

Somerville Dog Owners Group

The Evolution of Dog Parks

By Maureen Kochan

The next time you visit a dog park, thank the snowy plover.

The decline in this shorebird's numbers along some of San Francisco's remote beaches in the 1970s forced the beach's burgeoning off-leash culture inland, after naturalists linked the bird's predicament to the unleashed dogs romping along the Pacific's shore.

Unbowed, the owners headed to San Francisco and nearby Berkeley's web of small municipal parks. The once-sleepy plots soon transformed into mini battlegrounds, with off-leash opponents refusing to relinquish any of the city's precious open space.

A cease-fire of sorts was reached in 1979 with the opening of Berkeley's Experimental Dog Park in Ohlone Park, now widely considered the world's first dog park.

"It had a fence, two Mulberry trees, three big rocks, weeds and not much else," remembers Doris Richards, who helped found the dog park. "In the beginning people would ask, what kind of experiments are you doing?" laughs Richards, who also served as the dog park association's president for more than two decades.

Since the launch of the Experimental Dog Park (now the Martha Scott Benedict Memorial Dog Park), more than 700 dog parks have sprung up across the U.S.

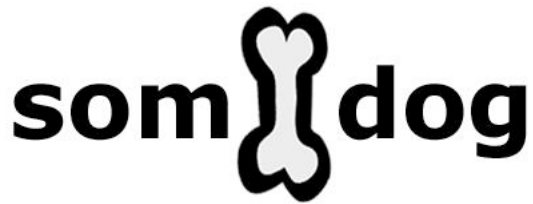
Experts expect that number to climb as city governments approve new dog parks every month. Indeed, Government Magazine, which tracks trends in local government, calls America's dog park lobby "unstoppable," and says any attempt by government to obstruct pet owners is the new third rail of local politics.

Michele Biscoe, who helped found the first dog park in Somerville, Mass., says it's time for city governments to recognize dog owners' rights. "Public open space must serve the many and diverse recreational needs of all residents," she says.

Karen Fritschel, mayor of Stow, Ohio, was a big supporter of her city's dog park, Bow Wow Beach, which features all the latest dog park amenities, including a three-acre swimming pond, sandy beach, separate fenced areas for large and small dogs, double-entry gates, and doggie washing station – all free of charge.

"The dog park has been one of the most popular things the city has done," says Fritschel, who was on hand at the dog park's grand opening last year. "When it opened, I received an unbelievable number of positive e-mails and phone calls," she says.

promoting responsible dog ownership, safe and legal options for off-leash recreation and the equitable distribution of open space in Somerville, MA.



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Fritschel understands why dog parks are important to a community. “Some owners have told me when the dogs are in the car and getting close to Bow Wow Beach, they get very excited,” she says. “Since the dogs love coming to the dog park, it makes their owners very happy.”

How to Start a Dog Park

Somerville, Mass. wasn’t always the friendliest place for dogs. Three years ago, “every city park was posted ‘No Dogs Allowed,’ which, of course, meant no dog owners allowed,” says resident Michele Biscoe.

Today, that’s all changed. Biscoe and a group of fellow dog lovers founded Somerville Dog Owners Group, and helped transform the city’s laws – and its attitude.

Residents – both two and four legged – now enjoy a fenced dog park at Nunziato Field, a tree-studded park not far from Tufts University. Even the signs at several of the city’s regular parks exude a refreshing new take. The “No Dogs Allowed” signs are gone, replaced by a new message that says dogs are welcome – on a leash.

But Biscoe is the first to admit that establishing the dog park, which opened in 2006, wasn’t always easy. But with hard work and some good old-fashioned doggedness, Som|Dog made it happen. And you can, too. Here’s how.

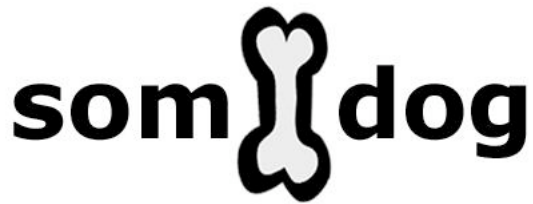
Create partnerships. Sniff out fellow residents who also want a dog park. (Trust us, they’re out there.) Contact local kennel clubs, rescue organizations and pet boutiques for help and leads. Biscoe met other frustrated dog owners at a regular city park where “No Dogs Allowed” signs were ignored when the park was empty.

Make it official. Set up a formal 501(c) (3) nonprofit organization, which many cities require. Some cities allow community groups to operate under an umbrella nonprofit. . (Check your town’s rules.)

Seek out receptive local government officials. Biscoe says Som|Dog identified important political allies early on, including several people who had been supportive of a similar dog park proposal a few years earlier.

Think money. Officials may be all for your plan, but won’t have the money to entirely fund the dog park – if at all. In New River, Ariz., the nonprofit community group that founded Jackass Acres K-9 Korral “raised every penny ourselves,” says Barbara Windgassen, president of Anthem Pets, the dog park’s association. And when the troubled economy forced several corporate sponsors to pull their support of the park, Anthem Pets had to redouble its fundraising efforts.

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Do some homework. Research your city's laws regarding dogs. Biscoe's group found out that Somerville had a law banning off-leash dogs from *any* city property. To proceed with its dog park plan, Som|Dog had to first get the law amended.

Get the word out. Create a pamphlet outlining your group's goals for the dog park. Spell out how the park will benefit your city's residents (e.g., promote responsible pet ownership, provide dogs with a safe place to burn excess energy, give residents a place to meet like-minded folks), how the park will be paid for, and the rules that park users will follow.

Distribute the pamphlet at community functions like farmers markets, city council meetings and school events. Biscoe also set up a website where people could share news about the dog park and coordinate fundraising and lobbying activities.

Stay involved. A dog park needs volunteers' continued attention to remain successful. Som|Dog holds regular cleanup days and fundraisers, and is also leading the charge for more dog parks in Somerville. "Our goal is an off-leash recreational area within walking distance of every resident," Biscoe says.

America's Best Dog Parks

Solar-powered dog washing station? Check. Recycled artificial turf? Check. Happy dogs? Double-check.

Looks like the greening of America's dog parks has begun. DOG FANCY's Best Dog Park 2008 goes to Jackass Acres K-9 Korral, in New River, Ariz., the country's first "green" dog park, complete with solar-powered lights, security system and water pumps.

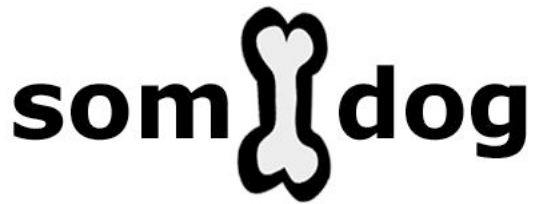
"We wanted to be a banner for solar in a state that has so much sun," says Barbara Windgassen, president of Anthem Pets, the nonprofit community group that lobbied for and built the dog park, which is named for the former ranch on which it stands.

Other green features at the two-acre dog park, which opened in November, include decorative metal flowers made from old cars, furniture crafted from fallen timber, and recycled artificial turf.

But the dog park's do-gooding doesn't end there. It also hosts a hotline to help reunite lost pets and their owners, regularly holds microchip clinics for both dogs and cats, runs an educational program for new dog owners – and once even trucked in snow for kids and dogs to romp in.

Members pay \$35 a year for one dog and \$50 for two or more to join the park, and must provide proof of vaccinations. So far, more than 800 dogs have been registered.

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Windgassen couldn't be more pleased with the dog park's success. "This project is a perfect example of what a bunch of determined people can do when they set their minds to it," she says.

The Runners Up

Wantage Dog Park

Wantage, N.J.

At eight acres, New Jersey's largest dog park attracts more than 1,000 dog owners and dogs a week. Regulars enjoy the park's mix of workshops and events, which include a popular Halloween costume parade and dog owner dinner-dance.

Woof! Pac Park

Santa Maria, Calif.

Woof! Pac Park rests on three acres in Santa Barbara County's Waller Park and hosts several popular events, including the Dog Days of Summer, which features a human barking competition, working dog demos and paw "reading."

Bow Wow Beach

Stow, Ohio

When Bow Wow Beach opened last year, even the Stow mayor attended the grand opening. And it's no wonder – this fenced dog park boasts acres of grassy knolls, a stunning sandy beach and a three-acre swimming pond.

Paw OK Dog Park

Oklahoma City, Okla.

In the center of this popular dog park rests a duck pond and gravel beach where dogs can swim and play in the water. More than 40 trees, several park benches, and ample watering stations make the park a favorite among human visitors.

MonDaug Bark Park

Fort Washington, Pa.

Nestled in Pennsylvania's popular Mondauk Manor Park, this one-acre dog park sports separate areas for small and large dogs, several double-entry gates, nearby dog-friendly walking trails, woods and a stream.

Broemmelsiek Park Off-Leash Dog Area

St. Charles, Mo.

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This dog park became so popular that the St. Charles Co. parks and recreation department had to recruit and train volunteer “Watch Dogs” to help enforce park rules and answer users’ questions about animal health and safety.

Frankfort Bark Park

Frankfort, Ill.

Frankfort Bark Park knows their park regulars are busy. That’s why the park association set up a vaccination database to help remind members when to update their dog’s shots. Other popular offerings include the Spring Pooch-a-Palooza and regular workshops.

South Brohard Beach Paw Park

Venice, Fla.

This one-acre fenced dog park features the only beach in the county to allow dogs. Other amenities include picnic tables, benches, and drinking fountains for dogs and humans.

Hammel Wood Forest Preserve Dog Park

Shorewood, Ill.

Hammel Woods Forest Preserve Dog Park is seven fenced acres of free-range bliss in the middle of Illinois’ Hammel Woods, a 300-acre outdoor haven near the DuPage River that’s popular with hikers, campers and picnickers.

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