

GOING TO THE



Areas for canines must be well-designed to ensure success

By Mary Helen Sprecher

Dog parks are having their day, becoming *the* amenity not only in parks but in neighborhoods at both the urban and suburban levels, as well as in multifamily settings.

Statistics from the Trust for Public Land show that, between 2009 and 2020, there was a 40 percent increase in the development of public dog parks. In fact, the parks are more in-demand than swimming pools in many installations. For municipalities that have been asked to build a dog park, it is imperative that officials understand the design considerations.

Like other recreational facilities, dog parks require a mix of good design elements, proper location, correct surfacing, and other amenities to be successful. That mix takes time. Yet dog owners will want to see the park constructed quickly and opened for immediate use because they're unaware of the decision-making process.



The Fencing

Double-gated entranceways allow users to enter and exit the park safely, without dogs escaping. A six-foot-high fence is generally recommended, regardless of the dog sizes or breeds that the park accommodates.

“The fence should be checked regularly,” says Narozanick. “There should be no sharp edges, and the mesh should be checked for holes a dog could get through or get caught on. The fence should go all the way to the ground, and the gates should be looked at quite often as a lot of use will loosen the bolts and hinges, making them fall into disrepair.”

“People are so happy to get a place to play with their dog, they don’t always know what they want or what the options are,” says Lee Narozanick of American Athletic Track and Turf.

The Location

Dog parks get a lot of use. That can translate to noise and congestion—something that could be bothersome to homeowners if the dog park is located too close to houses, according to Narozanick. Ideally, a dog park should be in a location that balances accessibility and neighborly respect.

“Make sure you have enough parking for cars as not everyone will walk there,” Narozanick notes. “This is going to be one of the most popular sites in the park, right up there with the pickleball courts and the soccer fields.”

If a dog park must be located adjacent to residences, it’s helpful to set operating hours. Otherwise, if dog owners bring their dogs into the park late at night or early in the morning and then call for them loudly, it will create tension with nearby homeowners.

The Layout

“I like parks that have different areas for different sizes of dogs,” adds Narozanick.

In fact, dividing a parcel with fencing can create separate areas for dogs, which can also ease owners’ concerns that large dogs will play too roughly and injure smaller pups.





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The Surface

Believe it or not, the dog park's surface is the aspect park officials will spend the most time discussing prior to construction. There are multiple options: grass, artificial turf, or a skinned surface (often covered with crusher run, mulch, or wood chips). The first two are the most aesthetically pleasing choices, while the third is the least expensive.

If leaders select natural grass, they should consult a local agronomist, as the best grass type will depend upon the geographic area, climate, and soil conditions, as well as the anticipated amount of use.

As with sports fields, a grass dog park will require maintenance, including mowing, watering, fertilizing, pest control, and more, including occasional repair work on muddy or skinned spots. As with well-tended sports fields, a dog park's healthy grass can reward users with a beautiful, soft, springy surface.

Chris Franks of SCG Fields LLC says that, when it comes to synthetic turf, dog park surfaces should be specifically formulated.

"Synthetic turf manufacturers make pet-friendly surfaces, so you'd want to purchase accordingly. Most dog parks we take our dog to are non-infill, high-density, and short pile. This allows for quick clean-up. If you must have some infill, a coated sand

infill would work well, but it only needs to be installed very lightly."

Many synthetic-turf surfaces for dogs are also formulated to be hygienic, antimicrobial, and odor-reducing.

Successful dog park construction starts from the ground up, Franks adds. "It probably goes without saying, but you'd want to build a drainage base and have a below-ground method of removing water from the surface, probably three to four inches of stone over filter fabric over a compacted subgrade. Both are used to keep the surface dry

after a rain and, more importantly, to allow for cleanup by washing and/or scrubbing with a non-abrasive cleaner. Most dog parks also include water features and/or water fountains so drainage could be an overlooked but very important part of the construction process."

Leaders who opt for a skinned surface will find it's a relatively inexpensive option. However, it will be necessary to assess the soil drains long before committing to this surface type. If there is insufficient natural drainage, the area will turn into a muddy mess following rain events and will likely

need to be closed until it dries—defeating the purpose of opening a dog park.



The Amenities

A safe, fenced-in area is adequate, but a well-appointed one will be a pleasure to use. Some of the furnishings to consider are the following:



- Posted lists of rules can include the hours of operation, a phone number to report concerns, owners' assumption of liability, dog vaccination requirements, rules about cleaning up after pets, and paying attention to dogs (rather than to phones), etc.

- Benches where owners can sit and talk with friends while watching their dogs play

- Trees to provide shade ("Dogs love to lie under them with their tongues out," says Narozanick.)

- Dispensers that hold dog-waste bags, facilitating easy cleanup, and nearby trash receptacles that are emptied regularly

- Structures like hurdles, logs, and bridges to explore

- Water fountains with bowls at ground level for dogs and at waist level for people

- A bin of tennis balls or rope toys to encourage owners to play with their dogs.

When properly designed and executed, a dog park can be an amenity that not only attracts owners but increases the overall appeal of an area and entices new residents to a neighborhood. **PRB+**

Mary Helen Sprecher is the technical writer for the *American Sports Builders Association (ASBA)*, and also the editor of two of ASBA's publications, *Sports Fields: Construction and Maintenance Manual* and *Courts & Recreational Surfaces: Construction and Maintenance Manual*.

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