



BY CHRIS GELBACH

Barks and Recreation

The Latest Dog Park Trends to Please Your Most Loyal Patrons

According to a recent national survey from the Humane Society, 39 percent of American households now own at least one dog. And as the nation goes to the dogs, so do its parks. America's 100 largest cities saw a 34 percent increase in dog parks from 2005 to 2010, according to USA Today.

As the dog-park movement continues uncurbed, recreation managers now have a variety of new products, features and operational approaches at their disposal to enhance these operations.

"As a profession, we've been designing parks since the mid-1800s, but we've only been seriously looking at dog off-leash areas for about 10 years," said Randy Burkhardt, the assistant director of parks, trails and building grounds for Colorado's Douglas County. "So there's a lot of new information out there, and the more we can share, the better."

Dog Park 101

As more recreation managers learn through experience, they are getting more adept at making dog park choices that ensure smooth operation over the long haul. And no parks department has launched more dog parks than Portland's. The city is now building its 33rd dog park and leads the nation per capita with 5.7 dog parks per 100,000 residents.

"The two most important things are going to be where you put it and what kind of surface you put on it," said Ali Ryan, a program specialist for Portland Parks & Recreation, whose many responsibilities include heading the off-leash program. "We've found that by using a few basic criteria, we've been pretty successful in siting dog areas and spots that work."

Dog parks can often be launched most successfully when placed in spaces without a history or other current use, but sometimes this isn't possible. In Portland, nearly all of the dog off-leash areas had to be carved out of existing park space.

To do this successfully, the city looks for spaces that are:

- at least 5,000 square feet
- relatively level, dry and irrigated
- away from playgrounds, residential areas and heavy traffic
- close to parking
- evenly distributed throughout the city
- not affecting fish and wildlife habitats or water quality
- outside the main circulation of the park
- currently seeing high off-leash use

In some areas, it can also be helpful to locate a dog park along a trail system to give pet owners more of an opportunity to walk their dogs to the park.

Portland has tested a variety of surface materials to deter



mine what works best in the city's wet climate. Bark chips seem to do the trick, though Portland also has a few sites with sand or gravel, is building a new park with decomposed granite, and has some larger grass off-leash areas.

Budget, climate, park size and usage, and surrounding park amenities all have to be taken into account when selecting a dog-park surface. Thankfully, dog parks have more options to choose from than ever before, including new synthetic turfs with antimicrobial backing designed specifically for dog parks.

Grass remains most common in larger dog parks, though more recreation managers are choosing to rest or reseed this turf regularly because of the damage that dog paws and waste can do.

Burkhardt oversees two dog parks in Douglas County located in developed sports complexes, where irrigated turf was used to match the character of the rest of the park. "Douglas County is basically high desert," he said. "In our area, if you don't maintain that grass, it never has an opportunity to recover. So in about three or four months, you've basically destroyed it, and the only way you can get it to recover is to take the use off it."

Douglas County splits the two dog parks in half, letting one side be used until the maintenance staff views it as almost at the point of no return before switching the off-leash usage to the other section. Even Portland, with its wetter climate, takes a similar approach with its grassy areas. "It's incredibly important to let the grass rest and clear part of the dog park to regenerate the grass seed," Ryan said.

For this reason, other surfaces are more common at smaller urban dog parks where such rotation is impossible. And these surfaces are also often the best choice in the high-traffic areas of a predominantly grass park. "You have to treat those areas of high concentrated use differently, whether it's with a bark material, granite or concrete," Burkhardt said. "If you are expecting turf to grow at the gate areas, you're going to be extremely disappointed."

According to Nora Vandenberghe, sales and marketing manager for a manufacturer of dog-park products based in Everett, Wash., synthetic turf and engineered wood fiber are two of the most popular surfaces being installed today. "Those are both great options because they're both pretty low-maintenance," she said.

But in some cases, even just letting an area go to dirt may be the right choice. "We spend as much on our dog off-leash areas as we do any other acre of our turf in our system for maintenance, because we wouldn't want just a large dirt patch in the middle of a sports com-

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plex," Burkhardt explained. "But if that's appropriate for your area, I wouldn't spend any more money than I had to."

Fencing Fashions

Fencing is pretty standard for smaller off-leash areas, but some larger ones are also left unfenced. And dog parks are becoming more strategic in how they use fencing for smoother park operation.

A number of the off-leash areas in Portland remain unfenced, but the city is reevaluating that approach in some parks. "The unfenced areas work pretty well in the quiet neighborhood parks that don't have a lot of active use," said Ryan. "But in parks with a lot of other active use and amenities, we're finding that fencing may be something we need to consider more widely."

A typical setup in many parks is two sets of gates at the entry area, which allow pet owners to close the outside gate and unclip their dog before heading in to the main off-leash area. But an emerging trend in some new parks is the use of a separate exit area.

"One of the problems you can run into with a single gated area for dogs coming into and out of the park is that they have completely different energy levels," VandenBerghe said. "Dogs are excited to come in, and a little less excited to leave. A separate exit gate can alleviate some of the crowding and make it a little less stressful for the dogs."

Likewise, Burkhardt is seeing many parks with a pond or other water features place an additional fence around the water to prevent dogs from making a break for the water (the instant they're unleashed. "Putting a fence around the pond controls access, so that the person makes the decision about whether the dog goes in the water, not the dog," he said.

More dog parks are also cordoning off certain parks into small- and large-dog areas. This approach is something that Portland has adopted upon pet-owner request in some of its parks, and VandenBerghe is seeing this nationally, as well.

"There are different play styles, and if you have a 70-pound dog and a 10- or 15-pound dog, the size difference is substantial," she said. "You want to make sure that the park users and their pets have a good time, and sometimes that means separating them out by weight."

Whether this is the best option can depend on the dog breed demographics and the needs of pet owners in your area. "A lot of people with small dogs want them to be socialized with other dogs—they don't want their dogs separated," Burkhardt said. "It gets back to, is there a community need or not? If we had a lot of poodles and shih-tzus, maybe we'd do it, but most of our dogs are golden retrievers and black labs."

Creature Features

As dog parks proliferate, they run the gamut from basic parcels of land to elaborate pet playgrounds with ponds, spray features, agility equipment and other amenities. But some basics are becoming more

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standard, particularly those that keep pet owners and their canine companions cool and refreshed.

"As far as trends go, the biggest things that we see in our particular off-leash areas are shade and water," Burkhardt said.

Providing cover from the heat is especially important for pets and owners in warmer climates. "We do a lot of work providing shade structures," VandenBerghe said. "They make a huge difference for people who still want to take their dog to the park when it's 100 degrees outside. You definitely want to provide something—whether it's a shade structure or trees."

This is less important in more moderate climates. In fact, Portland typically avoids heavy tree canopy in selecting dog park sites because of the wet weather there and the damage dog paws do to the ground.

But water is a welcome amenity for all pets, and it can run the gamut from a simple spigot and water bowl, to more whimsical spraying fire hydrants, to deluxe watering stations that include leash hooks and hose attachments for pet washing and groundskeeper use.

Water-fountain placement is important, since dogs often treat any vertical element as a marking post. "It doesn't bother a dog if it's a water fountain or a tree, and it can become a rather unpleasant experience after awhile," Burkhardt said. His parks include fountains in the staging area where the owners still have control of their pets for this reason.

Some of the nation's more elaborate dog parks are also adding dog play amenities such as agility equipment. "Providing those agility components gives you an outlet to work with your dogs, and helps to build the relationship you have with your pet," said VandenBerghe. "It's really fun and it can give people an opportunity to do more than just sit on a park bench. They can be up running their dogs through the obstacle course so they get exercise, too."

According to VandenBerghe, agility equipment for public spaces should not be the professional agility equipment used in competition. "The professional stuff is high and narrow," she said. "You want the equipment to be an introduction to agility, and you want people to be comfortable doing it with their dog even if they haven't done it before."

When selecting agility equipment, her company suggests that off-leash areas:

- Avoid equipment that's steep or more than 3 feet high for dog and child safety.

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Pooch Programming

Parks departments are also starting to explore the possibilities of programming for some of their

most rabid patrons. "I think the big trend is going to be programming and events, because dog owners are at their dog parks so much, there's a real opportunity to create some fun stuff and community around the amenity," Ryan said.

Portland has already started with events such as a dog-themed movie in the park complete with dog activities, a dog talent contest and a Humane Society appearance. "It's looking for ways to do some programming, whether it's training classes, more social events or a make-your-own-dog-toy class," Ryan said.

Charlestown County Parks and Recreation in South Carolina has been a leader in pet programming. According to Matt Rosebrock, festival and event manager for the department, it all started a decade ago—before the county even had a designated off-leash area—with the debut of a weekend extravaganza called Pet Fest.

The event annually draws between 5,000 and 6,000 people over two days in April at the Palmetto Islands County Park. It features performances by frisbee dogs, dock diving for pets, dog shows, a dog magazine cover model contest and other pet contests. It also includes a full pet expo with booths from vets, groomers, trainers, pet suppliers, rescue groups and adoption centers. And for the humans, there are jump castles and slides for the kids and food and beverages for the adults.

In 2009, the department expanded its pet programming with a Yappy Hour on several Thursdays in the warmer months at its largest dog park. While it's \$1 to get into the park, the park doesn't charge extra for these events, which feature bands and beer sales. The first event attracted 300 visitors, and now they average 1,000 attendees.

"They're just kind of no-brainer events if you have a dog park," said Rosebrock. "People will come anyway, and if you provide beer and a band, it's always a good thing. We make some money off the beer revenue, and it's a good give-back to those loyal dog park visitors."

Building on this success, the department will debut Pups, Yups and Food Trucks this year, another after-work event on select Thursdays with live music, leverages and three food trucks outside the county's second-largest dog park. The department also hosts an annual Dog Day Afternoon at its Whirlin' Waters Adventure Waterpark the Sunday after the park has closed to humans for the season.

"We close everything but the wave pool and keep about a foot of water in the lazy river, and there's another kiddie pool that we also keep open," Rosebrock said. After the dogs get the day to splash around, the park water is drained for the season. Last year, more than 1,000 dogs and 2,000 people attended the event.

Should We Unleash the Hounds?

Dog parks consume park space, cost money and require regular maintenance, but also offer a variety of benefits. For one, they can create a stronger community of regular parkgoers. "It adds those eyes and ears on the park that really help us, especially during the months when there's not a whole lot happening," Ryan said. "So it really does activate the park in a way that's positive."

Anecdotally, parks managers agree that dog parks also help encourage pet owners to pick up after their dogs. Giving dogs places to run free also makes it easier to enforce existing leash laws. And they often become one of a park's most popular areas. "Our dog off-leash area, for the size, is as heavily or more heavily used than our sports fields," Burkhardt said.

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"It's one of those things, if you build it, they'll come and they won't leave."

How much a park costs can vary greatly. Ryan estimates that recent dog parks in Portland consisting of a grassy area with fencing, a double-entry gate, a maintenance gate, trash cans, a dog-bag dispenser, park sign, and gravel at the entry cost about \$30,000, while a high-end designed off-leash area can run more than \$100,000.

"It really depends on the kind of supplies you're using. Is it farm fencing or ornamental iron? Are you just seeding an existing plot of land or using decomposed granite? The features are the same but the specifics are different, and that's where the very wide cost variation comes in," she said.

To help offset the cost of a dog park, several companies offer high-profile contests and grant programs. These include Benefit's \$500,000 Dream Dog Park Makeover, PetSafe's Bark for Your Park \$100,000 prize (and \$25,000 to two runners-up) and Nutro's Room to Run Dog Park Appreciation Project, which gave \$2,000 grants to 30 different dog parks in 2012.

Today, parks often opt to work with landscape architects to create fully designed dog parks, some using innovative new approaches. For example, a few dog parks in New York City are being designed using colors tailored to dogs' visual palette.

But whether it's a basic plot of dirt or a high-end Dog Fancy award winner, a well-functioning dog park is something that community dog owners definitely appreciate. And the technologies and accumulated knowledge now available give recreation managers growing flexibility in creating a dog park that fits their space and budget.

"Regardless of how much space you have, you can still have amenities, it can still be fun, and it will still be a draw for the community—whether you have two acres or half an acre," VandenBerghe said. "You can still make it a fantastic park."

The Scoop on Poop

In addition to being a foul-smelling pollutant, dog waste also presents operational challenges because it's heavy. For this reason, it can make sense to either consider smaller waste cans at dog park locations, or to go larger and truck the waste out. Portland installed deep cans that extend six feet into the ground and are removed with a truck and lift. "That has helped us tremendously because it cuts down on worker injury and lets us remove the waste less frequently," Ryan said.

To deal more sustainably with their dog waste, a few parks have recently even experimented with composting. The Allan H. Treman Marine State Park in Ithaca, N.Y., gained coverage in *The New York Times* for its efforts. And a private company based in Aurora, Colo., called EnviroWagg has taken the idea significantly further.

EnviroWagg, founded in 2008, today takes the dog waste from five parks in nearby cities, as well as from several dog daycare and a pet-scoop service. Collecting nearly three tons of waste a week, EnviroWagg hauls it to a composting facility, composts the waste, and then sells the bags of compost and potting soil at local regional garden centers.

Dog waste contains pathogens that are potentially harmful to humans, so composting it requires some expertise. "You have to get all parts of it heated up to about 145 degrees to make sure you're killing all the bad stuff," said EnviroWagg owner Rose Seemann. "It also needs to be tested and seasoned to provide the right balance in terms of plant nutrients." "It actually produces very well—it seems to have a lot of nitrogen and gives the soil a lot of oomph."

Seemann said that similar programs are in place in other countries with government support. "But here, you have to make it into a viable business for it to work. We're going to ramp up this spring, produce more of it and start selling more of it," she said. "It's kind of a test to see if this is possible in different areas of the country."

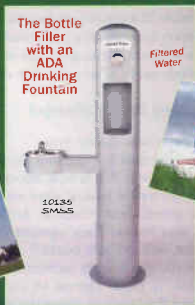
Meanwhile, some other dog parks are experimenting with another innovative approach: processing the waste onsite. "The dog park is a unique place because all of the resource is brought there every day. It collects the dog waste of the neighborhood. And then a truck has to come and take it to the landfill," said Matthew Mazzotta, a conceptual artist and the inventor of the Park Spark Project, which he designed to create a dialogue about waste, the environment and community participation.

Mazzotta put two airtight 500-gallon methane digester tanks in a dog park in Cambridge, Mass. People could put the dog waste into the tanks and turn a hand crank to stimulate anaerobic digestion. This turned the waste into methane, which was then burned to light a nearby street lamp. Methane is 30 times more potent as a greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, so burning it to produce carbon dioxide and water is actually environmentally friendly—in addition to eliminating the need to haul the waste to a landfill.

While Mazzotta's project was temporary, it has inspired others to attempt permanent solutions, one example being a methane digester in the Cosmo dog park in Gilbert, Ariz., where an underground system employing the same principle is used. That approach has succeeded technologically, but educating the public about the system has been the biggest hurdle to the project in its early stages.

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