

# The Case for a Belfast Dog Park



Prepared Under the Auspices of  
Friends of Belfast Parks

Presented to the  
Belfast City Council  
September, 2007

# CONTENTS

Section 1: <b>BACKGROUND INFORMATION</b> . . . . .	1
What is a dog park? Learning about dog parks.	
Section 2: <b>BENEFITS FOR BELFAST, DOGS, AND THE COMMUNITY</b> . . . . .	5
Benefits to dog owners. Belfast's dog owner population.	
Benefits to dogs. Benefits to the community.	
Section 3: <b>CONCERNS ABOUT DOG PARKS</b> . . . . .	9
Legal liabilities. Dog fights and bad behavior. Child safety.	
Feces removal. Disease transmission among dogs. Noise.	
Typical dog park rules.	
Section 4: <b>A LOOK AT SUCCESSFUL DOG PARKS IN OTHER COMMUNITIES</b> . . . . .	14
Dog parks visited: Portland, ME; Denville, NJ; Lexington, KY;	
Midland, TX; San Luis Obispo, CA; Palm Springs, CA.;	
Other dog parks.	
Section 5: <b>DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL DOG PARK</b> . . . . .	15
Basic features of the best dog parks. The volunteer component.	
Section 6: <b>ASSESSMENT OF POTENTIAL DOG PARK SITES IN BELFAST</b> . . . . .	20
Sites not considered. Sites visited. Sites considered.	
Section 7: <b>RECOMMENDED DOG PARK SITE AND PROJECTED COSTS</b> . . . . .	25
Phase I. Phase II.	
<b>APPENDIX</b> . . . . .	28

## SECTION 1 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

**P**arks and green spaces in and around Belfast and along the shores of Penobscot Bay provide a wide range of recreational opportunities for people throughout the year. Citizens of all ages and visitors to the city can enjoy walking, running, biking, boating, swimming, tennis, basketball, baseball, softball, beach-combing, skateboarding, horse-shoes, playground activity, and other leisure pursuits in facilities that are currently provided by the community.

Each of these recreational activities offers significant and obvious benefits to participants, and, taken together, there would seem to be something for everybody in the city. But one group of Belfast residents is currently lacking a specific area where they can enjoy one of their favorite forms of recreation: exercising their dogs.



**More than 630 dogs are registered in Belfast, which means that approximately one in ten people around the city owns a dog.**

Yes, the streets and parks of Belfast are open to everyone who wants to walk his or her dog on a leash, and as a whole the city is a wonderful place for dog walking. It's not only scenic, historic, and blessed with a network of well-kept sidewalks and roadways, but, by and large, it's also a very dog-friendly community. We like dogs in Belfast.



**Currently dog owners have no place in Belfast where they can safely allow their dogs to exercise off leash.**

Since the city adopted its municipal leash law (actually an ordinance) in 1974, dogs have no longer been allowed to wander loose around town. The city is notably cleaner as a result, and fewer dogs are lost or being hit by cars. Ask any of our local veterinarians.

But one unanticipated consequence of the leash law is that dogs can no longer legally go for a run anywhere in the city—unless their owner has a fenced yard or happens to enjoy jogging with a dog in tow. And, as dog experts will tell you, dogs are engineered to run. They need hardy, regular exercise even more than people do. In fact, it's the dog that's full of energy with no way to burn it off that typically develops behavioral problems ranging from excessive barking and inappropriate chewing to life-shortening obesity and aggression. Every dog owner knows a well-exercised dog is a "good" dog.

How many people (and dogs) are affected by the city's leash law? Just counting the 630 dogs that have been registered in the City of Belfast this year suggests that we have one dog for every ten residents in our city — certainly a significant segment of the community!

Belfast's leash law does allow some dogs off leash if they are "under voice command." However, spaces like City Park, for instance, are not designed to accommodate a group of dogs chasing a ball or Frisbee. Local ordinances restrict unleashed dogs from specific areas within the existing parks (e.g., picnic areas, playgrounds) for public health and safety reasons. In addition, some park users are uncomfortable being anywhere near an unleashed dog or are fearful of allowing their children to be around an unrestrained dog, and their concerns should not be ignored. As a result, Belfast dog owners are extremely limited in options for allowing their dogs to run freely and unencumbered - and both the people and dogs suffer for it.

This situation is hardly unique to Belfast and, indeed, is what has led to the idea of special areas for dog owners to exercise their dogs — "dog parks" — and the development of these recreational areas across the country.

## WHAT IS A DOG PARK?

In our research we discovered there are more than 700 dog parks in the U. S. and more are being established every day. Some are wilderness areas or beaches that allow dogs to be off leash. Others are small, fenced areas in parks, where the grass may or may not be mowed. Yet another type of dog park might be an area that does not officially allow unrestrained dogs, but where police or animal control officers choose not to enforce local leash laws. Some of these areas are part-time, some are off-hours only, others are off-days only. Some are set aside for training hunting dogs. Some are publicly owned; others privately owned. Some charge an entrance fee; others do not.

Actually, the very term "dog park" is a bit of a misnomer, because a dog park is as much a park for dog owners as it is a park for dogs. (Saying a dog park is just for dogs is like saying a tennis court is just for tennis balls or a skateboard park is for skateboards.) Like a swimming pool or a hiking trail, a dog park is a recreational area for people.

Our working definition of the term "dog park" is a securely fenced area in which dog owners can safely exercise and socialize their pets. The technical jargon for dog park, we learned, is "off-leash recreational area."

## LEARNING ABOUT DOG PARKS

Early in 2007, at the invitation of the Friends of Belfast Parks, a group of Belfast dog owners gathered to discuss the idea of establishing a dedicated off-leash recreation area in the city for dogs and their owners. The initial group included the following persons:

- Carol Good, President, Friends of Belfast Parks and dog owner
- Christine Urick, Vice President, Friends of Belfast Parks and dog owner
- Debra Hockensmith, Secretary, Friends of Belfast Parks and dog owner
- Lane Fisher, Owner, Waggle Tails Obedience Training and dog owner
- Linda Wakely, Board member, Waldo County Humane Society and dog howner
- Diane Braybrook, Member, Friends of Belfast Parks and dog owner
- Dale Kuhnert, Member, Friends of Belfast Parks and dog owner
- Annadeene Konesni, dog owner

In our initial discussions, we discovered that most participants had been casually expressing interest in a dog park with friends, neighbors, and fellow dog owners for years. Several had used dog parks in other communities. The early consensus was that an off-leash area was not only needed in the city, but that it would enhance the recreational opportunities for a significant segment of the community and could even have some beneficial economic impact on the area.

The group determined to gauge interest levels within the wider community in a variety of ways. First, group members began asking other dog owners whom they encountered on daily walks about their interest in having a dog park in Belfast. Overwhelmingly, the responses were (and continue to be) extremely supportive of the concept.

In addition, Friends of Belfast Parks solicited input from attendees at two public events that were held at the Boathouse in early 2007. The first event was a "We Love Our Dogs" Toys & Treats Swap, sponsored by Waggle Tails Obedience Training on January 27, which drew an audience of more than 50 dog owners (and well-behaved dogs on leashes). Almost a third of the persons signed a list expressing interest in a dog park and their willingness to assist with publicity, fundraising, construction, and/or maintenance tasks.

The second event was the "Indoor-Outdoor Convention" sponsored by GreenStreets! on March 4. This very popular event drew a wider audience interested in a whole range of outdoor recreation, land conservation, and environmental topics. Friends of Belfast Parks hosted an exhibit table at the event and invited attendees to sign a list of support for a dog park if they desired. By the end of the



**In June, Friends of Belfast Parks presented their preliminary findings about dog parks at a well-attended public meeting at the Belfast Boathouse.**

afternoon the sheet had attracted more than two dozen signatures — including those of the mayor and several other city officials. Of particular interest were comments from two citizens who did not own dogs themselves but expressed strong support for establishing a dedicated, fenced dog park because of their fear of encountering unrestrained dogs while running or biking in the city.

Encouraged, the original group began to research dog parks, issues and concerns associated with them, criteria for establishing a successful off-leash recreational area, and costs related to construction and ongoing maintenance. The group concluded the three most critical questions regarding the establishment of such an area in Belfast are:

1. **Where would a dog park be located in this community?**
2. **What would be the liability issues associated with a dog park?**
3. **What would be the immediate and/or ongoing costs of a dog park to local taxpayers?**

The group continued to meet biweekly through the first half of 2007 to assign research tasks, share information, visit established dog parks in other municipalities (in Maine and across the country), evaluate potential dog park sites in our own community, interview city officials, discuss findings, and prepare this proposal.

On June 28, Friends of Belfast Parks made a preliminary presentation of their findings to the community at large. More than thirty interested people showed up, including the director of Belfast Parks and Recreation and one city councilor.

Response from the assembled group was highly supportive. Many in the audience signed cards affirming their willingness to work as volunteers, and the *Waldo County Citizen* was moved to endorse the proposal for a Belfast dog park in an editorial in its next issue [see Appendix].

The high point of the evening was the announcement by Carol Good, president of Friends of Belfast Parks, that the organization had voted to pledge \$10,000 toward construction of an off-leash recreational area for Belfast if approval is obtained from the city. The remainder of the construction costs will be funded by donations from interested citizens, supportive businesses, fundraising efforts and/or grant sources.

Subsequent to the meeting, Friends of Belfast Parks heard from many other people throughout the community pledging to support the dog park proposal — both in person and with financial donations.

## SECTION 2    BENEFITS FOR DOG OWNERS, DOGS, AND THE COMMUNITY

The advantages of allowing dogs access to public, open space are substantial, although they may not be immediately apparent to all. If you are a swimmer, tennis lover, or parent, the benefits of a municipal swimming pool, tennis court, or baseball diamond are more obvious. But even Friends of Belfast Parks' dog-owning group of researchers was surprised to realize how broadly the benefits of a dog park extend.

### BENEFITS TO DOG OWNERS

Most people who choose to own dogs do so because we enjoy them as companions. They get us off our duffs and outside, which has obvious human health benefits. Countless dog owners remark that "dog walks" are a highlight of their own day, and that sharing such time with a canine buddy is much more satisfying than walking alone.



For many dog owners spending time outdoors with their pet is a special joy.

Research shows that just petting a dog can temporarily lower a person's blood pressure and that being around a dog can alleviate depression. The ability of dogs to make humans relax is why they are increasingly accepted as therapy animals in assisted-living facilities, hospitals, and hospices.

If simply being with dogs makes us feel happier and less stressed, it stands to reason that being with dogs who are playing freely and joyously would be a profoundly satisfying

form of recreation - especially when it includes sharing enthusiasm for dogs with other dog lovers. A dog park invariably creates another social hub in a community, allowing people with common interests to get to know one another while exercising their canine companions. As we all know, dogs often help "break the ice," making it easier for neighbors get to know one another and build a sense of community. Dog parks foster friendships.

Allowing a dog to run in a securely fenced area is also a very efficient way to exercise a dog. Fifteen minutes of unrestrained exercise can equal an hour of merely walking along on leash. Energy is burned more quickly, making a visit to a dog park a boon to folks who don't have unlimited time to exercise their pet.



First and foremost, dog parks are for people. They are places where dogs' owners and dog lovers can enjoy recreation with their pets.

A so-called dog park is, first and foremost, a park for people who love being with dogs. Just how numerous are such people in our community?

## BELFAST'S DOG-OWNER POPULATION

Dog owners represent a substantial segment of the population both here and across the nation, and they regularly visit public park areas with their companion animals. Susyn Stecchi, a nationally recognized authority on dog parks, reports that nearly 42 percent of American households currently own one or more dogs. Based on other surveys, 53 percent of non-dog owners say they would like to have a dog in the future if circumstances permit. Whichever figure you go with, it is clear that a significant number of people live with one or more dogs or would like to.

It is, of course, possible to come up with more precise estimates. In 2007, more than 630 dogs were licensed by the City of Belfast, and informed estimates suggest there are at least as many as 100 more that are not licensed. In 2005 the U.S. Census Bureau estimated the population of Belfast to be 6,872 — which means we have more than one dog for every ten residents in our city. Considering that many dogs are owned by couples or families, more than 10 percent of our citizens are actually dog owners.

Seven years ago, the U.S. Census reported 2,765 occupied housing units in Belfast. If one were to assume, using Susyn Stecchi's figure, that 42% of all those households have a dog, the projected total dog population of the city would be 1,161 dogs. Far fetched? Consider how many of your immediate neighbors currently have one or more dogs.

## BENEFITS TO DOGS

Off-leash exercise is good — one could argue essential — for dogs, but misconceptions abound even among dog owners concerning what constitutes exercise. Merely tying a dog outside or leaving it alone in a fenced yard does not pass the straight-face test in terms of off-leash exercise. Yes, the dog is technically off leash, but the animal most likely will just stretch out and nap. While walking a dog on leash can bring pleasure to a pooch, a half-hour walk is inadequate daily exercise for most dogs. And, unfortunately, for many owners, exercising a pet more than a half-hour each day is nearly impossible. By way of contrast, running free can tire many dogs in less than fifteen minutes; it's a very efficient way to expend pent-up energies.

Dogs are innately social animals. Being leashed not only inhibits a dog's natural movement and social interaction, but it causes such frustration



**Dogs by their physiology need to run; it's how they burn off excess energy and develop strength, stamina, and coordination. Many trainers rank exercise as more important than discipline or affection.**

in some that they actually become aggressive when they're on leash (and only then). On the other hand, romping with a group of dogs helps each to learn what it can and cannot do with others; play is the natural way for dogs to learn their manners.

Mostly, free play is a fun way to keep a dog in good physical condition and emotional balance. Sedentary dogs, like inactive people, are prone to obesity and associated health issues, whereas lean and fit dogs tend to have longer, healthier lives. Most breeds were developed for specific, vigorous jobs - chasing vermin, herding sheep, tracking prey — and yet few of our pets engage in these pursuits. Full-out exercise reduces or eliminates canine boredom and the resulting problems, such as unnecessary barking and neurotic behaviors. Again, a well-exercised dog is a better companion.

In an off-leash recreation area, dogs not only engage with other dogs, but they also meet and interact with people who are unfamiliar to them. Since nearly everyone at a dog park is a dog lover, this creates a wonderful, safe place for dogs to learn how to deal with strangers. The better socialized a dog becomes — both with people and other dogs — the better neighbor and canine citizen it makes.

## BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

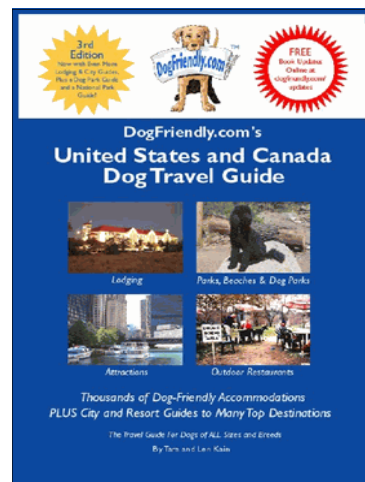
In addition to helping create better canine neighbors, a dog park bears several potential benefits for the community at large. By bringing dog owners together in a place where the fellow dog owners will be watching to make sure all dogs are licensed (and thus have had their rabies vaccinations, etc.), the park may help bring the number of licensed dogs in line with the actual number of canine residents of Belfast.

Maintaining designated spaces for dogs and owners reduces the likelihood that dogs will be let loose in other recreational areas where they could infringe on other park users or frighten people who are fearful of dogs.

Having a dedicated space for dogs to be off leash eliminates a prime excuse some dog owners give for letting their dogs wander along without a leash. No one will be able to claim, "There's no place around here where my dog can just run."

Users of the dog park can provide a valuable service in public outreach by modeling responsible pet management and helping to educate the public in what accountable ownership means. Collaborating among themselves, for instance, they can encourage other dog owners to pick up after their dogs and set a higher civic standard. A well-managed dog park can foster a culture of responsible dog ownership that benefits the entire community.

Because of age, infirmity, or circumstance, many people who like dogs cannot have one of their own. A dog park is a place where these folks can get out of their homes and enjoy many of the benefits of owning a dog. They can enjoy the happy spectacle of rollicking dogs, "talk dogs" with



**More people are traveling with their dogs these days — a dog park can help Belfast look more attractive to these folks.**

other enthusiasts, and pet or interact with dogs whose owners they've gotten to know. And, as grandparents quickly learn when visiting new grandchildren, once they've had their fill they can leave the dogs with their owners and return to some peace and quiet.

Furthermore, travel authorities report that more people are traveling and vacationing these days with their canine companions, so any community that is home to a dog park is attractive both because of the convenient facility (travelers need to exercise their dogs) and for what it says about the area's attitude toward dogs. The Belfast Comfort Inn, the Belfast Harbor Inn, and Colonial Gables Motel and Cottages, for instance, are proud to offer dog-friendly accommodations, and several stores in town allow well-behaved dogs to enter their premises. A community with a reputation for being particularly dog friendly has a valuable marketing tool.

Being a community with a dog park could also have some small effect on the local real estate market. A town with a dog park can be considerably more appealing than one with just a leash law for dog lovers looking for a place to settle in midcoast Maine.

In short, dogs and dog owners are hardly the only beneficiaries of a properly run dog park. The entire community can benefit. As many other towns and cities across the country have learned, a dog park is a bona fide community asset with both social and economic benefits — another place to have fun in town.



## SECTION 3 CONCERNS ABOUT DOG PARKS

As wonderful as the many benefits of a well-run dog park may be, off-leash recreational areas are not without hazards and risks. Even "good" dogs can get into fights, for example, and not all dog owners feel it's their obligation to pick up after their own animal. Fortunately, though, because dog parks have been long established elsewhere, most of the potential problems have already been identified and successfully addressed.

Strategies that other communities use to avoid problems include signage that clearly communicates park rules and a users' guide that explains the reasoning behind the rules and encourages all to honor them. Friends of Belfast Parks intends to produce such a users' guide which could be distributed as residents license their dogs, at the dog park itself, at dog-friendly Belfast motels, and on the city web sites. Other possibilities include placing helpful resources for loan at Belfast Free Library, creating a DVD that shows safe and responsible park use, and holding educational events for park users throughout the year.

Listed below are specific concerns about dog parks that were raised by local veterinarians, dog trainers, and dog owners, and gleaned from off-leash recreational area literature and web sites we explored. Recommended solutions follow each.

### LEGAL LIABILITIES

Maine's Recreational Use Statute (MRSA §14-1-7-159-A) clearly states a property owner bears no liability for mishaps occurring at a recreational area that is open and free to the public, just as it is currently not liable for injuries on the tennis courts or skateboard park. It is the dog owners themselves who are legally responsible for the behavior of their dogs.

To emphasize this point, signage will make it clear that people using the park do so at their own risk and may be liable for any harm caused by their dogs.

### DOG FIGHTS AND BAD BEHAVIOR

Although there was no aggression evident at any of the parks we visited, and regular users reported it is rare, fights on the playground can happen between dogs just as they do among children and professional basketball players.

Strategies to prevent aggression and minimize harm from any fight that does break out include:

- ◆ Being explicit in both signage and the users' guide that aggressive dogs are forbidden from mixing with other dogs at the dog park.
- ◆ Banning any female dogs that are in heat, and advising owners to monitor unneutered males closely.

- ◆ Educating users on signs of stress and impending aggression in dogs through regularly scheduled workshops, as well as books and DVDs placed in the Belfast Free Library.

- ◆ Providing for the protection of small dogs (i.e., less than 20 pounds) by creating a separate, visually screened area where they can romp without being bullied by larger animals.

- ◆ Building or planning for a visually screened "solo" pen for dogs that don't behave appropriately in a group, so that these dogs, too, can have off-leash exercise.

- ◆ Scheduling trained volunteers to be in the park at peak usage times to watch for bullying and stressed dogs and to ask owners to remove animals that are causing or having trouble.

- ◆ Banning repeat offenders from the dog park through a process developed by a coalition of local dog owners in concert with the Belfast animal control officer.

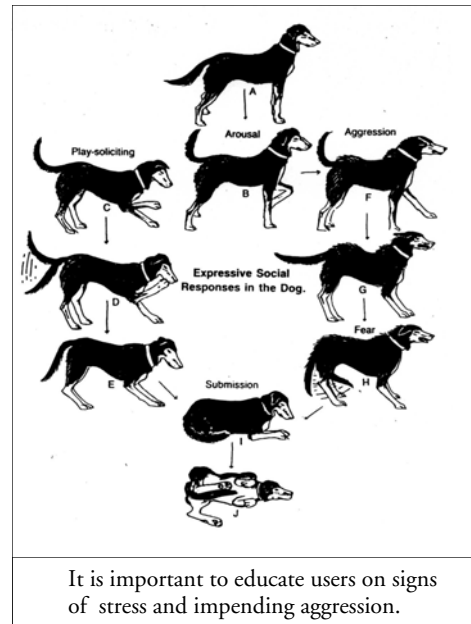
- ◆ Forbidding people to bring or eat food inside the dog park, which could stimulate "resource protection" by dogs.

- ◆ Keeping water available to throw on any dogs that fight, which is considered the safest way to break up a fight.

- ◆ Building or providing for a time-out pen where overly excited dogs can settle.

- ◆ Keeping all dogs on leash until they have entered the fenced park, to prevent excited dogs from interacting freely on ground used by the general public.

- ◆ Requiring that all dog bites be promptly reported to local authorities.



## CHILD SAFETY

Dog parks are playgrounds for dogs, not kids. In an ideal world, all dogs would be thoroughly socialized with young children, but many owners don't have toddlers in their households and many don't realize that learning how to interact with tykes is most reliably accomplished before their pups are twelve weeks old. Occasionally, even a well-socialized dog will shift into prey drive when little children run, shriek, or cry. In addition, youngsters tend to play on the ground, which, for reasons of hygiene as well as safety, is hardly advisable in a dog park.

To protect the well-being of Belfast's youngest residents, we recommend that:

- ◆ No children under four be allowed into the dog park.
- ◆ No children under twelve be allowed in the dog park unless accompanied by a supervising adult.
- ◆ Parents be warned to watch their children in the park as closely as they watch their dogs.
- ◆ Children under twelve — and everyone else — be advised that only dogs can run in the park, not people.

## FECES REMOVAL

All the parks we visited were surprisingly clean. Users readily spoke to other users who had not cleaned up after their dogs, and they reported they also cleaned up piles that some owners had missed. An important asset of a dog park, we learned, is that it brings dog owners together and strengthens a culture of shared responsibility among them.

Keeping the park clean is crucial for both hygienic as well as esthetic and practical reasons. A park littered with piles of poop is a community eyesore and health hazard, and would quickly be abandoned by responsible dog owners. To keep the park healthy and clean, we recommend the following:



**At the dog park — like everywhere else in the city — dog owners will be responsible for cleaning up after their pets.**



**Friends of Belfast Parks sponsored "April Stools' Day" at Steamboat Landing on April 1, 2007 to clean up after careless dog owners.**

- ◆ Dog owners will be required to clean up after their dogs immediately and dispose of the waste in garbage cans that are provided.
- ◆ Plastic-bag dispensers will be located at convenient spots around the dog park, even though park users would be encouraged to bring their own bags.
- ◆ All park users have access to demonstrations on how simple it is to clean up after their dog with a plastic bag.
- ◆ Park users will be encouraged to pick up after other dogs if they notice an undiscovered pile.

- ◆ Volunteer park monitors with special training will confront dog owners who don't pick up after their pets and will work in concert with the city's animal control officer to levy fines against users who fail to take responsibility for their dogs' waste.
- ◆ Repeat offenders should be banned from the park. The procedure for doing so should be clearly defined and equitably administered.
- ◆ Waste receptacles should be provided at the park and be serviced by the city at least as regularly as all the other public trashcans around town.
- ◆ The dog park users' guide should recommend parasite checks by a vet before a dog's first visit to the park and twice a year thereafter. It should also encourage owners to give a heartworm preventative that also prevents infestations by intestinal parasites.
- ◆ No one, child or adult, should be allowed to enter the park in bare feet or sandals.
- ◆ Friends of Belfast Parks should continue to sponsor annual park clean-up days to focus attention on the need for dog owners to be responsible for their dogs' waste throughout the city.

## DISEASE TRANSMISSION AMONG DOGS

Dogs, like schoolchildren, can share germs with playmates, and spreading diseases is another concern when groups of dogs gather in one place. Adopting and enforcing the following rules should reduce the likelihood of this happening at the Belfast dog park.

- ◆ All dogs in the park must bear a current Maine license tag, which indicates that they have been vaccinated against rabies; out-of-state visitors must be prepared to show proof of current vaccination.
- ◆ Dogs under four months of age will be banned from the park, as their immune systems are not fully mature.
- ◆ The dog park users' guide will recommend that owners stay current on the standard American Animal Hospital Association schedule for canine vaccinations or test for immunities that their veterinarians judge to be adequate.
- ◆ Signage and the users' guide will remind people to use common sense and keep their dogs out of the park if they exhibit symptoms of respiratory or gastrointestinal illness or any other contagious condition.
- ◆ Again, signage at the park will make clear that dog owners use the area at their own risk, but dogs that have been vaccinated will presumably have immunity if unvaccinated dogs should enter the park.

## NOISE

Barking dogs are generally a concern of neighbors to any proposed dog park. All of the dog parks we visited, however, were surprisingly quiet places. In addition, our proposed site has no residential neighbors and is flanked by louder ones: Route 1 and the airport.

## TYPICAL DOG PARK RULES

Solutions to realistic hazards are found in rules posted at every well-managed dog park. In every instance these rules — which are surprisingly similar across the country — are calculated to prevent adverse incidents and address common concerns. The following list of examples is adapted from signs posted at various dog parks we visited and from the books *Visiting the Dog Park: Having Fun, Staying Safe*, by Cheryl S. Smith ((c) 2007, Dogwise Publishing), and *So You Want to Build a Dog Park? A Comprehensive Guide for Municipalities and Private Entities* ((c) 2006, DogParks USA(tm)).

- ◆ Dogs must be free of contagious diseases.
- ◆ Do not bring a sick dog to the dog park.
- ◆ No female dogs in heat may enter the dog park.
- ◆ No dogs with known aggressive tendencies or exhibiting aggressive behaviors may enter the dog park.
- ◆ Dog feces must be cleaned up and disposed of by the dog owner.
- ◆ Dog owners are responsible for filling in any holes their dog digs.
- ◆ Do not smoke or eat in the dog park — cigarette butts are toxic if eaten by dogs and food may lead to resource guarding.
- ◆ Do not bring rawhide chews or treats into the dog park to avoid resource guarding
- ◆ Keep your dog leashed until you get into the double-gated entryway to the park, and reattach the leash here when you leave.
- ◆ If at any time your dog becomes unruly or plays too rough, get your dog and leave immediately.
- ◆ If your dog is obviously nervous or stressed, leave immediately.
- ◆ Obey all posted rules — even if you don't agree with them. They are there for a reason and should be respected.

## SECTION 4 A LOOK AT SUCCESSFUL DOG PARKS IN OTHER COMMUNITIES

Recognizing that Belfast is a unique place with its own special history, politics, landscape, and foibles, as well as a staunchly independent spirit, the dog-park study group nonetheless felt it important to learn about off-leash areas in other towns. To find out what might be most appropriate for our own community, we researched dog-park web sites via the internet, we visited off-leash areas in communities both in-state and out of state, and we spoke with individuals living in Waldo County who have had experiences with off-leash areas in other places.



The city of Belfast would bear no liability for activity at a free, public dog park; liability for dog behavior would reside with individual dog owners, as it does currently.

Despite the great variety in the size, fencing, and amenities among the parks, we discovered that all adhere to essentially the same rules and all were clean and free of dog waste. One popular feature that impressed us was a covered bin to hold dog park users' guides offering information about city ordinances, park rules, pet-friendly accommodations in the area, other nearby parks and hiking trails, and local veterinarian and dog services. Interestingly, most of the dog parks we investigated were part of or adjacent to other, larger recreational areas such as playing fields, pools, or other municipal facilities.

The most striking commonality among them all, however, is that the pet owners we spoke to were overwhelmingly positive in their praise of their local dog parks and openly appreciative for the opportunity these places offer for exercising their dogs. In general they were also very friendly people, happy to talk to other dog owners and eager to help them get the most out of their local parks. Clearly, we learned, people socialize at dog parks as much as the dogs.

### DOG PARKS VISITED

#### PORTLAND, MAINE

About an acre in size and enclosed by a chain link fence, Portland's Valley Street Dog Park is located in the West End close to the downtown commercial district, adjacent to a heavily traveled city street. It has trees, benches, gravel, and grass (though much of it has worn away). At some point the area had been mulched, but maintenance has evidently been lax. Even though the area seems a bit shabby, it is surprisingly clean throughout. Amenities in-



A shelter at Portland's Quarry Run offers dog owners shade and a place to sit.

clude a water spigot, metal water dishes, and trashcans, as well as bag dispensers.

Portland's only other fenced dog park, Quarry Run, is located about five miles from downtown on the site of an old landfill. The six-acre area has rolling hills, winding pathways, and a lot of foliage. There is a shelter and some benches, but there was a curious lack of trashcans during our visit. Inside the park is a smaller, fenced area, about 50'x 50', evidently for isolating smaller dogs or unsocialized dogs, but it lacked any signage explaining what it was for. An unfavorable feature is that, due to the topography, dogs can easily be out of their owner's sight.

#### DENVILLE, NEW JERSEY

Part of a recreational area that includes soccer and baseball fields, Happy Hound Playground is a fenced two-acre park with separate small- and large-dog areas. Adirondack-style chairs, benches, shelters, water, plastic-bag dispensers, and trashcans are among the standard amenities. But at this park there is also an agility course set up for the dogs and a collection of dog toys scattered about for all to use. In contrast to other dog parks we visited, this one is under the management of the local health department; Denville's animal control officer monitors the park and visits often in a supervisory role. Access to the park is by membership only, with annual fees ranging from \$35 for residents to \$50 for non-residents. In the little more than a year that the park has been open, it has built a membership of 267.



**Pet drinking fountain.**

#### LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

The city's six-acre dog park, enclosed with horse-farm plank fencing (and mesh), is located within Masterson Station Park, a 40-acre municipal park on the outskirts of town. It is grassy, has mature trees, and has its own water hydrant.

Lexington also has a three-acre dog park located at Jacobson Park, another of the community's several huge municipal recreation areas. The dog park here is fenced with chain link and has a tree line. It is grassy but otherwise has few amenities within the fenced area. The park itself, however, has a lake, picnic areas, trails, many trees, and is very popular.



**Bulletin boards come in handy for announcing events, workshops, lost dogs, and other news for dog owners.**

#### MIDLAND, TEXAS

This is a relatively new dog park and it is part of a much larger sports complex. The total dog park

site is about five acres, with one and a half acres reserved for small dogs. It's all surrounded by chain-link fencing, and amenities include drinking fountains. The very active group of users organizes pool days, pooch parties, and other fun recreational activities involving people and their dogs.

#### ROSWELL, NEW MEXICO

As in most of the off-leash areas we visited, this park has chain-link fencing, a shelter, drinking water, and separate areas for small and large dogs. It is grassy and like all the others uses double gates for safety.

#### SAN LUIS OBISPO, CALIFORNIA



**At this park, the groundcover is woodchips rather than grass.**

This is a regional park about five miles out of town, located next to a botanical garden. The surface for dogs to play on is wood chips and there is a concrete sidewalk through the park. Trees, shelters, and benches are located inside the park as well as a large informational kiosk and attractive wooden trash cans. Its water spigot, hose, and large tub basins sit on terra cotta tiles.

#### PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

This park includes separate areas for small dogs and large dogs and features a striking, artist-designed, ornamental fence. This is a grassy area with a concrete entrance and sidewalk around part of the perimeter. Shade trees, shelters, and benches add to the comfort.



**Fencing at this fancy California dog park is as decorative as it is practical.**

#### OTHER DOG PARKS

Dog parks visited by others with whom our group has spoken include those in Overland Park, Kansas; Charleston, South Carolina; and Denver, Colorado. Belfast residents who have used these parks had complimentary reports about each. One local resident who has a second home in Charleston said she chose to locate in that city in part because it had such a great dog park.

## SECTION 5 DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL DOG PARK

**D**rawing on a wealth of information from the nation's already long-established off-leash areas for dogs, as well as visits to several dog parks across the country, including two in Maine, we found that the best of these areas all have certain basic features. These include the following:

- ◆ One acre or more completely enclosed by fencing.
- ◆ Chain link or other fencing that is at least five feet tall and sturdy enough to withstand weather and protect dogs of all sizes.
- ◆ Flat enough terrain that dogs are never out of their owner's sight.
- ◆ Adequate drainage so area can be used year-round.
- ◆ Safe location, not isolated.
- ◆ Easily maintained surfaces such as grass, mulch, or concrete.
- ◆ Double-gated entryways to prevent dogs from slipping out accidentally.
- ◆ A minimum of two entryways to facilitate access to park and dogs at play.
- ◆ Ample shade for both dogs and their owners.
- ◆ Water for drinking, park maintenance, and also dog control.
- ◆ Covered garbage cans with regular trash removal.
- ◆ Dispensers for plastic doggy bags.
- ◆ Seating for dog owners and spectators located throughout the parkway, not all bunched together.
- ◆ Wheel-chair accessibility.
- ◆ Regular maintenance.
- ◆ Support and oversight from a committed group of volunteers.
- ◆ Sensible, simple, proven rules posted prominently near the entrance and elsewhere inside the enclosure.

In addition to these basic features, dog parks can also have such amenities as trails; a separate enclosure for small dogs, shy dogs, or aggressive dogs; simple or elaborate landscaping with trees and shrubs; dog agility equipment (such as weave poles or obstacles to jump over); a dog-bathing area or fountain; and a bulletin board for communication among dog owners. Pools, streams, and natural or constructed water features are common.

## THE VOLUNTEER COMPONENT

Repeatedly in our travels and research to learn about dog parks, we found references to the absolutely indispensable role local dog owners themselves play in the success of an off-leash recreational area.

Few municipalities in Maine or elsewhere can afford to pay for policing a dog park properly, and no city official could be expected to manage a dog park single-handedly in addition to his or her regular job

load. In virtually every case we studied, the success of the local park depended on a coalition of local dog owners - the people with the most to gain, or lose, by how well a particular park is run.



**The success of a local dog park depends on a coalition of local dog owners — the people with the most to gain, or lose, by how well a park is run.**

In every instance, dog owners told us they didn't just use the dog park, they also felt an ownership of it. They worked together with everyone else interested in dogs to adopt the slate of rules appropriate for their area, to spread information about how to use the park safely, and to encourage one another to keep the area clean and pleasant. In town after town, these are the people who constantly assess the condition of the dog park, pinpoint needed improvements, and figure out how to obtain them.

Although the city of Belfast has been generous in trying to meet the recreational needs of such disparate enthusiasts as tennis players and skateboarders, we are confident that dog owners themselves will fund establishment of a dog park in Belfast. Whether it's selling "bark-park" T-shirts and drinks at local festivals, sponsoring or participating in events like Belfast's Wiener Fest, or launching a capital campaign, the dog owners — by their numbers, diversity, and passion — should be able to raise enough money for the park.

United in their efforts to manage the local dog park, dog lovers can also invite speakers to the area - experienced trainers, groomers, veterinarians, for instance — to learn more about caring for their animals. In ways like these, the value of the volunteer organization could extend well beyond the dog park.

Dog owners allied with other dog owners could also bolster the city's efforts to keep dogs around town safely on leashes and to keep the streets and sidewalks clean. Those of us out walking our dogs every day are among the first to notice when other dog handlers don't clean up after their animals. Of course, the converse is also true: without a strong coalition of dog owners behind a local dog park it may be doomed to fail. We did not run into any case histories of unsuccessful dog parks, but it stands to reason that no one would take his or her dog to an unsafe or unhealthy area, and it is difficult to imagine how a park could thrive without the cooperation of everyone involved.

Clearly the single most important component of a local dog park is the volunteer group of dog owners who oversee it. From the beginning, the study group assembled by Friends of Belfast Parks has been impressed by the numbers of dogs and dog-owning households in the city and the widespread enthusiasm for a safe site for dogs to run off leash. In the words of Don Hanson, a highly respected dog behaviorist and trainer from Bangor, who is currently serving as national president of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers: "If there's one town in Maine that could successfully pull off a dog park, it's Belfast."

**"If there's one town in Maine that could successfully pull off a dog park, it's Belfast."**

—Don Hanson

President, National Association  
of Pet Dog Trainers  
Registered Practitioner,  
Bach Foundation  
Owner, Green Acres Kennel  
Bangor, Maine



## SECTION 6 ASSESSMENT OF POTENTIAL DOG PARK SITES IN BELFAST

With the design considerations for a successful off-leash recreation area in mind, the Belfast Dog Park exploratory group obtained a map from the Belfast Planning Office showing all the publicly owned lands in the city.

After studying the map and identifying all city-owned properties, the group first agreed upon several city-owned properties that we would exclude for consideration as potential sites for a dog park. These sites included Steamboat Landing, Heritage Park, and Belfast Common, as we



Of all city-owned properties, only Belfast City Park, Wales Park, or Walsh Field have most of the components critical to a successful dog park in Belfast. Of these three, the Walsh Field site appears to be the most promising.

assumed that restricting any portion of these highly prized properties would be inappropriate and politically unfeasible. Ironically, Steamboat Landing serves currently as the city's *de facto* dog park; it is certainly the city park most visited every day by Belfast dogs and their owners.

After determining the sites that would be excluded from consideration, the exploratory group then set out to inspect seven locations that we thought might be possible sites for a dog park. The sites included 1) the "old ski slope area" on outer High Street, 2) Sportsman's Park on Shepard Road, 3) the site of the former city landfill on Pitcher Road, 4) a wooded parcel in the Belfast Industrial Park just south of the airport runway, 5) an undeveloped area in Belfast City Park, 6) Wales Park, and 7) an area in the Walsh Field Recreation Area.

We rejected four of the sites because of their remoteness or the high costs that would be associated with site preparation, construction, and/or the providing critical components (e.g., potable water, restroom facilities). In addition, we were concerned that a remote site would not be as well used as a central one and would cause some dog owners a sense of insecurity when using the park alone.

We determined that three areas warranted further consideration: 1) the undeveloped area in Belfast City Park; 2) Wales Park; and 3) the undeveloped parcel in the Walsh Field Recreation Area. A summary of our evaluation of each of the three sites follows.

## BELFAST CITY PARK

This is an undeveloped, grassy area in the south-east corner of the park, below the children's playground area.



### ADVANTAGES

- ◆ Gently sloping land with a spectacular water view.
- ◆ Sea breezes to cool site and keep bugs at bay.
- ◆ Parking, potable water, and restroom facilities nearby.
- ◆ Accessible by foot to most people inside the bypass.
- ◆ Other focused recreational areas nearby — such as tennis courts, swimming pool, and playground — setting a precedent for a specially designated recreation area, in this case for the city's dog owners.

The Belfast City Park site, just below the playground area, is too small to accommodate a number of dogs, and has very poor drainage in the spring.

### DISADVANTAGES

- ◆ Less than half acre available is too small for a city's sole dog park: crowding dogs could lead to aggressive behavior and make maintenance more difficult.
- ◆ Not enough space for a separate area for small dogs.

- ◆ Proximity to playground could overexcite some dogs.
- ◆ Site has very poor drainage in springtime.
- ◆ City Park is not currently open to cars in winter.
- ◆ No shade for dogs, little for owners; landscaping would be required and would further decrease amount of open play area for dogs; also, the area would need to be screened from playground with shrubbery.
- ◆ Location might be perceived as less accessible to people from the East Side and neighboring communities.
- ◆ Nearby residents may object to project.

## WALES PARK

Top of Main Street hill, at intersection of Main Street and Lincolnville Avenue; between Congress Street and Lincolnville Avenue.

### ADVANTAGES

- Flat, well-drained, already developed field.
- Accessible by foot to most people inside the bypass as well as by car.
- Easily accessible year-round.
- Distant water view, pleasant vista and neighborhood.
- Breezy elevated location might keep bugs down.
- Parking area, small pavilion.
- Possibly the least-used public park in Belfast; it is curiously empty except for transient teenagers and a short season for peewee football players.
- At least one neighbor highly supportive of using this area for dog park.



Wales Park is also too small, and has inadequate parking.

## DISADVANTAGES

- ◆ Less than an acre of usable space, not adequate space for the city's sole municipal dog park; crowding and overuse could become an issue here.
- ◆ Little shade for dogs; landscaping would be required and would reduce open space available for play.
- ◆ Some traffic noise from Main Street.
- ◆ Six-foot chain link fencing may be perceived as obtrusive in such a visible location.
- ◆ Minimal space for parking; five or six cars would fill space currently available.
- ◆ Neighboring residents may prefer to keep park empty or object to using it specifically as dog park.
- ◆ Traditional users of park may feel they "own" it.

## WALSH FIELD RECREATION AREA

This is an undeveloped parcel adjacent to the baseball diamond in the Walsh Field Recreation Area; access to the area is off Route 5 (Lincolnville Avenue) south of US Route 1.



## ADVANTAGES

- ◆ More than an acre of relatively flat, well-drained land.
- ◆ Ample paved parking in proximity of site.
- ◆ Potable water, restroom facilities, and sidewalk to site.
- ◆ Pleasant view of surrounding wetlands and ball fields.

- ◆ Adjacent ball diamonds already surrounded by tall chain-link fences, making prospective dog park fairly unobtrusive.
- ◆ No residential neighbors.
- ◆ Ample space for additional, specially designated areas for small dogs or shy/aggressive dogs or solo training exercises.
- ◆ Equally accessible for East Side residents, downtown residents, and even people from neighboring communities.
- ◆ Not already designated formally or informally for another use; it is land that has never been developed or used by the city.



The undeveloped (and unmowed) site at the Walsh Field Recreation Area appears to have all of the attributes needed for a successful dog park, and looks to be the least expensive to turn into an off-leash recreational area.

## DISADVANTAGES

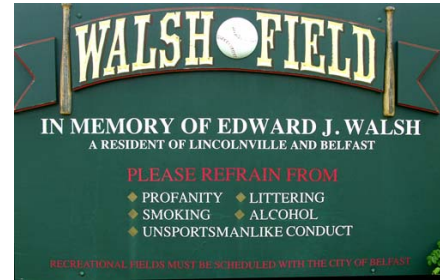
- ◆ Outside the bypass; essentially inaccessible by foot for most Belfast residents.
- ◆ Traffic noise from Route 1.
- ◆ Low-flying aircraft cause noise and may possibly spook some dogs.
- ◆ Undeveloped nature of the parcel may require grading, adding an expense.
- ◆ No shade exists at current time for dogs or owners; landscaping and/or construction of one or more shelters would be required.
- ◆ Parking may be a problem when adjoining ball diamonds are in use.
- ◆ Possibly a buggy area in spring or summer (though that doesn't seem to be a problem for ball players and fans).
- ◆ Accessibility in winter might be an issue.

## SECTION 7 RECOMMENDED DOG PARK SITE AND PROJECTED COSTS

After thoroughly evaluating the three potential dog park sites in Belfast, our group is requesting that a dog park be established on the proposed site at the Walsh Field Recreation Area.

This location has adequate space for the necessary features, is close to the concentrated population of Belfast residents, is readily accessible, and offers the critical elements of potable water, restroom facilities, parking, and a sense of visibility and security.

As of August 2007, the City of Belfast is in the process of acquiring the Walsh Field Recreation Area from the Bank of America; our recommendation for proposing this area as the location for the Belfast Dog Park is contingent upon the city's acquisition of the property.



### MAINTENANCE OF THE DOG PARK

Our group realizes that the monetary obligations do not end with the construction of any municipal facility, and that there is an ongoing obligation to maintain any public facility over time. In recognition of that fact, the Friends of Belfast Parks will commit to provide a minimum of 100 volunteer hours annually to the maintenance and upkeep of the dog park. In addition, the organization plans to sponsor one or more annual fundraising events to help support the ongoing maintenance costs for the park.

### ESTIMATED CONSTRUCTION COSTS

In order to determine the amount of funding that might be required to establish a dog park at the Walsh Field site, we obtained estimates for various components from local building supply businesses and fencing contractors and compared our results with those of already established parks.

The figures we are presenting represent what we consider to be conservative estimates. The possibility of donated materials and volunteer labor could reduce these numbers considerably.

## ESTIMATED PHASE I CONSTRUCTION COSTS

### CHAIN-LINK FENCING SYSTEM

Fencing for primary area, 6 foot high galvanized ~ 1,000 linear feet.	.	.	.	.	.	.	\$ 12,000
Installation costs, by contractor.	.	.	.	.	.	.	7,000
Fencing for secondary area, 6 foot high galvanized ~ 400 linear feet.	.	.	.	.	.	.	4,800
Installation costs, by contractor.	.	.	.	.	.	.	3,000

### SIGNAGE

Park identification sign with rules listed.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1,500
Large dog, small dog area identification signs.	.	.	.	.	.	.	300
Message board/kiosk.	.	.	.	.	.	.	600

### PET DRINKING FOUNTAINS

Pet comfort station w/ shower feature, qty 2 @ \$1750	.	.	.	.	.	.	3,500
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	-------

### CONCRETE PAD FOR DRINKING FOUNTAIN AREAS

Size: 10' x 10', qty 2 @ \$250	.	.	.	.	.	.	500
--------------------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	-----

### TRASH RECEPTACLES

Waste receptacles (22 gal), qty 4 @ \$180	.	.	.	.	.	.	720
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	-----

### DOG-WASTE BAG DISPENSER STATIONS

Mutt Mitt bag dispenser kits, qty 4 @ \$200.	.	.	.	.	.	.	800
Mutt Mitt bags, 5 cases @ \$70							350

### SEATING

Park benches, 4 ft. long, recycled materials, qty 4.	.	.	.	.	.	.	1,200
--	---	---	---	---	---	---	-------

### LANDSCAPING

Shade trees, to be planted on interior of fenced area, qty 2-3	.	.	.	.	.	.	2,000
Ornamental landscaping at entrance area/around entrance sign	.	.	.	.	.	.	1,000

<b>Estimated Total Cost (Phase I)</b>	.	.	.	.	.	.	<b>\$39,270</b>
---------------------------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	-----------------



## PHASE II CONSTRUCTION COSTS

CONCRETE PAD FOR SHELTER/STORAGE AREAS

Size - 16 ft x 16 ft

Cost TBD

SHELTER/STORAGE SHED COMBO

Size - 16 ft x 16 ft

Cost TBD

WATER FEATURE (OPTIONAL)

Cost TBD

