





BUILDING BRIDGES

One Dog Park at a Time

Trainers are credible sources for dog behavior to assist those planning a dog park

By Rachel Brix, CPDT-KA

Living in a rental unit while her husband is here on a work visa, a dog mom knows she needs a safe place to exercise their Siberian Husky. She's relieved to learn of a nearby dog park and decides to start making routine trips. She runs into a couple who were considering giving their terrier/border collie puppy back to the shelter. But once they started visiting the dog park every day and saw a decrease in undesirable behaviors, they changed their minds.

As they all make their way out of the park with their tired and happy dogs, in walks a shelter volunteer with a senior mixed breed that's spent the last three years in the local shelter. She brings him as often as she can not only to get him exercise and out of the confines of his kennel, but also to network with other dog lovers to try and find him his forever home. On any given day there are many stories of love and success at our local dog park.

The Experimental Dog Park at Ohlone Park in Berkeley, California, which is generally acknowledged as the country's first leash-free dog park, was created in 1979. Dog parks have since become increasingly popular. According to an April 2016 report issued by The Trust for Public Land (TPL), dog parks are the fastest growing segment of urban parks nationwide, increasing four percent in 2015 and 89 percent in the past decade. The report also finds 100 of our nation's largest cities have at least one off-leash park. While the numbers are steadily increasing, many suburban and rural areas are still in need of safe spaces for dogs to run and play.

► A dog/human water fountain is unveiled and dedicated at the one-year anniversary celebration of the Eureka Springs Bark Park.

Also, as more people look for ways to spend time with their dogs, they look for fun things to do. Agility, IPO (Internationale Profungs-Ordnung or tracking, obedience and protection training) and even canine freestyle are perfect for some pet parents, dog parks appeal to anyone who likes to be outdoors. Dog parks transcend age, socio-economic status, physical disabilities and other barriers that tend to separate; instead these parks bring people together over their shared love of dogs.

Whether you spearhead your own dog park committee or join forces with an existing dog park crew, as trainers we can offer a professional and educational voice that can help promote responsible pet ownership and a more dog-friendly community.

Why Should Trainers Become Involved?

As professional dog trainers, we are credible sources for understanding dog behavior and how many of dogs' needs can be met with regular visits to a dog park. When I spearheaded the committee that built Carroll County, Arkansas' first dog park three years ago, I set out to solve a problem in my community: our yards are tiny or non-existent and, according to our veteran animal control officer, we have a population of dogs that outnumbers people.

That combination left a lot of dogs with nowhere to exercise and a lot of dog parents—and city officials—struggling with a myriad of issues. We had a lot of dogs running amok off-leash in our small mountain tourist town, including the cemetery and many city park spaces. This created problems for folks there for the rightful and intended purposes of those public areas. Off-leash dogs also presented challenges for properly handling dog waste. And people who weren't comfortable around dogs were being forced to interact with them, thereby cultivating more fear and anxiety toward dogs rather than acceptance.

Of course, as trainers we are business people, but most of us are dog people first. Becoming involved with building a dog park will undoubtedly get you some professional recognition, but it will also contribute to a shared vision and mission of helping dogs and educating pet parents on responsible pet ownership and the benefits of dog training. The comprehensive goal of creating a dog park



is connecting with other business owners, local government and animal shelters to support and network with each other to create a more dog-friendly community.

Benefits for Dogs and People

Off-leash dog parks benefit both dogs and people by providing socialization and health benefits. For example, people can share questions and ideas about their pets. According to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), “With dogs as social lubricants encouraging conversations among strangers, people in the community get to know each other and share information about responsible pet ownership.” Dogs also get the opportunity to interact with other dogs and people besides their immediate family.

With pet and human obesity at record levels, dog parks provide the opportunity for exercise and wellness by encouraging people to spend quality time with their dogs. According to a recent Harvard Medical School study, we can reduce our blood pressure and lose weight by having a dog because we are more likely to get the recommended amount of exercise each week. The Harvard report further shows dog parenting also can reduce anxiety, depression, stress and loneliness. In 2013 the American Heart Association published a finding that dog ownership is linked with a decreased risk of heart disease.

Dog parks also provide a great opportunity to promote and model responsible pet ownership by having a dedicated space with sensible rules that include manners (i.e., no excessive barking) and requirements pertaining to vaccinations, pet licenses and spay/neuter.



◀ Locals gather for the Eureka Springs Bark Park's Opening Day festivities in Arkansas.

Since most dogs are relinquished to shelters due to behavioral problems, and most behavioral problems are related to lack of sufficient exercise and stimulation, a dog park is a great asset. Dog parks therefore have the potential to keep more dogs in homes and reduce the burden on local shelters. Well-exercised dogs also make better neighbors. Regular physical and mental exercise can reduce unwanted barking and other undesirable behaviors because after a stimulating visit to the dog park dogs are typically tired and happy rather than possibly bored or agitated. Even if dogs are just content to sniff every smell in the place it's still a good thing: as Dr. Ian Dunbar, an author, veterinarian, animal behaviorist and trainer asserts, "Mental exercise tires a dog physically more than physical exercise does."

Garnering Local Support

First, you need to gather a group of like-minded people who want to work as a team. In our situation, many locals were not familiar with dog parks, so it provided a great opportunity to educate people on dog behavior and responsible pet ownership. Next, presenting the idea to residents and local government requires preparedness and explanations how the community will benefit from the creation of a dog park, especially if your community is like mine and did not have one.

One of the first steps we took was to create a proposal that not

only addressed all the pertinent information of the hows, the whys and where, but also a plan for implementation of the various phases of construction. Our full-color 20-page booklet outlined and explained our timeline and served as a great marketing and educational tool throughout the entire process. Furthermore, it was submitted with grant applications and distributed to city council members. It also included our post-construction 5-year-plan that included the addition of a dog/human water fountain, agility equipment and a memorial garden.

You'll need to check local ordinances and commissions regarding building, zoning and additional requirements. Since our town is on the National Register of Historic Places, we had to approach the Historic District Commission about fencing and signage. Working within established guidelines and applicable laws demonstrates your willingness to work within parameters of what's best for the community.

The number of people traveling with their pets has been steadily increasing with no signs of slowing down, and a dog park is likely to attract more dog-savvy tourists. Since we are a town that sees nearly one million tourists

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each year, we could use that angle to get support from many of the pet-friendly lodgings and other establishments that stood to benefit from the creation of a dog park. Your committee could explore angles that help folks understand why a dog park has additional benefits for your community. For example, researching your community's demographics could reveal what the HSUS points out as providing "people with disabilities and senior citizens who cannot always walk their dogs a safe alternative."

Other talking points to encourage support for dog parks include that because people would have a dedicated space

► The Eureka Springs Dog Park Committee at the groundbreaking ceremony. It took plenty of patience and planning, but it finally pulled together.

to exercise their dogs, there would be fewer leash law infractions, fewer calls to animal control and police and less misuse of public property.

Building the Park: The Short Version

Volunteers are what will make a dog park a reality in most situations, especially if the community doesn't already have a dog park. Volunteers will also help to monitor and maintain the dog park. By reaching out to people in your community you're creating a coalition for a dog-friendly atmosphere and developing a foundation for future dog-related endeavors. Both the Boy and Girl Scout organizations look for community activities for their Eagle/Gold Star projects.

Land will be the biggest obstacle. That expense and its location will probably depend a lot on what's available—first check for any land the city/township may be willing to devote to this purpose. You may also look for any person or business that might be willing to donate property, or you may need to look to purchase or lease property. Our committee was very fortunate a dog park had been in our parks department's master plan for quite some time; however, the plan lacked funding and people willing to tackle the challenge. As such, we were able to use a one-acre hillside that is sufficient for our small town of 2,073. Plus, it has many mature trees and is already adjoined to a downtown park area that has a shared parking lot.

After you've decided on a location, fundraising will present the next biggest challenge. Many states and even counties offer grant opportunities for projects that benefit the entire community. Crowd funding and online fundraising are also an option. We approached local businesses and local dog enthusiasts for donations and held many dog-themed fundraisers at dog-friendly locations and local parks. Yappy hours, Barktoberfests and various contests were big draws for our cause and afforded us opportunities to have our committee present to answer questions while promoting responsible dog ownership with canine guests.

Our memorial brick drive was very successful, raising \$2,000 that was matched by a local bank. We used the bricks to pave the two separate entrances to the park. We also coordinated with our Downtown Network



that hosts events for local nonprofits at local businesses and splits the proceeds. Creating a Facebook page helped get the word out about what we were doing and created a buzz. We still use ours (Facebook search Eureka Springs Dog Park) to promote events, dog park etiquette, training tips and volunteer clean-ups. Local papers were very supportive, one even giving us a regular spot (the "Park Bark") for a photo captioned with a brief update on our progress.

Since the Eureka Springs Bark Park was funded entirely by our community and built by our committee of volunteers, our approach was to build a park we could afford that was safe, enjoyable and facilitated a few rules. The basics included fencing, dog waste stations, trash receptacles and signage. Through the generosity of our residents and even several tourists we were also able to purchase benches and an informational kiosk.

We knew the importance of having separate areas for small and large dogs, double-gated entryways and at least 5-foot fencing. We chose coated chain link for cost and effectiveness. Our dog park is free and entry is unrestricted, but some dog parks have registration through city offices and/or entry is granted through a key, combination or FOB system. The HSUS has an extremely helpful easy-to-read guide online outlining the ins and outs of how to go about building a dog park at http://www.humanesociety.org/assets/pdfs/pets/dog_parks.pdf

Lastly, be prepared to be patient! In many cases building a dog park can take several years. Since we already had the land secured, a community that was long overdue for this amenity and a small



◀ The memorial brick project raised \$4,000 for the Eureka Springs Bark Park.

yet very motivated grassroots team, we were able to raise \$20,000 and build our dog park in 22 months. We even had about 10 percent of the proceeds left over for future amenities.

Handling Objections

Most of the hesitation to build a dog park comes from valid concerns: Will the dogs bark all the time? Will there be unpleasant odors from excessive dog waste? Will dogs be fighting? Most of these objections can be handled with the explanation of a well-developed set of rules and how those rules will be enforced. Most dog parks have similar rules; our list of rules can be viewed at <http://www.lakeleatherwoodcitypark.com/barkpark.htm>.

Since in our situation there was concern over wolves and wolf hybrids, we researched the issue. The Arkansas General Assembly states these animals are unregulated in Arkansas and our state law reads, “The Compendium of Animal Rabies Control advises that no vaccination has been approved for use in wolves or wolf-dog hybrids.” Therefore, due to legitimate safety concerns and other concerns regarding the breeding of wild animals in general, we chose to include a rule that restricts them from our dog park. We have no other breed restrictions.

Dog-on-dog or dog-on-person aggression is typically handled proactively with rules that stipulate dogs with aggressive history are not permitted in the park and dog owners are required to remove their dog at the first sign of aggressive behavior. This requires vigilant monitoring on the part of the pet parents, but also requires some level of training that further encourages responsible pet ownership. As far as dog-on-human aggression,

the HSUS reports, “A National Recreation and Park Association study showed no incidents of dog fights in dog parks resulting in libel suits...and no incidents involving dogs attacking humans.”

Building a dog park will establish and nurture local relationships and help promote discussions that will benefit dogs, dog parents and the community. Even if you already have a dog park in your area, you can still get involved in its ongoing efforts. Consider volunteering to help with continued fundraising, maintenance or even being a professional liaison for issues that may arise where your expertise can make a constructive difference. You might also consider hosting seminars on dog behavior and body language, dog park etiquette or responsible pet ownership.

Ultimately, dog parks enhance the community’s wellness, unity and happiness by providing a place where dogs and people can enjoy each other’s company: a win-win for all types of dogs and all types of people.



Rachel Brix, CPDT-KA, is a veteran high school teacher who decided to switch gears to pursue a full time career with dogs. She has been Lead Trainer at Petco, opened her own grooming and training business and managed two animal shelters. Rachel is a Canine Good Citizen Evaluator and currently teaches group classes and offers consulting and training to animal shelters. She also spearheaded the effort to build Carroll County, Arkansas’ first and only dog park. Her passion is rescue dogs and all animal advocacy, her most recent campaign resulting in a wild animal circus ban in Eureka Springs, the first and only one of its kind in Arkansas. Rachel lives with her husband and six rescue animals in Eureka Springs.