RISK MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

WHO LET THE DOGS OUT? – OFF LEASH DOG PARKS

What are dog parks?
The term “dog park” is generally used where the purpose and design of the park is such as to invite dogs, often in an unleashed environment. Some dog parks require membership or charge fees; others are free and open to the public. In general, private parks tend to be those that require fees to assist in the costs of operating the park.

Why have dog parks?
Dogs are popular and people want a safe place to socialize and exercise their dogs. Off-leash parks offer substantial benefits as a way for dog and owner to get exercise and meet new friends. Dog parks are relatively inexpensive to maintain, have no significant history of claims, and have generally been thought to be successful where they have been created.

What are the features of a dog park?
Dog parks vary in size and amenities, but the following represent some things to consider.

Should you enclose your dog park? Consideration should be given to manmade or natural barriers to encourage the dogs to stay within the designated area. Small areas in busy neighborhoods may necessitate a fence around the park with a gated access. Larger areas may allow for natural buffer zones. Nearby property owners and traffic should be considered to determine what level of barrier might be necessary.

Should specific rules be developed and posted? Rules should be posted at the entrance to the dog park. Indicate the purpose of the park, the hours of operation, and a phone number to report problems and emergencies. General rules include picking up feces, keeping control of aggressive dogs, and leash requirements if any. Off-leash parks should emphasize that dogs kept on leashes within the off-leash boundary will cause tension and should be avoided. Cities should require that dogs be licensed and vaccinated to be allowed in the dog park. Children should be supervised while in the dog park because playing dogs can run into children and running children may trigger the dog’s instinct to chase prey. Any special information about the use of the dog park should be displayed at the entrance.

Should trash containers be provided? It may take some time to cultivate good habits, particularly for picking up feces. By providing containers and even bags, if possible, compliance will improve. Dog owners must be reminded that good stewardship will ensure the continued availability of the facility.
How much parking should be provided? Adequate parking will be necessary to prevent clogging streets or the parking lots of others with dog park patrons. Some cities have found that use of the park greatly exceeded their original estimates; extra parking had to be added. The location of parking should minimize any detours from the most direct route into the park. In general it is a good idea to require the use of a leash in parking areas until entering the off-leash area. Parking leading to a gated entrance provides an opportunity for placing advisory signs that are hard to miss.

Should the park have a source of water? Dogs drink plenty of water during play, and some dogs enjoy swimming. Therefore natural ponds or streams may be desirable. On the other hand, if there is mud around, a dog will find it. Some owners prefer to avoid this problem. Owners should be encouraged to bring plenty of water with them if none exists at the park.

How should the park be designed? Some parks are specifically designed for smaller dogs. Larger dogs do not usually attack small dogs, but small dogs may be injured engaging in play with much larger dogs. In most cases, dogs properly supervised will socialize easily in the neutral turf of an off leash exercise area.

Are there any maintenance considerations? Primary maintenance issues include trash removal, snow removal, grass cutting, and wear and tear to walkways. Parks with enough area can fence off portions to allow for vegetation to reestablish itself in over-worn areas. Wood mulch may be applied to walkways to reduce erosion and improve traction.

Are there other items to consider? Some parks have bulletin boards to provide feedback on park use and to report problems. Many parks also have picnic tables, benches, and park shelters for shade and protection from the elements.

CONCLUSION

Off leash areas, or dog parks, provide great benefits to dog owners. Current statistics indicate almost one in four people own a dog. Dogs and their owners are happiest and healthiest when they have opportunities for exercise and meeting others. Dog parks have not proven to be a significant liability risk or source of complaints by the public.

Following are some web sites where you can find dog parks or information about dog parks.

These sites allow you to search for dog parks in any state.
http://animal.discovery.com/features/dogpark/map/states/MN.html
http://www.ecoanimal.com/dogfun/

These sites provide information about dog parks.
http://www.dogplay.com/Activities/dogpark.html
http://www.dogromp.org/homepage.asp
http://www.thebark.com/community/advocacy_dogParks/dogParks.html

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