALL AND LARGE DOG AREAS.** Allow for dogs of different sizes and ages to avoid interacting (and causing possible conflicts) by creating separate areas for differently sized dogs and their humans. Puppies and shy dogs then have the opportunity to interact and get used to the high level of activity that can occur in a dog park.
- **SURFACING PLAN** (including renewal) – There are many surfacing options and the choices depend on weather, drainage and current conditions. That said there are many options ranging from artificial turf to engineered wood fiber to gravel. All have pluses or minuses and local knowledge of what works in other park facilities (such as playgrounds or other high traffic areas) is critical. For example, artificial turf is great, but it requires cleaning and built in irrigation and sanitizing systems are increasingly common. Natural turf is softer but requires a lot more care – including a need a plan for renewal, including temporary closures for regrowth. Gravel, rock dust or some sort of crusher fines work well

but can get stuck in dog paws and can get dusty in drier climates or seasons. Regular mulch or engineered wood fiber is increasingly used in playgrounds, but needs to be replaced often, depending on the usage patterns.

- **AN ALTERNATIVE** to a fenced gated site are areas that are subject to time restrictions for off-leash use. Prime examples are the Long Meadow in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY or the Boston Common, which has off-leash rotating areas depending on the time of the year. These set out specific areas as well as specific times of day for off-leash usage.
- **DOG WASTE PLAN** (bag dispensers and trashcans) – a key requirement of any dog park is dealing with dog waste, as well as general trash and recycling. All dog owners should be strongly encouraged to bring their own bags (you never know where a dog will poop!) and is encouraged to “pack it out” to minimize the impact on the dog park as well as the ongoing maintenance and operations for the parks department.
- **A DESIGN TO ENCOURAGE MOVEMENT.** We’ve heard over many dog trainers as well as public health officials that a key ingredient in developing good park areas are designs that keep dogs and their people moving in the off-leash area. Many people might think that unclipping your dog’s leash once inside the double gate and plopping oneself down on a bench is all you need to do. Nope. Dogs are pack animals and love to socialize, but also need to be managed by their owners. We all need exercise and having areas for object chasing, agility and other forms of activity mixed with socialization are a key part of a great dog park.

## 2. Make sure your dog park is open and inviting.

Try to make your dog park inviting to everyone, not just dogs and their owners or walkers. As many case studies have shown, having a good working relationship with neighbors is critical to the success of any dog park. While such amenities might be considered frills, it is important to think about what makes your favorite park inviting and welcoming, as many of the same rules apply.

- **WATER FOUNTAINS OR FEATURES** for humans and pups. Having a source of water, especially in

warmer climates, is key. Dogs can get easily overheated and we all want everyone to stay hydrated and safe.

- **SEATING FOR HUMANS.** Generally, it is a good idea to keep people and their dogs moving, but everyone needs a break. Having seating is good; it can often double as an agility feature.
- **PARKING AND BIKE RACKS.** Not everyone can walk their dog to the park; some people need to come via other means.
- **SHADE.** In general, we need to keep planting trees in our parks and dog parks are no exceptions. Alternatives can include shade structures that are increasingly found in warmer climates over playgrounds.
- **SIGNAGE.** It is very important to have park hours, Dog Park rules, opportunities for volunteering, and for joining local the friends of the dog park group clearly posted at park entrances.
- **VISUAL ATTRACTIVENESS, ESPECIALLY FROM OUTSIDE THE PARKS.** It is important to be a good neighbor to the rest of the park, the adjacent street or residents and businesses. Improvements such as flower plantings, attractive street fencing, and artwork are always welcome and are another way that the local friends’ group can make a difference in the upkeep of the park. One of the authors passes his community dog park to and from the subway each day and it’s a lively place with dogs and their people socializing, actively playing with their dogs, engaging with passersby (there’s a set of athletic fields and a very busy hike and bike trail in the immediate vicinity.)

## 3. Be open and communicative.

Be sure to cast a wide net and work with likely as well as unlikely allies as you work to plan, build and run your dog park.

**PRO-DOG PARK GROUPS** should reach to the city parks department to determine if there are ordinances as well as design standards (including the elements mentioned above) that need to be followed in order to create a dog park.

Pro-dog park dog groups should also reach out to current users of the park as well as local community leaders to understand the history of the community and the park, prior and current uses as well as

other possible plans or efforts that may be already underway. This identifies issues and concerns that both individuals as well as other groups may have and allows all of the players to engage in a process with their eyes fully opened.

Public parks agencies should seek input from groups that may, at first glance, not seem to be allies. These can include:

- **PUBLIC PET ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES, PUBLIC ANIMAL SHELTERS.** These can be sources of information like runaways/stray dogs, dogs chained in yards, dog bites, the number of dog adoptions, and other issues as well as identifying potential allies and other benefits of building a dog park. These organizations can provide programming, including adoptions, run with a dog programs, on-site mini health clinics, obedience classes, licensing and vaccinations. (All of these programming efforts can go a long way in addressing some of the issues that often come up in news reports from the popular press, including sick dogs, misbehaving dogs or owner issues.)
- **COMMUNITY BASED DOG ADVOCACY GROUPS.** These groups are often breed specific or rescue oriented. Community and other friends' groups are critical to the success of dog parks. In fact, a number of public park agencies require a friends group to help maintain and manage the park, even raise money to build portions of a dog park as well as fees or permits to maintain or fund improvements. More than any other partner, these mostly volunteer groups assume a strong "ownership" role in the park, helping maintain standards of behavior and cleanliness, keeping "eyes on the park" and managing community and park agency issues on a regular basis.
- **NON-PROFITS INVOLVED IN DOG WELL-BEING** – adoption agencies, low-cost spay and neuter clinics, animal shelters, vets in the area, dog affinity groups, agility and obedience trainers, and more. Similar to the public pet agencies and shelters, these organizations are a great source of programming both at the dog park and off-site and aid in the education of dog owners as help with positive activation of dog parks.

#### 4. Embrace the standards.

Many city parks departments have developed standards for dog parks as well as master plans for dog parks in a city parks system. But what is even more important is outreach and communication about what you would like to propose and how you plan to go about it. Even if the standards are set and many dog parks have built in your community, the critical step is outreach. While the expenses associated with community outreach, collaboration with community groups, establishing a coalition to care for and maintain the dog park may seem high, they are essential to a successful dog park. We've provided a case study below to show how.

#### Case Study: RUFF and the DeFillipo playground and dog park in the North End, Boston.

RUFF (Responsible Urbanites for Fido) began in response to increased complaints about dogs and dog owners in the North End neighborhood of Boston. The North End is a close knit and tightly packed neighborhood that has been an Italian-American neighborhood for several generations and prior to that, an Irish Enclave and a Jewish enclave, all in the last 100 years. RUFF began to organize and help address issues including keeping dogs on leash in parks, volunteer efforts to clean-up parks where dogs and their owners were going, raising funds to pay for mutt mitts and other supplies.

About four years ago, they began looking for public spaces to put in a pilot dog park, working closely with the Boston Parks and Recreation Commission as well as local community groups. Of all of the parks in the neighborhood, they ended up with what they thought was their last choice. It was multiple levels in and around the DeFlippo Playground. The park is historically known as the Gassy, from the days when a giant aboveground gas tank stood in the middle of the neighborhood. But, it was site for a dog park and they saw a great opportunity.

They raised some funds and embarked on a pilot project. They purchased fencing the site and had it installed, complete with gates that had to be manually locked and unlocked daily. To do this, they rotated through volunteers for the first few months. With a

little fundraising, they installed automatic gates that unlocked in the morning and locked automatically at closing.

Through the pilot, which lasted several years, RUFF worked to address ongoing issues like excessive barking and dog waste), held gatherings with educational offerings and services (licensing, dog wash, vet check-ups), and continued to work with both neighborhood organizations and the public parks agency. Over time, they raised additional funds and worked out the details that would be required to build a permanent dog park, complete with artificial turf grass, an irrigation to clean and disinfect the turf in season, additional play features, additional safety features, and improvements to the pilot elements, including fencing.

The park unofficially opened in December 2017 and a formal opening is due to take place later this spring, 2018. In the meantime, RUF volunteers continue to do what they have been doing for the past four years: addressing neighborhood issues, daily maintenance and operations (shoveling snow, cleaning steps, and small repairs) and most importantly, enjoying the park.

## 5. Unique features, cool features, ideas and suggestions for dog parks.

Off-leash dog parks are not just for playing, walking and running. Swimming, agility and more are some of the many features being added to public dog parks in cities across the United States. We have highlighted a selection and will be adding to this list on parkology.org. We invite your contributions as well.

- First dog park in NYC – Tompkins Square Park ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog\\_park](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog_park))
- Millie Bush Dog park – Houston, TX – <http://www.pct3.com/dog-parks/millie-bush-dog-park>
- Laurel Canyon Dog Park – Los Angeles – <https://www.laparks.org/dogpark/laurel-canyon>
- Bear Creek Dog Park, Colorado Springs, CO – <http://www.bearcreekdogpark.com/>
- Montrose Beach Dog Park, Chicago – only beach where dogs are allowed (in many parts of the northern US, dogs are often excluded from beaches from memorial day through labor day) – <http://mondog.org/>

- Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY – <https://www.prospect-park.org/visit-the-park/things-to-do/dogs/>
- Bark Park at Heritage Park, Henderson, NV – <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2018/march/measuring-the-use-of-public-neighborhood-parks/>

## 6. Sample standards and policies for dog parks

Here are some examples of policies and / or standards that have been created by public agencies for dog parks.

- Ann Arbor, MI: <https://www.a2gov.org/departments/Parks-Recreation/play/Documents/Recommendations%20and%20Guidelines%20for%20Dog%20Park%20Site%20Selection%20updated%204-10-15.pdf>
- American Kennel Club: <http://images.akc.org/pdf/GLEGo1.pdf>
- City of Norfolk, VA Dog Park Criteria: <https://www.norfolk.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1531>
- CityLab – The Anatomy of a Large Dog Park: <https://www.citylab.com/life/2017/04/how-to-design-the-best-dog-park/522870/>
- District of Columbia – Dog Park Design Guidelines: [https://dpr.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dpr/publication/attachments/dpr\\_DogParkDesignStandards.pdf](https://dpr.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dpr/publication/attachments/dpr_DogParkDesignStandards.pdf)
- Raleigh, NC Dog Park Study: <https://www.raleighnc.gov/parks/content/ParksRec/Articles/Projects/DogParkStudy.html> and final report: <https://publicinput.com/dogparks>
- Separating small and large dogs in dog parks: <https://www.dog-on-it-parks.com/blog/dog-park-design-cosiderations-large-small-dog-areas/>
- Ten tips for planning and building a dog park: <http://www.doodycalls.com/blog/ten-tips-for-planning-and-building-a-dog-park-in-your-community/>
- PetSafe: <https://www.petsafe.net/learn/how-to-design-a-dog-park>