



Policy Recommendations on Dogs in Oakland Parks

A Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Dog Play Areas
Oakland Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission
May 2013

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*Barry Miller, Chair
Judy Belcher, Commissioner
Faith DuBois, Commissioner
Brad Ricards, Past Commissioner*

May, 2013

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Introduction

In August 2012, the Oakland Parks and Recreation Advisory Commission (PRAC) established an Ad Hoc Committee to address the issue of dogs in Oakland parks. Creation of this subcommittee came about after a proposal for a dog play area at Lake Merritt's Astro Park caused a public debate about how Oakland was addressing the growing demand for dog play areas in its parks. As Commissioners, we felt it was important that the City adopt a formal policy to help guide future decisions. The issue of how and where to accommodate dogs in parks will only become greater in the future as Oakland's population, both canine and human, grows.

The Ad Hoc Committee established the following mission for itself:

1. Review City of Oakland policies and regulations for dogs in parks.
2. Provide general direction on how to better accommodate dogs in parks. This includes provisions for fenced "dog play areas," provisions for dogs on-leash, and provisions for dogs off-leash, in unfenced park areas.
3. Address the various issues relating to dogs in parks, including maintenance, visual and aesthetic impacts, conflicts with other uses, noise and odor, parking, and management of aggressive dogs.
4. Develop criteria for siting future dog play areas in Oakland.
5. Develop criteria for designing future dog play areas, once a site is selected.

Finding an alternate site for the proposed dog play area at Astro Park was explicitly not part of our mission. Likewise, it was beyond the Committee's mission to take a position on the proposal for a dog play area at Snow Park. Our focus was citywide. The discussion of possible sites for a Lake Merritt dog play area continued on a parallel track at the staff and community levels while our Ad Hoc Committee was convened.

The Committee met several times in late 2012 and early 2013. We evaluated existing City of Oakland ordinances related to dogs in parks. We studied best practices in cities around the country, researched academic and advocacy group studies on dog play areas, and heard from Oakland residents at eight focus groups at recreation centers in all parts of the City. Individually, some of us visited dog parks in other cities to see what works and what does not. We distributed a survey on the issue of dogs in parks (see Appendix A) and received 103 responses from park users. The survey was posted on line and 220 additional responses were completed electronically.

It is our hope that these recommendations will help the City respond to the growing demand for designated dog play areas and the even broader demand for residents who simply wish to walk their dog on a leash through a park without driving to another city. We believe this can be done without diminishing the quality of Oakland's parks or over-burdening our Parks and Public Works staffs.

Summary of Recommendations

The principal recommendations of our ad hoc committee are as follows:

1. Oakland needs more dedicated **fenced, off-leash dog play areas**. The City ranks below the average for peer cities in terms of the number and acreage of fenced dog parks per capita.
2. It will continue to be challenging to locate dog play areas within existing parks due to fact that the City is already below its desired acreage standards for parks and has demand for passive and active open space that far exceeds supply. While there are opportunities to develop fenced dog parks within existing community and neighborhood parks, controversy is likely due to the potential displacement of existing uses, and public perceptions about noise, odor, aesthetics, and maintenance. This does not mean the city should give up on siting dog play areas within our parks. It does mean that our first focus should be on transforming space in parks that is widely regarded as underused or blighted, and on sites that expand existing parks so activities are not displaced.
3. The City should plan to include two flagship state-of-the-art dog parks (2 acre minimum) in pending large-scale developments, including one in the Oak-to-Ninth development on the Oakland Estuary and a second in the Oak Knoll development in the East Oakland Hills. These represent the best opportunities for beautiful, nationally-acclaimed dog parks that can be built without the difficult debate that has surrounded the search for a dog park at Lake Merritt. The City needs to act now on these opportunities before the open space planned for these projects is designed.
4. The City should revisit its policy of not allowing dogs on-leash in all but a few City parks. While we recognize that it is not practical to allow dogs on-leash in *all* parks, we recommend that the number of parks in which dogs are permitted on-leash be expanded at least to the larger “community” parks. In particular, we recommend the formal designation of a **Lake Merritt Dog Path** around the perimeter of the lake, avoiding the wildlife refuge to the greatest extent feasible, and using the upper sidewalk path rather than the lower shoreline path where the option exists. Consideration should be given to signage—or even stenciled sidewalk paw prints—to mark this path and indicate the penalties for straying from it. The **Dog Path** should be marketed as a unique Oakland amenity and should complement recent Measure DD improvements.
5. The City should explore a pilot program in which dogs are allowed **off-leash** in a few large parks during limited hours, such as before 10 AM, after 5 PM, one day a week, etc.. We suggest the City proceed incrementally and evaluate its options after testing this policy for a month or so at a handful of parks. The pilot parks should be those where the risk to dogs and people is minimal, e.g., where dogs are not likely to run onto busy streets with fast-moving traffic.

6. Oakland needs to “**think outside the crate**” and develop dog parks in locations where it has not considered them thus far. As one of America’s greenest cities, we should be planning America’s first “green” dog park. We should also consider the idea of temporary dog parks on sites that are sitting dormant or awaiting future uses. This could include vacant lots and even parking lots. For example, the parking lot at the moribund Henry J Kaiser Convention Center and the parking lot at Laney College are large flat surface areas that sit empty most of the day, both in areas with high pedestrian traffic and high park demand. These could be fenced dog play areas, even if just for a year or two while permanent installations are planned and designed elsewhere.

Background

In 2011, USA Today reported that there are now more households in America with dogs (43 million) than with children (38 million).¹ While dogs have been perceived as “members of the family” for decades, this new demographic reality is redefining priorities for many households. In growing numbers, we want to take our dogs with us when we walk, run, play, or socialize. And in a large, dense American city, what better place to walk, run, play, and socialize than a city park.

The growing demand to accommodate dogs in parks is having far-reaching impacts. The Trust for Public Land reported that there were 569 off-leash dog parks in the nation’s 100 largest cities in 2010, a **34 percent** jump in five years. By contrast, the number of parks overall increased only three percent in that time period.² The nationwide development of dog parks has been compared to the playground movement of the early 1900s and is seen as one of the most significant trends of our time in park and recreation planning.

It is time for Oakland to catch up. Our City ordinances currently prohibit dogs in parks—on-leash **and** off-leash—with only a few exceptions. We are not alone in this respect. In fact, many suburban communities ban dogs in parks, except in designated dog play areas. However, for a city of 400,000 residents where 53 percent of our households reside in multi-family buildings with limited outdoor space and no yards, we can do better.

Our research found that most cities of Oakland’s size and density have more liberal rules for dogs in parks, and have gone further than Oakland has to create designated dog play areas within their parks. While we have the benefit of a wonderful dog-friendly regional park system in our city’s backyard, not everyone can or wants to drive to the hills or the shoreline to walk their dog. There

¹ <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2011-12-07/dog-parks/51715340/1>

² *Creating Dog Parks Without Rancor*, Trust for Public Land 2011

are an estimated 50,000 to 60,000 dog-owning households in Oakland—but only a few places in our city parks where dogs are welcome.³

Oakland takes pride in being a contemporary, leading edge city. On May 2, 2013, movoto.com named us the “most exciting city in America.” We rank among the 10 most “walkable” cities in America (Walkscore, 2012), the top 12 “Art Places” in America (ArtPlace 2013), and the top five “green” cities in American (sheknows.com). In 2012, we even made the New York Times list of the top five “places to visit” in the world. On the other hand, pawnation.com ranked the city 86th in a list of “the top 100 US cities for dogs.”⁴ All of the iconic urban parks of the United States—Central Park, Grant Park, Golden Gate Park, Balboa Park, and even Washington DC’s National Mall—allow dogs on leash, but Oakland’s crown jewel--Lakeside Park—does not.

The issue of dogs in parks is more than just a parks and recreation issue. It is a quality of life issue. In some respects, it is even an economic development issue, as dog play areas contribute to Oakland’s image as a city that is ahead of the curve and on top of contemporary urban trends. Dog parks are also important for the socialization of dogs and provide places for dogs and their owners to congregate. They can help build a sense of community and provide neighborhood gathering places. They can create more “eyes on the park” and create a sense of security.

Overview of Current Rules in Oakland

Rules for dogs in parks are contained in Title 6, Chapter 6.04.80 of the Oakland Municipal Code (OMC). These rules establish that is unlawful for dogs to be present in public parks and school grounds, with exceptions for police service dogs and work dogs for persons with special needs. The OMC further indicates that dogs are allowed dogs on-leash in the following locations:

- Joaquin Miller and Leona Parks east of Mountain Boulevard
- Dimond Park east of El Centro Avenue
- Knowland Park east of Golf Links Road
- Glen Daniel/ King Estate Park north of Fontaine Street
- Montclair Railroad Trail
- Mosswood Park on hardscape paths leading from three specific park entrances to the dog play area
- Grove Shafter Park on hardscape paths leading from perimeter streets to the dog play area

The OMC gives PRAC the ability to modify the above list. It also lists the locations where the PRAC has specifically authorized off-leash dog play areas. These are located at Jefferson Park,

³ Humane Society reports that nationally 39% of all households own at least one dog. This would equate to 60,000 households in Oakland. Since we are a large urban city, a more conservative range of 50-60,000 is cited here.

⁴ Men’s Health Magazine. September 21, 2012

Hardy Park, Mosswood Park, Grove-Shafter Park, and Joaquin Miller Park. These parks are located in Downtown Oakland, North Oakland, and the Oakland Hills.

Findings of the Resident Survey

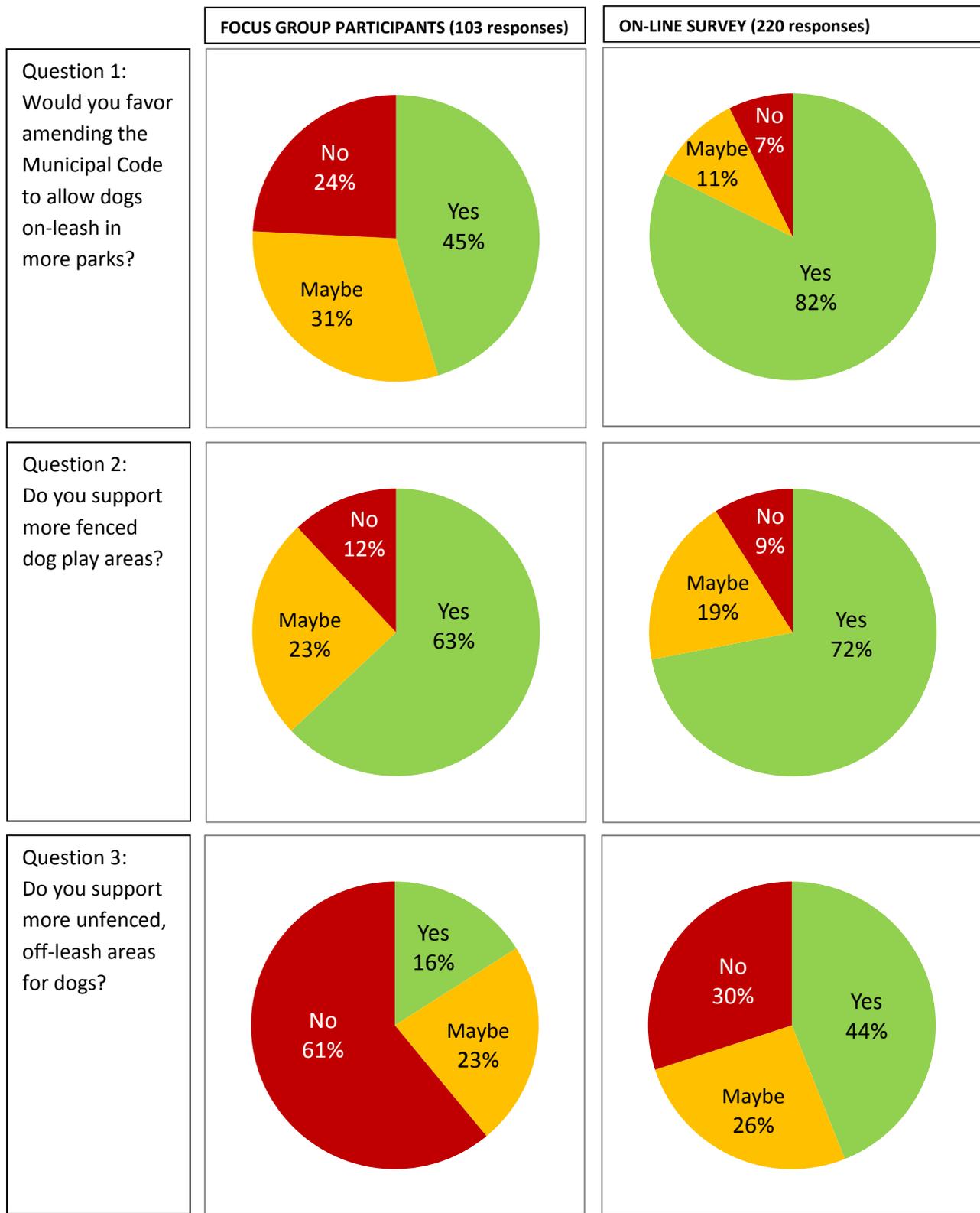
In November and December 2012, the Office of Parks and Recreation convened eight focus groups at locations throughout Oakland to solicit input on park-related topics. Each meeting agenda included 20 to 30 minutes on the issue of dogs in parks. A PRAC member provided introductory remarks at each meeting, followed by a facilitated dialogue with participants. A two page survey was distributed; these were collected at the end of each meeting. A total of 103 responses were collected (roughly 10-15 per meeting).

In January 2013, the City placed an electronic version of the survey on the Engage Oakland website, giving residents who did not attend the focus groups an opportunity to weigh in. The link remained active for over four months, and 220 on-line surveys were completed. While the survey responses do not represent a statistically valid sample, they do provide a helpful indication of how residents feel about the issue. Some of the most valuable data comes in the responses to the open-ended questions, where residents were asked to express their ideas and concerns for addressing the demand for dog play areas.

There were substantial differences between the on-line responses and the responses collected at the Focus Groups. We believe this is primarily due to the fact that 40% of the Focus Group respondents were dog owners (a little higher than the percentage for the city as a whole), while over 80% of those completing the on-line survey were dog owners. Not surprisingly, dog owners tended to be stronger advocates for dog parks and reforms to Oakland's leash laws.

Figure 1 presents a series of pie charts showing the survey responses. Approximately 45% of the focus group participants and 82% of the on-line survey respondents supported changing the Municipal Code to allow dogs on-leash in more City parks. Nearly a third of the focus group participants answered "maybe" to this question, indicating they might support changing the leash laws provided their concerns were addressed. Survey responses indicated the primary concerns were safety, enforcement, impacts on park maintenance, and irresponsible dog-owners, particularly those who did not pick up after their pets.

Figure 1: Summary of Dog Play Area Survey Results



40% of the Focus Group participants were dog owners and 80% of the on-line survey respondents were dog owners.

Another survey question asked respondents if they were in favor of more fenced dog play areas in Oakland. Almost two-thirds of the Focus Group participants and three-quarters of the on-line survey respondents answered “yes.” Again, a relatively large percentage of respondents answered “maybe,” expressing the same concerns about maintenance, enforcement, safety, and irresponsible dog owners.

Survey respondents were also asked their opinion about allowing dogs off-leash in unfenced areas in Oakland parks. There was less support for this concept, with 61% of the focus group respondents and 30% of the on-line respondents answering “no.” Even among dog-owners, less than 50% of the respondents indicated unconditional support for off-leash areas. However, a relatively large percentage of the respondents (about one-fourth in both surveys) answered “maybe,” indicating they might be open to the idea if their concerns were addressed. For instance, there was support for off-leash areas in the hill parks, but not in urban parks. The major concerns expressed were conflicts with children and impacts on other park users.

The Focus Groups themselves provided additional feedback. Consistent with the Survey findings, most participants agreed that more fenced dog play areas were needed. However, there were some who vehemently disagreed and there were differences from one neighborhood to the next. For instance, some of the participants in the East Oakland Focus Groups did not want dogs in their local parks due to public safety concerns; they indicated that the priority in their community must be on people rather than pets. Participants at multiple meetings noted that the prohibition on dogs in parks was ignored by residents, that dogs occasionally ran across athletic fields without supervision, and that owners did not clean up after their pets. On the other hand, most participants at the focus groups expressed support for changing the leash laws, especially at Lake Merritt.

Best Practices

Our Ad Hoc Committee studied best practices around the country. We looked at Berkeley, Boulder, Denver, Kansas City, New York, Seattle, Portland, Eugene, St Petersburg, Chicago, Austin, and Madison. We also looked at studies done by non-profits, including Trust for Public Land and the UC Davis Veterinary School. We even consulted a study on dog parks in Australia.

There is a lot to be learned from other cities. Other cities have spent years on this topic, created task forces with dozens of people, held hundreds of meetings and have invested a lot of money on expensive reports. Much of this knowledge is transferable to Oakland.

Among the lessons learned from our best practices research are:

Lesson 1: More and more cities are working to accommodate dogs in parks. Allowing dogs to a greater extent than we do now is a legitimate public policy goal and should be embraced by the City of Oakland.

Lesson 2: As Portland's guidelines indicate, "conflict is inevitable" when citing a dog park in an established park. The extent of the opposition is usually proportional to the number of people who currently use the space. Spaces that were "forgotten" or neglected are a much easier sell than spaces that are in active use, or that spaces that have high aesthetic value or importance to the community.

Lesson 3: Oakland is one of the few large cities in the country that prohibits dogs in public parks. In light of changing demographics and recreational trends, this seems obsolete and is out of synch with Oakland's image as a diverse, progressive, trend-setting city.

Lesson 4: Don't limit the search for dog parks to public parkland. The City should look at parking lots, large-scale new development, railroad rights-of-way, schoolyards, Caltrans properties, and even the Airport and the Harbor.

Lesson 5: Maintenance and enforcement of rules is critical to the success of dog parks. Without a solid plan for ongoing maintenance, the park's chances of success are much lower.

Criteria for Siting and Designing Enclosed Dog Play Areas

The criteria are divided into two categories:

- Locating suitable sites for a dog park (e.g., siting criteria)
- Designing the dog park once the site is selected.

Siting Criteria for Enclosed Dog Play Areas

The following criteria should guide the selection of a dog park site. Although these criteria are numbered, these are not listed in any particular priority order:

1. **Achieve Better Geographic Distribution.** Oakland should strive for better geographic distribution of dog parks. The five existing dog parks are located Downtown (Jefferson), in North Oakland (Mosswood, Hardy, Grove-Shafter), and in the Hills (Joaquin Miller). Many parts of the City are miles away from these parks, and many residents travel to Alameda, Berkeley, or other cities to use their dog parks. The City should place a priority on better serving all neighborhoods. Ideally, there should either be a fenced dog play area or an off-leash unfenced area within two miles of every Oakland resident. Right now, there are over 200,000 Oakland residents—half the city—living in neighborhoods that do not meet this standard.

2. **Focus on Sites with Community Support.** The level of community support is one of the most important criteria. The City should not be perceived as forcing a dog park on a community where it is where is not wanted. For instance, at the OPR focus group meeting in Council District 6, residents suggested that other types of park improvements should be a higher priority, and that dog play areas could be a liability rather than an asset. According to the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine Dog Park Guidelines, *“Community support and involvement is integral to this process, especially in promoting a harmonious relationship with the neighbors of the park.”*
3. **Avoid Immediate Proximity to Residences If Possible.** Dog play areas should not be immediately adjacent to residences if other options exist. Several of the cities we studied (including Seattle) have adopted this guideline, and Alexandria, Virginia has even established a 50 foot setback requirement between dog parks and the nearest adjacent residence. This is largely due to the potential for opposition from neighbors over potential impacts—whether real or perceived. Per the UC Davis Veterinary Medical School guidelines, where there is no other choice, locating a dog park near residences should include buffering such as tall hedges, trees, etc., opaque fencing, or earthen berms. If the option is available, dog play areas should be located in the portion of the park where the dogs will be least intrusive to nearby neighbors. *Exceptions to this guideline should be considered if there is significant support for the project among those living nearby or if no other feasible alternative is available.*
4. **Avoid Conflicts with Wildlife.** Dog play areas should be selected to avoid conflicts with wildlife. This may eliminate several sites on the perimeter of Lake Merritt from consideration, as well as the marshes at Martin Luther King Junior Regional Shoreline. On the other hand, the presence of wildlife alone should not be used to automatically disqualify a site. We note that dogs and wildlife co-exist at the Albany Bulb, at Point Isabel, at the Alameda Shoreline, Sibley and Redwood Parks, and other locations.
5. **Avoid Conversion of “Successful” Parkland.** Oakland should avoid placing fenced dog play areas on parkland that is currently perceived by the community as successful recreational space. This is because the dog play area may be viewed by some park users as taking space away, even if the net effect is simply to change the use to a new type of recreational activity. A number of the cities we studied have adopted criteria to locate dog parks in a way that “avoids interference with other established uses or department-sponsored activities” (Seattle) or “uses non-traditional locations to help decrease the chance for conflict with other community users” (UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine Guidelines)
6. **Create a Perception of Improvement.** The corollary of Criteria #5 is that the dog play area proposal should be perceived as an improvement over the current use of the site. This is one of the reasons the Hardy Dog Park is successful, despite its location under a freeway. It is also one of the reasons why the Jefferson, Mosswood, and Grove-Shafter (580/24) dog parks had very

little community opposition. In each case, there was either very little use of the space previously, or antisocial behavior which the community sought to mitigate. The dog park was seen as a win-win in each case, bringing new users to the park without displacing existing recreational activity.

7. **Consider Topography, Drainage and Water Quality.** To the extent possible, a fenced dog play area should be relatively flat (some slope is OK) and well drained. One of the big complaints about dog parks is that they can quickly become muddy and unpleasant if they are poorly drained. By the same token, dog parks should be sited so they avoid negative impacts on nearby water bodies. This does not mean they can't be located near water, but it does mean that berms and catchment basins may be needed to avoid waste runoff into creeks, lakes, or the bay. In addition, dog parks should not be located on sites that are contaminated or pose health risks to park users, including both dogs and people.

8. **Capitalize on New Development Sites.** Some of the best opportunities for dog parks in the city are in planned large-scale development areas, particularly the Oak to Ninth (Brooklyn Basin) area and the former Oak Knoll Naval Hospital site. Since these are brand new developments, there is an opportunity to develop dog parks *before* the housing, reducing the potential for opposition and making the dog parks an essential amenity for future residents as well as residents in the rest of Oakland. We note that most of the recent large scale urban mixed use developments around the country—from Battery Park City in New York to Mission Bay in San Francisco—include dog parks.

9. **Focus on Multi-Family Neighborhoods.** In general, multi-family neighborhoods may need dog play areas to a greater extent than single family neighborhoods. The reason is obvious: dogs in single family homes can enjoy backyards, while dogs in most apartments and condos cannot. The challenge is that Oakland's high density neighborhoods are already under-served by parks. It is important that dog play areas are seen as enhancing open space, rather than removing it. Ideally, dog play areas in these neighborhoods can be added by expanding existing parks onto new lands, increasing the total acreage of the park, or by using space in existing parks that is presently not well used.

10. **Ensure Availability of Some Parking.** To the extent possible, a dog play area should have at least some parking located in the vicinity. The parking may be metered or unmetered, as long as it is available with a reasonable walking distance. Although the ideal means of transportation to the dog park would be to walk there, we recognize that this is not possible in all cases. Getting to a dog park may require crossing busy streets or walking long distances, and it is inevitable that many users will drive. Dog parks should still be pedestrian-friendly and pedestrian-accessible, to the greatest extent feasible.

11. **Balance Between Open Areas and Shaded Areas.** The ideal dog play area will primarily be an open area, with some shade cover. One of the communities we surveyed indicated that at least 20% of the site should be shaded. On the other hand, there were also cautions against areas with dense tree canopies and heavy shade, presumably to maintain visibility and avoid damage to trees.

12. **Size of Park.** Dog play areas are generally better suited for Oakland's larger region-serving and community-scale parks than they are for neighborhood parks and mini-parks. The region-serving parks include Lakeside (75 acres) and Joaquin Miller (420 acres). The community parks include Mosswood (11 acres), Bushrod (10 acres), DeFremery (9 acres), San Antonio (12 acres), Brookdale (5 acres), Ira Jinkins (14 acres), Arroyo Viejo (19 acres), Montclair (7 acres), and Dimond (14 acres). A number of Oakland's "Special Use Parks" and "Resource Conservation Area" parks also may be appropriate, including Estuary (7 acres), Knowland (383 acres), Shepherd Canyon (25 acres), Leona Heights (50 acres), King Estate (75 acres), and former Chabot Observatory (6 acres).⁵ Parks not included on the list above could also be considered for dog play areas provided there is strong community support and a desire to enhance or improve space that is currently underused or creating problems. A dog play area could also be appropriate in a neighborhood park if there is strong interest in creating pedestrian activity, increasing eyes on the park where security is an issue, or displacing anti-social or illicit behavior in the park.

In the event fenced dog play areas are pursued in any of these parks, they should be a minimum of 20,000 square feet. They should be sited in a manner that does not displace existing activities or create conflicts with existing uses such as children's playgrounds and athletic fields.

13. **Visual Character.** The ideal dog play area should be regarded as an improvement to the visual character of the space. For this reason, sites located at prominent city gateways are less ideal than those that are in more protected locations. A second advantage of sites away from gateways is that they are less likely to be adjacent to busy streets, where the risk of pedestrian/dog/traffic accidents is lower.

14. **Commitment to Maintenance and Stewardship.** Dog play areas should be located in communities where there is an active constituency committed to sustained and continuous maintenance of the space. Parks where a "Friends of the Dog Park" organization can be formed, or where users might be willing to pay a small annual membership fee toward maintenance are ideal. While the City will have primary responsibility for maintenance, it is always helpful if staff's efforts are supplemented by the dedication of those who live in the neighborhood. In addition, the presence of such groups suggests the dog play area will actually be used and not sit dormant.

⁵ Of the parks listed here, dog play areas already exist in Joaquin Miller and Mosswood.

15. **History of Dog Activity.** Consideration should be given to locating dog play areas in parks where there is already a history of people bringing dogs to the park—legal or not.

Design Criteria for Enclosed Dog Play Areas

Once a dog play area site has been selected, the following criteria should guide its design and detailed site planning. As noted above, the ideal size should be at least 20,000 square feet.

1. Ideally, the park should include separate fenced areas for large dogs and small dogs. The upper threshold for a small dog is usually around 30 lbs.
2. There should be at least one water source in both the large dog area and the small dog area.
3. There should be at least one dog waste pick up bag dispenser and disposal receptacle in each enclosure. If possible, underground vaults should be used for disposing of dog waste.
4. The dog play enclosures should be surrounded by attractive, decorative fencing at least four feet high. A landscaped buffer at least 18 inches wide should be located on the exterior side of the fence. Landscaping of the fence itself (e.g., climbing vines) should be encouraged for screening where appropriate. Decorative fence elements such as art incorporating dog-related themes is encouraged.
5. Double gated entries should be used, with minimum 8 x 8 dimension between the dog enclosure and the exterior of the park. A separate gate should be provided for maintenance and waste collection vehicles.
6. As noted in the siting criteria in the last section, the site should be relatively flat and well drained. Slight topography is acceptable to create variation, and to avoid ponding and mud.
7. The dog play area should be designed as a gathering place for people as well as dogs. Opportunities for a community kiosk and bulletin board should be considered. The dog play area should include benches, picnic tables, and other inviting places to sit and relax.
8. The dog park surface should be easy to maintain. In our research, grass and turf were generally considered infeasible within smaller fenced areas due to wear and tear. However, there are exceptions, particularly in places where the park is closed for extended periods to allow the grass to “rest.” Other common surfaces include wood chips, decomposed granite, artificial turf, recycled or crushed rock, and sand. We have not fully researched the solution that works best

for Oakland: The short answer is that one size does not fit all, and the best solution may need to be determined on a case by case basis.

9. Shade elements such as trees should be incorporated, but a dense canopy of trees over the entire dog park is discouraged. If new trees are planted, they should be durable species that can survive rough conditions.
10. There should be clear separation between the dog play area and other park uses such as athletic fields and picnic areas. The dog play area should not be immediately adjacent to children's play areas or playgrounds if possible. However, proximity to a children's play area should not be a deal-breaker. For dog play areas near playgrounds, the entrance should be located on the opposite side of the fenced enclosure.
11. The dog play area should be ADA accessible
12. The dog park should be designed to discourage anti-social behavior—both by people and by dogs. Visibility from nearby activity areas, a recreation center, or a nearby street, etc. is important. Locating the dog park near the street may be beneficial because it reduces the need to walk the dog further into the park, potentially crossing athletic fields, playgrounds, or other uses where dogs may interfere with activities.
13. If the park is intended for evening use, lighting should be provided. Otherwise, a dawn to dusk operation policy should apply.
14. Incorporation of “artificial” features for dog play and adventure such as moguls are encouraged. If possible, the dog play area should not just be a flat featureless rectangle.
15. The dog park should feature prominent signage with the name of park, hours of operation, and rules of behavior.

Beyond these siting guidelines, it is imperative that the design of a dog park be a community-driven process. The involvement of Recreation Advisory Councils is especially important if the play area is in “their” park. Public meetings should be held to solicit input into the design, and participation by the surrounding neighborhood should be strongly encouraged. This should include both people living close to the site, and those who might live further away from the park. The business community should also be involved in this process. Along these lines, the Ad Hoc Committee recommends the creation of an Oakland Dog Park Advisory Council, similar to the Advisory Councils that have been set up for Aquatics, Community Gardening, and similar recreational interests. Such a Council could share ideas for dog park funding, management, maintenance, enforcement, while also advocating for improvements elsewhere in the city.

In addition, the design process must address issues related to ongoing maintenance of the park, including regular clean-out of waste receptacles, periodic clean-up of the park grounds, maintenance of vegetation and park seating areas, graffiti abatement, and enforcement of rules, including the control of aggressive dogs and assurance that dogs in the park are licensed. The feasibility of collecting a nominal fee from regular users should be considered to create a supplemental funding source for these activities. Twenty five to \$35 a year or so seems to be fairly routine in other cities. Periodic park stewardship days might also be held for the community to chip in and take care of the park.

Loosening the Leash: Ordinance Revisions

As noted at the beginning of this report, Oakland is somewhat unique among large US cities in that it prohibits dogs on leash in all but a few City parks. This prohibition is not consistently enforced and is routinely violated. Despite the presence of “No Dogs” signs in most parks, many residents bring their dogs to the parks anyway. There is usually no consequence to the violation, although at least one focus group participant reported receiving an expensive police citation.

Our Ad Hoc Committee believes the prohibition on dogs needs to be loosened, particularly on the perimeter of Lake Merritt. On any given weekend, there are literally hundreds of people walking with their dogs, running with their dogs, and picnicking with their dogs around the edges of the lake. One of our committee members counted 33 dogs during a one-hour walk around the lake. Most of the owners seem unaware that they are breaking the law and appear to be behaving responsibly (e.g., keeping their dogs on leash, picking up after their dogs, and controlling aggressive dogs). They are doing precisely what people are supposed to do in parks—exercising, relaxing, and having fun with their families.

The most common argument for banning dogs around the lake is its designation as a wildlife refuge. The rationale is that dogs and birds don’t mix. There are also concerns that dogs will compromise the recent Measure DD improvements. We believe that the designation of a **Lake Merritt Dog Path** on a well-defined alignment that avoids the most sensitive parts of the refuge could be created without interfering with either the birds or the DD improvements. The path could even consist of stenciled paw prints on the sidewalk and signage, primarily reminding users that dogs are prohibited more than five feet off the path in either direction. We recognize that negotiating the proper alignment for the path may take time and must respect wildlife interests. Yet we also recognize that by formally designating a path, much of the potential for damage that is already happening from those walking their dogs wherever they please, without consequence, could be avoided.

One of the advantages of allowing leashed dogs around the Lake perimeter within a well-defined corridor is that some of the pressure to create a fenced dog play area at the Lake would be relieved.

This is not to say a designated dog park at the Lake should not be pursued. We still think such a space is needed. However, we also recognize there is no easy solution to finding the perfect site.

We think it would make sense to allow dogs on leash in a number of other locations. This could include the Community Parks (listed earlier), and possibly on trails in the Resource Conservation Areas.

We are not advocating an all-out repeal of the prohibition on leashed dogs at this time. We think an incremental approach is needed, possibly carried out as a series of pilot programs to test how well new regulations might work in a handful of parks. Our concern about changing the rules for all parks all at once is that the City may not have the resources or manpower to respond to increased maintenance needs or conflicts that may result from the increased presence of dogs in the parks.

We think the most prudent course is to proceed with caution, a few parks at a time, to see how it goes. If costs and conflicts are minimal, the number of parks might be expanded. If not, the policy would be revisited. Our expectation is that even under a full relaxation of the rules, there might still be parks where leashed dogs are prohibited outright (for example, the Morcom Rose Garden).

The Ad Hoc Committee was also asked to address the possibility of allowing dogs **off-leash** in unfenced park areas. This is presently permitted in the regional parks such as Sibley and Redwood but not in City of Oakland parks. Many of the cities we examined had unfenced off-leash areas, and there were very few reported problems or conflicts with existing uses. Again, we think it would be worthwhile for Oakland to explore a pilot program in a handful (perhaps five) large parks to test the outcome.

For the safety of the dogs, we recommend that any pilot unfenced, off-leash areas be more than 200 feet away from the nearest arterial street. The most feasible pilot projects would be the larger community parks and athletic fields such as Raimondi or North Oakland Sports Center, and possibly parks on the Estuary at Middle Harbor, Portview, Union Point and Curt Flood. Some of the larger open spaces around the lake like Snow Park might also be considered, although areas which abut the busiest arterials should be avoided to reduce accident potential.

We strongly recommend that an off-leash pilot program be limited to specific hours of the day so as not to interfere with other activities at the park, including athletic events. It might also be limited to certain days of the week or even just one day a week, for a month. In fact, the City might even make this a single day event (e.g., “Unleash Oakland!” or “Take Your Dog to the Park Day”) with sponsors to cover any related costs. The intent is not to change the rules *yet*, but rather to *test* a new set of rules in a handful of locations to see what makes sense moving forward.

Thinking Outside the Crate

While our ad hoc committee believes the City can do more to accommodate dogs within our parks, we also think great advances can be made outside of our existing parks. The City does not have enough parkland to meet public needs right now, especially in its most urban neighborhoods. As more residents are attracted Downtown, to the Jack London district, and to other Oakland neighborhoods, the City should be looking for any opportunity possible to expand its parks, particularly on the fringes of existing parks and within major new development areas.

Some of the opportunities are self-evident. For example, the City recently announced a development agreement for a 3,100 unit residential development at Brooklyn Basin (Oak to Ninth). The 65 acre site is said to contain include 30 acres of proposed parkland. We believe it is imperative that at least two of these 30 acres be planned for a dog play area. Similarly, plans for the 180 acres at Oak Knoll Naval Hospital are being revived, with a substantial park component to be included. A dog park serving the South Hills and upper East Oakland neighborhoods should be included.

Some of the opportunities may be less obvious. Oakland should be taking a hard look at rooftops, parking lots, vacant City-owned properties, and other public lands. For example, the Henry J Kaiser Convention Center has sat empty for years, while the City remains locked in a dispute with the State about the building's future. While this dispute lingers on, why not turn a portion of the empty two-acre parking lot into a temporary dog play area? This could be the first in a series of **“parking lot” to “barking lot”** transformations.

If Oakland can turn a neglected area underneath a freeway into a well-used dog park as we have at Hardy Park, surely we can do the same on empty asphalt parking lots with spectacular views, or on vast parking garage rooftops sitting empty all day long. We are a city that prides itself on being green, sustainable, artistic, and inclusive. It is time to “unleash” this energy and become a national leader in innovative dog park development.

IMAGINE.....



The 2-acre parking lot for the Henry J Kaiser Convention Center was used as a staging area for the 12th Street reconstruction until a few months ago. Today, it is a vast sea of freshly poured asphalt at the foot of Lake Merritt. While the future of the building is being determined by the City and State, why not make good use of the site as a temporary dog play area? Or better yet, a permanent dog play area that catapults Oakland to the forefront of the urban greening movement?



The eastern half of the roof level at the City-owned garage at Franklin and 19th is empty 24 hours a day. A beautiful park and garden tops the privately owned parking garage rooftop across the street, and an even larger rooftop park and garden sit atop the Kaiser Building two blocks away. Could this one acre of concrete be put into productive use as an urban green and dog park?

Appendix A:

Dog Park Survey



City of Oakland
Office of Parks & Recreation

DOG PLAY AREA SURVEY

QUESTION	PLEASE WRITE YOUR RESPONSE HERE				
1. Are you an Oakland resident?	YES		NO		
a. If yes, what neighborhood do you live in?					
2. What is your favorite Oakland park?					
3. How often do you visit an Oakland park (any park)?	Daily	More than once a week	More than once a month	Once every few months	Once a year or less
4. What is the most common way you travel to an Oakland park?	Walk	Bicycle	Bus or BART	Drive	Other
5. Do you own a dog?	YES		NO		
a. If yes, how many? (write in number)					
b. If no, have you owned a dog in the past?	YES		NO		
<i>If you answered NO to question 5, please skip to question 7</i>					
6. We'd like to know more about where you take your dog for play and exercise, and whether you're familiar with Oakland's dog parks.					
a. Where do you take your dog to play?					
b. Have you ever been to a dog park (anywhere)?	YES		NO		
c. Have you ever been to a dog park <u>in Oakland</u> ?	YES		NO		
d. What is the closest dog park to your house? <i>If you don't know, please write "don't know"</i>					
e. If you visit an Oakland dog park. How do you get there?					
f. If you visit an Oakland dog park, what time of day do you usually go there?					
7. Dogs are not permitted in most Oakland parks, even if on a leash. Would you favor changing the rules so it is possible to walk a dog on a leash in Oakland's parks?	YES		MAYBE		NO
If you answered NO or MAYBE, what concerns do you have about dogs on-leash in the parks?					

QUESTION	PLEASE WRITE YOUR RESPONSE HERE		
8. Would you favor more fenced dog parks in Oakland?	YES	MAYBE	NO
If you answered NO or MAYBE, what concerns do you have about creating more dog parks?			
9. Would you favor allowing dogs <u>off leash</u> and outside of a fenced dog park anywhere in Oakland's parks?	YES	MAYBE	NO
If you answered YES or MAYBE, where?			
10. Is there a particular Oakland park where you'd really like to see a dog park? If so, which one?			
11. Is there a particular Oakland park where you think a dog park would be a bad idea? If so, which one?			
12. What do you think are the most important features of a good dog park?	(rank your top three in the space below)		
Convenient location			
Convenient hours of operation			
Adequate size (is it large enough)			
Flat, well drained terrain			
Separate areas for large dogs and small dogs			
Cleanliness and maintenance			
Safety and security (of users)			
Availability of Parking			
Lighting (for evening use)			
Amenities (water, wood chips, trash cans, benches)			
Appearance and Aesthetics (landscaping, fencing, impact on the visual character of the space?)			
Enforcement (making sure dogs are licensed, control of aggressive animals, ensuring owners pick up dog waste, etc.)			
Other (please describe):			
13. Would you be willing to pay a small annual fee to use a dog park, if the money is used for maintenance of City dog parks?	YES	MAYBE	NO

Please contact me about future Oakland Dog Play Area topics:

Name: _____ email: _____

Address: _____