



Dog Park Design Highlights

A dog park is a space, often in a public park and usually enclosed with fencing, where dogs are encouraged to play off-leash with their handlers/caregivers and other dogs.

Excellence in dog park design occurs when not only the physical site is considered, but the users and community (including dogs and handlers/caregivers, maintenance personnel and neighbours) have their needs considered and included in the design and operation of the facility.

A wise person once said “the answer is in the question”, the questions below encourage dog park designers to consider the vital needs of these various constituents.

Physical Location

1. Size, Location and Entrances
 - a. Is the park located near residential areas (within walking distance) to encourage use yet far enough away (setback and buffered)/landscaped to minimize noise?
 - b. Is there good surveillance of the space from public areas (site is not isolated)?
 - c. Is the site connected to an existing urban walking route?
 - d. Are there multiple entrances to ensure flow and prevent confrontations?
 - e. Is the site located near environmentally sensitive areas (such as wetlands or with significant wildlife habitat/near endangered species) and are they appropriately buffered?
 - f. Is the site a minimum of 2 acres (~8000 square meters) or - more appropriately to prevent dog behaviour issues - between 2.5 - 4 acres?

‘The area should be big enough for dogs to run around and space themselves out considerably. If there’s not enough square footage available, a park can easily get crowded. Crowding can lead to tension among dogs and, as a result, fights can erupt’

(American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2013:n.p).

2. Signage
 - a. Is the name of the park clearly posted at entrance(s)?
 - b. Are the signs located so they are clearly visible?
 - c. Are the signs legible (i.e. color, size, etc.)?
 - d. Are there appropriate regulatory, advisory, and warning signs?
 - e. Are emergency contact numbers posted – to local animal control/maintenance?
 - f. Is a notice board provided for dog park community organizers, dog service providers and dog handlers to post information and concerns such as lost dogs?
 - g. Is there signage to encourage handlers to effectively manage their dog’s in-park behaviour?

3. Fencing
 - a. What type?
 - b. How high (minimum five feet, six or seven feet is generally most appropriate)?
 - c. Configuration?
 - d. Size of area that is fenced?
 - e. Are dogs protected by fencing from hazards such as roadways and train tracks?
 - f. Is there a separation between large and small dogs (generally a 25 – 30 pound limit) for safety in play?
 - g. Do visual barriers separate the small and large dog areas to prevent stress?
 - h. Are 90 degree angles (corners) avoided to reduce areas where dogs can be trapped by other dogs?
 - i. Is there a separated area for dogs who may be shy and fearful?
4. Gates and Equipment Access
 - a. Are small and large dog gates physically separated?
 - b. Are there separate double-gated entries and exits (usually a minimum of sixteen feet between the gates)?
 - c. Can the gate latches stand up to extremely frequent use?
 - d. Are there several (at least two of each) entry and exit gates to reduce congestion and prevent potential conflict from dogs congregating to bully newcomers?
 - e. Are gates situated on fencing straight-runs to prevent dogs from being boxed-in immediately on entry?
 - f. Is there a maintenance access with a minimum entrance width of 16 feet to allow vehicles to access the site?
5. Seating
 - a. Does the park provide adequate seating away from the entry gate?
 - b. Are there benches in each section of the park?
 - c. Are the benches designed to minimize mud and dirt from jumping dogs?
 - d. Is there enough seating?
 - e. Is the area around seating places (especially canopied areas) adequately drained to prevent a “ring of mud” around the area?
 - f. Is there a good mix of sun and shade seating?
 - g. Does the seating minimize the risk of dog injury (getting paws stuck or avoiding sharp metal re collisions)?
 - h. Do benches surround trees to help protect them from the nitrogen in dog urine?
6. Accessibility
 - a. Are the parking areas and pathway to the park gates accessible?
 - b. Is the interior of the park accessible to people with disabilities?
 - c. Are signage, gates and paths clearly marked for PWD’s?
 - d. Are pathways wide and substantial, with surface and height transitions clearly marked (using bright colours and Braille as possible)?

7. Surfaces

- a. What types of surfaces do the dogs run on?
- b. Are the surfaces durable?
- c. Do surfaces support allowing users with disabilities being able to enjoy the space?
- d. Are high traffic areas such as the entry and transition areas hardscaped to prevent churning?
- e. Do stones and mulches used avoid colourants which might transfer to dogs (for example red stone or mulch)?
- f. Is grass mowed, watered, reseeded and aerated to maintain drainage and are any holes and ruts repaired regularly?
- g. Are underground drainage systems like weeping tile and French drains incorporated and land appropriately sloped to allow urine and water drainage?
- h. Is integrated pest management practiced in grass areas?
- i. If there are grass fields, are they regularly rotated to allow regeneration?
- j. Is rain puddle formation prevented by maintaining level surfaces, to prevent mosquitoes and other arthropod pests?
- k. Is the surface type appropriate to minimize the possibility of it harbouring infectious and zoonotic diseases?

8. Paths

- a. Are there paths through the dog park?
- b. How are they constructed?
- c. Are they effective?
- d. Are they looping to encourage flow and movement?
- e. Are they accessible to PWD'S?

9. Parking

- a. Is there parking available?
- b. Is it easy to park?
- c. Are there enough spaces?
- d. Is there accessible parking?
- e. Is parking off-street and near to park entrances?
- f. Has a traffic engineer been consulted to ensure congestion is reduced (for example, dead-end parking increases congestion and decreases circulation)?
- g. Are waste disposal areas incorporated into the parking area near park entry ways and in other strategic locations in the parking lot?

10. Lighting

- a. Is there night lighting and is it energy efficient?
- b. What type?
- c. Location?
- d. Is the parking area well lit and visible enough to prevent crime while the handlers are in the park?

11. Structures

- a. Are there buildings to protect users from the elements?
- b. Are there structures that provide shade?
- c. What type?
- d. How many?
- e. Are there sculptures or equipment designed for dogs?
- f. Are structures (material and fasteners) used in construction able to withstand corrosion from dog urine (for example, made of aluminum, HDPE plastic and stainless steel)?

12. Vegetation and Softscaping

- a. Is the park deliberately organized?
- b. Are there trees that provide shade?
- c. Are shade tree root areas protected from negative effects of dog urine?
- d. Is there a minimum of 20% shade canopy within the area?
- e. What kinds of plants are used?
- f. Are the plant species native?
- g. What is the condition of the plant material?
- h. Are any of the plants and trees poisonous to dogs?
- i. Is the facility regularly checked for poisonous plants?

13. Water

- a. Is there a water fountain for both dogs and humans?
- b. Do water stations allow for individual drinking and between-use cleaning to prevent transmission of infectious disease?
- c. Is water protected from faeces run-off?
- d. Are there areas of regularly refreshed and circulating water where the dogs can swim (both splash pad depth and for deep swimming)?
- e. Are dogs with cuts and open sores prohibited from swimming?
- f. Is there a place for dogs to shower off on exit?

14. Waste disposal

- a. Are there trash cans?
- b. Are there alternative trash arrangements such as biodigesters or methane digesters with “community” scoops to encourage use?
- c. Are there enough (generally at least one or two waste stations per acre)?
- d. Are they being used?
- e. Are they being regularly maintained and cleaned?
- f. Is there a naturalized and separately-fenced “long grass” poop-run where faeces is not picked up?
- g. Does the park provide bags for clean up?

15. Bathrooms

- a. Are there bathrooms provided for people visiting the park?
- b. What kind?
- c. Are bathrooms regularly maintained?

16. What is the overall condition of the park?
 - a. Is it maintained?
 - b. Are hazards regularly removed (for example, broken glass)?
 - c. Is the ground regularly examined for worn areas and holes and these issues addressed?
 - d. Are there mechanisms for users to report safety and maintenance issues?
 - e. Can users see when concerns have been reported and when they will be addressed?
 - f. Does park design discourage crime and encourage safety?

Management and Activity Considerations

17. Dog activities
 - a. Is there equipment provided such as jumps, tunnels or A-frames?
 - b. Are there multiple heights of objects (for example, large rocks) that dogs can use for dimensional exploration (or to retreat to if feeling threatened)?
 - c. Are there interesting areas for the dog to explore?
 - d. Would handlers generally be able to see their dogs?
 - e. Are toys (especially those that provide choking hazards like tennis balls) prohibited?
 - f. Does the park offer a linear and easily-walkable set up to encourage walking vs. congregating (reduces opportunities for aggression)?
 - g. Does the park provide opportunities to fulfill heredity activity needs (scenting on trails, a digging pit, open field for chasing and retrieving)
 - h. Is there a quiet zone where dogs can enjoy low-energy activities or down-time?
 - i. Can small, fearful/shy and infirm dogs play separately from larger, more active dogs?

'A small fenced area does not encourage people to walk with their dogs, but rather to stand around socialising. This increases the risk of inadequate supervision of dog behaviour' (McArthur, 2007:85).

Dog behaviour

- j. Are dogs required to enter and exit on leash?
- k. Is there a time out area for dogs that become over-excited?
- l. Is there educational information for handlers to help them determine if their dog is enjoying being in the park or is a danger to others?
- m. Are there clear instructions for users on what to do in event of a dog fight or injury?
- n. Are handlers required to fill holes that a dog digs? Are there appropriate tools available for them to do so?
- o. Are there separate fenced areas where dogs can be worked in sports such as obedience that can potentially generate revenue via dogs shows and trials?

18. Owner/Caregiver Requirements

- a. Are handlers required to carry a leash at all times?
- b. Do handlers need to remain with and monitor their dog(s) at all times? Does this include being on the telephone?
- c. Are handlers allowed to video other dogs? Other people?
- d. If a dog becomes aggressive, are the handlers required to put it on a leash and remove it immediately (or place it in a time out area)?
- e. Must children under the age of 12 must be accompanied by an adult?
- f. Are handlers required to be a minimum age to be in charge of a dog?
- g. Is there a maximum number of dogs that an owner or walker can be in charge of?
- h. How do commercial businesses interact with the park?
- i. Are people encouraged to walk and travel with their dogs vs. remaining stationary?
- j. Are rules posted?
- k. Are the rules easy to read and understandable?
- l. Do the rules seem to be followed?
- m. Do the rules appear to be enforced and how?

19. Dog Health

- a. Are dogs with contagious illnesses prohibited?
- b. Is there a regular preventive parasite control program for the grounds?
- c. Is there a minimum age for dogs (for example, four months)?
- d. Are abrupt grade changes in open areas avoided to prevent accidents when dogs are running?
- e. Are females in heat prohibited?
- f. Are the park and features (including water) regularly tested for communicable illnesses?
- g. Are areas of high use regularly treated or resurfaced to reduce parasites and other environmental disease vectors from transmission?
- a. Is there educational signage discussing arthropod pests?

20. Enforcement

- a. Can dog park associations be trained to take an active role in self policing off leash areas and to notify city bylaw officers when additional enforcement appears to be needed?
- b. Are city bylaw officers available to enforce area rules when warranted using the appropriate powers and laddered enforcement strategy (education and warning, escalating fines)?
- c. Are clear instructions provided on how to contact bylaw enforcement?
- d. Is technology (e.g. texting, smartphone apps) available to be used by volunteers and park visitors to help the city track and respond to infractions?

21. Visitor Health

- a. Are people required to wear shoes to prevent contracting zoonotic disease?
- b. Is there educational signage discussing dog body language and appropriate play?

- c. Are people encouraged to wash their hands after handling feces?
 - d. Is there an appropriate handwashing station?
22. Licensing, Identification and Vaccinations
- a. Are dogs required to display a current municipal dog licence?
 - b. Are dogs required to have proof of rabies vaccination?
23. Food and Toys
- a. Are treats or bones allowed (bones may encourage possessive aggression)?
 - b. Is there a place to purchase food for both dogs and humans?
 - c. Types of food offered?
 - d. As toys allowed to be used in the park (scarce resources like toys may cause competition)?

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