

Dane County Parks

The Pioneer of the Dog Parks

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Preface 1991 - 2011

Dane County was one of the first, if not the first municipal dog park program in the country. The program dates back to 1991 with the establishment of a Park Commission, Dog Sub-Committee. The Committee working with park staff developed what is recognized as one of the first official park programs to provide for dog walking and use in a municipal park system. Dane County Parks has refined its program over the years and updated its "How to Guide" for Developing Dog Exercise Areas at least three times between 1997 and 2002. Through the success of the program the County been able to provided guidance to other public agencies and dog advocacy groups throughout the United States and around the world.

The operation al cost for the County Dog Parks is full funded by its users. In Dane County a Cooperative Dog Program was developed first with the City of Sun Prairie, then the City of Madison and more recently the City of Middleton. A patron can purchase one Dog Park Permit and use over 16 large Off-Leash Dog Parks throughout Dane County.

Program Development

Dane County was one of the first park systems, if not the first park systems in the United States to develop designated off-leash dog exercise areas. In 1991 dog issues rose to a priority issue. Calls of concern for not only park visitor safety, but also for safe areas to take dogs became a common theme rising to the attention of Parks Director Ken LePine. Under county ordinance dogs allowed within county parks as long as they were restrained by a 6-foot lead. According to LePine many if not most patrons with dogs allowed their dogs to roam free creating many conflicts.

A Park Commission Sub-Committee was formed to solve the issues concerning dog's off-leash use within the county parks. The Committee was made up of dog owners, dog advocacy groups, concerned citizens, and representatives from other park interests. The Committee objectives included developing criteria for identifying potential off-leash sites, new rules and regulations and identifying funding sources for the develop off-leash areas. At the time most officials and citizens thought it was a poor use of valued park land to development park areas exclusively for the use dogs and their handler. To gain support for a new program the County developed the term 'Dog Exercise Areas' to identify designated use park sites vs. calling them dog parks. When Dane County began its program, there were no guide books or protocols for developing dog parks. There were a couple of "private sites" one in Chicago and one in San Francisco that catered to dog owners. The City of Indianapolis was identified as the only

public agency to designate a site for off-leash dogs, an old baseball diamond fenced into thirds. LePine noted that “there wasn’t any guide or copying what someone else was doing. Dane County Parks was creating a program that wasn’t available. No one had recognized walking dogs as a legitimate use of the parks”.

Once recommendations and protocols were developed by the Sub-Committee and approved by the Park Commission in 1993, charge was given to park staff to create the program and identify potential off-leash sites. Staff identified properties where there was currently limited park use and minimal impacts to patrons. Sites that were chosen provided natural barriers and locations where there was already existing roads and access. According to Darren Marsh, Operations Manager at the time there was no extra money for this program. The development plan was to create dog exercise areas with minimal investment for parking, fencing and other amenities. Most of the first Dog Parks were mark by just posting a 12”x12” blue Dog Exercise Area boundary sign.

The first Dane County Dog Park established in late 1994 was at Viking County Park on County Highway N, near the City of Stoughton. Viking Park seemed to an excellent first choice as a trial-run for the dog park program. The dog exercise area was located on a 12-acre peninsula, where three sides of the land are surrounded by water. This site only required one short side of the peninsula to be fenced. The fence was installed by volunteers and still stands today. Volunteers also cleaned the park, preparing it for use by the public. The entire first project was funded by donations.

Operations of the new site and program would then be funded through an annual dog permit fee. The Park Commission made the permit required for all dogs using any county park properties and that the revenues be used to offset the operational costs for the Dog Exercise Areas. In the beginning, volunteers helped to sell the daily and annual permits. Peer pressure and a new park violation notice be came the enforcement.

The second Dog Exercise Area, added in 1994, was an 80 acre site at Prairie Moraine south of Verona on County Highway PB. This site added new challenges for Director LePine and his staff. When this site was opened there was no conflicts identified with other park users. It was a vacant cattle pasture with an existing boundary fence around the site and without other user conflicts it was determined that no additional fencing was required. The only improvements required where a parking lot for access and mowing some grass trails.

Then there was a report that dogs were not staying in the designated off-leash area and were entering private lands. There was even a report of a dog being caught in a trap on an adjacent property. The Committee asked that donors step forward to raise money for fencing the site. A fundraiser was held and upwards of \$10,000 was raised to re-fence the property. Additional problems arose that identified that signage alone would not work to designate specific as an off-leash dog exercise area. Fencing was going to be required for future developments. Dog handlers are required to have control of their dog(s) under control, however, it became apparent that there was a wide range of training and control that various handlers had over their dog(s). The step topography of the site and the heavy use of undesigantated trails created erosion issues. Working through all these issues allowed the Dane County

Parks personnel and the Dog Parks Committee helped to shape the rules and regulations and development of future dog parks.

As word spread of Dane County's new Dog Park program spread throughout the upper Midwest Dane County Park personnel were regularly meeting other municipalities or corresponding with groups all over the United States. LePine began to receive calls from all over the state, country and even other countries asking how to build a dog park. In 1997 Dane County Parks developed the first guide to developing Dog Parks and updated the guide three times up until 2002. The Guide included chapters of rules and regulations, fencing materials, permit fees, permit collection boxes, dog waste collection and much more. There have been many changes since the first guide was published and now most major communities around the United States and other countries. With the help of the public, volunteers and the Dane County Parks Dog Committee, a successful program was developed.

Timeline

- 1994 - Viking (14 acres), Prairie Moraine (79 acres) and Token Creek dog parks established.
- 1995 - Indian Lake (42 acres) and Yahara Heights (20 acres) dog parks established. The City of Sun Prairie joined the Cooperative Dog Park Program.
- 1997 - Token Creek dog park moved to a larger site (38 acres).
- 2004 - the City of Middleton joined the Cooperative Dog Park Program.
- 2007 - Badger Prairie (12 acres) dog park established.
- 2012 - Capital Springs (25 acres) dog park established.
- 2017 - the City of Madison joined the Cooperative Dog Park Program.
- 2019 - Small dog area added to the Badger Prairie dog park.

In addition the county has pledged to build a 40 acre area at Anderson County Park near the Village of Oregon in southern part of the County and has proposed other regional dog parks near the Village Cambridge, Cottage Grove, of Mt. Horeb and in the vicinity of the Town of Middleton.

Extra Facts

But where did the inspiration for dog parks come from? Certainly there was a need for safe areas to allow dogs to run off off-leash. More inspiration came from William Penn Montt from California. In 1972 he presented information at the WPRA about a dog park in Isabella Beach, California. There they had charged dog park user fee of \$1 per dog and with fundraising efforts raised of \$1million in capital funds to create their park.

The idea of a user fee stuck with LePine and he proposed the fee system to help fund the program. LePine said having a revenue source was the key to creating a successful program. The new Dane County Parks Dog Permit provided a year round funding source to maintain the sites. The success and popularity of the program forced the county to look for and anticipate where new dog parks would be required in the future. LePine noted that day-in and day-out, over the entire year, there are no other county parks that are that more popular than the dog parks.

Darren Marsh, current Parks Director states that much of the success of Dog Parks programs can be credited to what we now identify as Dog Parks must be given to Ken LePine, a forward thinking Park Commission and a County Risk Manager that saw the merits of this new program. "Most people have no idea that municipal dog parks began right here in Dane County", states Marsh. "Now they are found throughout the United States. Each program building on the success of others. Dog parks are a tremendous success, day in and day out they are our busiest parks. We now know that the dog parks provide an incredible health and social benefits for both patrons and their canine companions."