

Montpelier Parks Commission
Public Meeting on Dog Use at Hubbard Park

Present: Aaron Brondyke, Emily Boedecker, Lyn Munno, Cara Robecheck, Kip Roberts, Geoff Beyer

February 19, 2013
7:30-9:44

1. Review minutes from January 17, 2013 Parks Commission Meeting.

There were no further comments on the January minutes. Emily moved to approve them. Cara seconded. Approved unanimously.

2. Presentation of summary of public input received on dogs at Hubbard Park to date.

Emily briefly summarized the history of how dog related issues were brought up with the Parks Commission. She asked who in the crowd had already provided formal comments. Over 90% of public attendees raised hands.

Emily explained that park users brought dog-related concerns to Geoff. Subsequently, Geoff brought the issues of problems with dogs and dog poop to the Parks Commission's attention. The Parks Commission then went out to collect more information. 331 people responded to our dog use survey. 91 of those people provided written comments. 25 other park users emailed comments to Geoff or Parks Commissioners before the survey went out. 22 people provided comment at the Parks Commission public meeting in December. Overall, this represents a great response from the community.

Emily generalized that comments have ranged from "I can no longer go there out of fear," to "I'm tripping over dog poop," to "the park is great as it is. Don't change a thing." All of the comments are posted on the Parks website now.

To broadly summarize the results of the survey:

- The majority of respondents are residents of Montpelier.
- A majority of survey respondents walk a dog in the park, and are there on a daily basis.
- About 70 respondents have been threatened by dogs themselves. Others responded that they had issues – being jumped on, etc., but not threatened.
- About 40 respondents have had issues with dogs interacting badly with their children.

- There have been many, many complaints about dog poop.

Tonight, we will determine whether we should take further action, and if so, what further action we should take. We have no predetermined agenda. Here is how we envision the structure for this meeting:

- A. First, Cara will talk about some of the responses that we've heard.
- B. Second, Geoff will talk.
- C. There will be a public comment period. Each person will be given one minute to speak.

Cara stated that she has carefully read the 120 comments. She has noticed three themes regarding areas where we could improve:

- i. Dog waste is an issue for everyone and a health issue. We could easily address it, and create a lot of goodwill between dog owners and non-dog owners.
- ii. Better communication. We could post more effective signage about our dog policy: for example, where dogs are allowed, and what to do with dog waste. We could also provide a comments box where people could leave written comments if they had an issue.
- iii. Finally, many people want a discussion about whether there should be places in the park where dogs should only be allowed be on leash. For example, some people have proposed dividing up the park to create some on-leash areas.

Geoff added that there has been a wide range of responses ranging from “people attacked by dogs” to “dogs attacked by kids.”

3. Open floor for public comments. Comments should be kept to 1 minute to allow for all to speak.

Summary of comments from Montpelier Residents:

I have a Bernese mountain dog. I am a former Parks Commissioner. My dog lives for the joy of running with other dogs. Please make the most minimal changes possible.

In all circumstances, dogs need to be under human control.

It is unfortunate that this meeting is happening during another City meeting, because many residents are attending the other meeting. Lyn responded that she agrees but that when we picked this date, we were not aware that another meeting would later be

scheduled for the same night. She added that she hopes that people have also submitted comments through email.

We do have a poop problem. Many people bag it and leave it. That's an issue. But I haven't had any negative dog experiences there.

I am sensitive to people who are afraid of dogs. My dog is well-behaved. It is a terrible feeling when your dog scares someone. I love Montpelier because of Hubbard Park. Thank you.

I let my dog run off leash. But as a new parent with a young child, we've had a number of situations that were unnerving when other park users' dogs felt threatening. Maybe we have an opportunity here to improve this situation through better park management.

I moved to Montpelier partly because of Hubbard Park. Thank you for posting the Canine Code of Conduct. I am trying to follow it. The park needs more visible and professional signage. The more information we have, the better we'll self regulate.

I experienced two dog-related incidents recently that were very unnerving. I was walking with two friends who are blind and use seeing-eye dogs. A pair of exuberant dogs came barreling down the path. This caused my friends a great deal of fear, because the seeing-eye dog of one of my blind friends had been bitten while on leash on Main Street. Also, I am a grandma, and I can relate to what an earlier commenter said about kids feeling threatened. My grandchildren are fearful of dogs, and that has prevented me from using the Park.

I have walked regularly in the park for the past 20 years. It is now overcrowded, and the use of the park has really evolved. I feel very safe in Hubbard Park; safer than I do downtown. Yet, every park user needs to be sensitive to other people's personal space, whether you are skiing, walking with kids, have a puppy, or a baby. We need to know what is a reasonable expectation of dogs and people. Keep an eye on your dog. Keep an eye on your dog.

There is a small percentage of irresponsible dog owners. I leash my dog if I see a toddler. We need to be responsible. We don't want to lose this privilege.

All of us who are responsible leash our dogs when we see small children or puppies. That should be part of the Dog Owner Code of conduct.

I have been using the park for 40 years. The park has changed over that time. During that time, half of the park's roadways have been closed to vehicles. Soon thereafter, I started seeing more wildlife. In last couple of decades, the number of dogs visiting the park has increased. The park should be available for use in multiple ways. Personally, I like to go to a place without the activity that dogs create. I would prefer to have part of the park that is dog-free.

My concern about what the gentleman just said is that many residents visit the park for exercise for both humans and dogs. Limiting people's ability to exercise while walking their dogs is a health issue. My dogs like to run and keep moving.

I have been coming to the park every day for the past 3 years. There is not enough signage in the park about the code of conduct, or what is expected of bikers and other activities in the park. We need better communication, and people should be required to carry leashes.

I walk in the park daily. It is the way that I've met most of my best friends in town. I helped to develop the Canine Code of Conduct 10 years ago. Speaking from personal experience, it made a difference to me to see that Code of Conduct posted in the park every day. It made me more conscious. I would be willing to be on a volunteer committee to deal with all of the poop. As a community of park users, we should take responsibility for these issues. However, I would strongly suggest that there are certain times of the year when walking your dog on a leash in the park can be dangerous, due to icy conditions on the trails.

I walk a little dog in the park daily. I think that we should do more about the poop. I've stepped in it. My dog has stepped in it. It's no fun. However, I don't want to see the area restricted. All park users must try to get along. Public conversations like this one help to promote that. To the earlier comment by a resident desiring certain areas of the park that are off-limits to dogs, I would recommend that that individual check out the Deer Yard. It is a portion of Hubbard Park where dogs are already banned. I've walked through there and seen many deer.

I would like to thank Geoff for the enormous progress that he has made in Hubbard Park. I ski, run, or walk there frequently. When I do, I try to concentrate on what I'm doing. I get in a zone, and dogs bump me out of my zone. Dogs must be under their master's control. I don't care to be approached by other people's dogs. We should keep the concept of a leash control ordinance in mind, if self-control doesn't work.

I have had two dogs, and I walked them both in Hubbard Park. One is still living. I suggest not only that dog walkers be required to carry a leash, but also that we need more scoops in the park. And people should use them!

I own property jointly with some of my neighbors. The property abuts Hubbard Park. I would like to remind everyone that park policy bleeds onto private property owners' properties adjacent to the park. People's dogs come into my backyard. People assume it's part of the park; but it's not. People should be leashing their dogs when on private land adjacent to the park. Currently, being around dogs in the park is an unclear experience. Is the dog under control? I hope we can come up with an effective way to allow dogs to be off leash.

I run a local dog walking service. I walk a lot of dogs on lead and peoples' dogs approach me off leash. People also let their kids come close to me, even when I request that they not do so. You can't assume that every dog is "happy go lucky," and wants to interact with you.

In the winter, dogs can't get into the deep snow to poop. There should definitely be disposal containers. I noticed in the survey comments that some people suggested that the Parks Department provide a composting container for dog poop. Other parks provide containers and bags. This should be done immediately. I don't believe that a carry out policy works anywhere. I think that people would be willing to pay a yearly fee when they register their dogs to help defer the cost of maintaining such containers.

I have two comments: 1. Poop: I would be willing to be on a committee to deal with dog poop. I agree it's a problem. I carry dog bags at all times. 2. Communication: Dog owners need to communicate with their dogs. And also, all park users need to communicate with others park users on the trail. Skiers, bikers, dog walkers, etc. should say, "coming up behind you" or "approaching on the left," or "I have a dog," etc. So that people and dogs don't get startled.

The park needs better signage, because a lot of people come from out of state, and they might not be aware of the Canine Code of Conduct. I would like to dissuade you from the concept of providing a fenced-in area for dogs, because dogfights will break out if the dogs are penned up. We need to walk throughout the park in small groups to avoid conflict.

In regard to signage: we do have visitors to the park from outside the area. Signage should address not only dog owners, but also visitors. Signage should convey something to the effect of: "You are approaching a dog play area where there might be dogs off leash."

I agree we need containers for dog poop. The bag method is better than scoops. We might also want to look at regulating the hours of park use. In New York City, for example, park use is regulated, based on usage. There is a set period of time during the day (early morning, for example) when dogs can run loose in a certain area. We might consider regulating by using hours.

I walk in the park almost daily with 3 dogs. For most part, my park visits are almost issue-free. I am not happy about the survey. To me, it sounds a lot like the climate change debate, in that you give equal credence to a small minority of voices. No one has pointed out that 80% of the people that responded to this survey said that there were no problems. That is the key here. There is a really good thing happening in that park, and instead we focus on negative things.

In regard to the previous gentleman's comments, whether there is a problem in this park is not up for a vote. It is a significant enough problem for those people who

want to use the park daily, safely and predictably, and ensure that they will not be hassled. Dismissing it because of majority rule will not solve anything.

Recently I was using the park, and parents with kids on sleds were coming down main streets in the park. They were coming around the corner without even looking. There need to be rules about conduct for everyone. Those parents and kids with sleds could have taken out these two old ladies!

First of all, thank you Geoff for strewing hay on icy stretches of trail in advance of the last bike race. I am in the park twice daily. Yes, there have been problems with dogs and with poop. Yet most of the time, I have had an excellent experience in the park. I have seen skiers fall down and get messed up with dog poop. That is one of the things that started the Canine Code of Conduct ten years ago. Recently, I had a kid slide into my car while the kid was sledding.

We just moved here last summer. The park is so nice. The process here tonight is impressive. I hope that this discussion would remain in the spirit of wanting to make changes to ensure that the park is open to everyone's different needs. Signage and rules is fine. Sometimes people will break rules, but let's remember that that is not a failure. I'd love to see this process continue.

I would just like everyone to know that the park is listed on dogparks.com as a dog park. That might be a good place to post the Canine Code of Conduct.

I volunteer weekly in the park. Most of my work involves addressing "people problems." People litter and try to burn park infrastructure in the fireplaces, for example. People sometimes leave poop near the park entrances in bags. I often pick up those bags. But that behavior has decreased. This year, there has been less of that. Last year, there was more.

Signage will not solve all the problems. People will ignore the signs, assuming that their dogs are good dogs, and that they don't need to review the rules. Recently, I needed to tell a woman in North Branch that her dog must be on leash. We need to tell other people to follow the rules, and speak up when we should. We also need to pick up poop, and generally take responsibility for our animals.

Kim Beyer stated: I have lived in the park for 25 years. Thank you to the Park Commission in the spirit of sharing the park. I love the park deeply. I have cared for children in the park for many years. Recently, almost every time that I walk with children in the park, there has been at least some incident of a dog growling, or playfully knocking over a child. In the spirit of working together, in the future, I would love to see myself going out with children, and having no dog-related problems. No aggressive dogs and no poop would be success.

In regard to the gentleman earlier who noted that the number of bags of dog poop being left in the park has decreased, I would like to note that the "leave it here" sign

is gone. The sign meant, “leave the scoop, NOT leave the poop.” Maybe that is why the problem is better.

I appreciate all the people who use the park. As a woman walking at night, I especially appreciate feeling safe at night when so many other people are also out using the park.

In terms of signage, there were comments about speed limits. The park needs some speed limit signs. A lot of people drive up really fast, or go down really fast. That is important as well.

A resident of Calais:

I walk in Hubbard Park a couple times a week with dogs. I’ve noticed that many parks in other cities have a kid-only area where dogs aren’t allowed. Hubbard Park seems hard to divide into dog-permitted and dog-free areas. Perhaps the Parks Commission could designate some areas where kids could go, that are off-limits to dogs. She suggested that perhaps the playing field where some have suggested placing the proposed “sleeping bear” sculpture would be a good location for such a dog-free kid zone.

A resident of Plainfield:

Hubbard Park is a great place to walk a dog, ski, or hike. Everyone needs to get along. Take a leash. Ask if peoples’ dogs are friendly. I feel it’s a safe place. It’s a great place.

Emily said, thank you all, for respecting our different opinions. Tonight, we have heard a lot of great suggestions on top of all of the good previously received comments. Now, I would like to turn it over to the Commission and Geoff for thoughts and comments.

Lyn said, it is clear that people really value the park, especially as a place to walk dogs. I really understand that. But many people feel like their park experience has been deteriorated by negative experiences with dogs. We want to ensure that everyone can have a positive experience. I don’t want to see a leash law throughout the park. I love all of the great suggestions. And I think that we can do better for all of the people who feel that there are problems. I would like to highlight the following:

- Signage: We should be able to move forward on these requests fairly quickly. We should post the Canine Code of Conduct better in the park.
- I like the idea of a suggestion box. We need an easy system for people to give information, anonymously, if necessary.

- We must work collaboratively as a community. I would like to see a process established for folks to review the Canine Code of Conduct. Can we make it stronger? Improve it? Add to it? Should we make certain areas on-leash only areas? Would any of you like to volunteer on such a committee, and then report back to the Commission?
- Poop: It would be hard to find another public park that gets this much dog use where it would be acceptable to leave poop in the park. Maybe the structure for dealing with poop worked when there were fewer dogs using the park. But people commented on this issue a lot. It is an issue. I go out with groups of kids from Union Elementary. The presence of dog poop distracts from the ecology lessons. Even off-trail in the park. We should change the current poop policy. Should we install a composter? If so, who will pay for that? Who will remove the poop? Dealing with dog poop better in the park would go a long way toward making other dog owners feel like that was their park as well.

Kip said, we got a lot of comments about the lack of trash receptacles in the park. Kip asked Geoff, “What happened last time there were trash receptacles in the park, and how much did that cost?” Geoff responded that back when we made the decision that the park would be “carry-in, carry-out” only, in the mid-80s, we were spending a third of the Parks Budget on trash removal. And that did not include all of the staff time that we spent cleaning up raccoon damage and removing the trash. The decision to establish a “carry-out” policy is among the most cost-effective things that we’ve done in the parks. I would never recommend that we reverse that.

Kip noted that one of our commenters suggested charging more for dog licenses and using that additional revenue to pay for waste disposal.

Cara said that we need a subcommittee of dog owners to address all of these issues. A group should look at signage.

Emily said that the code of conduct should be a user code of conduct. We must carefully consider budget implications of any policy changes that we recommend.

Lyn reminded the group that the critical issue concerns whether the Canine Code of Conduct is being followed. Keeping general user issues a little bit separate from dog issues would be helpful.

Geoff said that there was a huge shift after we posted the code of conduct 10 years ago. He remarked anecdotally that people have said that “since the survey was distributed, I haven’t had one problem with dogs.” I believe we need a cultural shift. I’ve only had one complaint about dog behavior in the last 3 months.

One person asked, “Where are the Canine Code of Conduct signs?” Geoff has posted the Code and the leash regulations both in Hubbard and North Branch Parks.

However, someone very unfriendly to the policy has been taking them down at North Branch Park. Geoff said, people can't assume that they have a right to walk their dogs off-leash. More often, in public places, leash laws are required. We must have conversations to ensure that the privilege to walk dogs off-leash will continue.

Lyn recommended setting up small groups to address these specific issues. One attendee asked whether there will be opportunities, i.e., a public process, to allow residents to respond to what comes out of the small groups? Lyn responded that, yes, there will be opportunities for the public to respond at Parks Commission meetings.

One resident suggested soliciting interest from the broader public, through an ad in the paper. Another resident suggested posting the meeting better, including on the information boards in the parks.

Geoff stated that if we choose to rely primarily on Park Staff to address dog issues, it will be a major shift in how the park is run. This needs to be a community effort. I really appreciate people like Susan Ritz, who regularly help to address dog issues and keep the parks clean. But we have backslid since our progress of ten years ago. We can't keep sliding back like this. There needs to be a permanent shift in public behavior.

Emily recommended that the Commission decide on focus groups and topics. Lyn recommended the following three committees:

- Dog Waste.
- Canine Code of Conduct and/or Dog Policies
- Signage, after aforementioned Code of Conduct committee meets.

One resident recommended that we not only deal with dog issues in signage, but that it should be a general park use code of conduct. Lyn reiterated that the current focus is on dog issues, and we should start by looking at the Canine Code of Conduct.

One member of the public said, "People need to understand what they're getting into—that this is an area where dogs run off leash. Park signage should state, "Please don't let your child come up to me." "People that use the park need to be aware of that . . ."

Another resident disagreed: "We need to be responsible for our dogs up there. Walking your dog off-leash is a privilege!"

Another resident said, "I've seen people threaten dogs with their ski poles. I was up there over the weekend. Skiers were everywhere. A father was sledding down the road from the tower with a baby! It was chaos. We left."

A park user said, “Let’s not demonize dog walkers. We cannot achieve perfection. We must achieve the best situation possible,” and be satisfied with that. Lyn responded that “I don’t think that anyone is expecting perfection.”

Geoff suggested that people sign up for one of two committees: i) look at the Canine Code of Conduct for areas of improvement; b) a committee of people who want to create a sustainable culture for dog walkers in Hubbard Park (i.e., the kinds of things that dog owners could do to create a sustainable environment for dog walkers in the park).

A member of the public suggested that there should be a separate committee for poop.

Another resident reiterated that somebody needs to check out the way that Hubbard Park is addressed on websites, such as DogParks.com.

A resident pointed out that the local Humane Society encourages people to take their dogs to Hubbard Park to socialize them. Maybe someone should discourage them from making this recommendation.

Lyn stated that the Canine Code of Conduct group needs to look at all of the suggestions offered, including potentially new dog policies.

11 residents left their names and said that they would be willing to serve on committees. The Parks Commission agreed that the Code of Conduct Committee should have 6 citizen volunteers, one Parks Commissioner, and Geoff. The Commission will ask each volunteer to provide a statement explaining why they want to volunteer on the committee. The Commission will select committee members at the March meeting.

4. Parks Commission discussion of next steps on dog issues.

Geoff pointed out that there are less than 400 dogs registered in Montpelier. Therefore, it is difficult to make the argument that a minority of citizens are trying to force an agenda on the majority of park users.

The Commission agreed to establish the following committees:

- Dog Waste Committee.
- Dog Policy and Communication Committee. This group will review the Canine Code of Conduct and all written suggestions offered, and propose any changes to the Canine Code of Conduct or park policies. One of the outcomes might be more signage.

Cara moved that the Commission create a Dog Waste Committee and a Dog Policy and Communication committee. Emily Seconded. The motion passed unanimously.

Lyn agreed to lead the Dog Waste Committee. Kip and Geoff will lead the Dog Policy and Communication Committee meetings.

Later, an implementation group might emerge from the Canine Code of Conduct committee.

5. Update on Park Caretaker Position.

Bill Fraser must approve the position description that has been drafted by Lyn and Geoff. Then, the City must post it. Geoff has been fielding numerous calls about it already. There is deep interest. Kip has been hearing interest about it, too. Kip and Aaron will be on the interview committee and Cara and/or Emily will also volunteer to ensure gender balance. Emily suggested that round 1 interviews be with Geoff Beyer. Then, round 2 interviews would be scheduled with a larger committee. Then, Bill Fraser. Geoff suggested that the interview committee come up with a process, and that all 4 people on the committee should screen the resumes.

Geoff and Kim anticipate moving out of the Park House between mid-March and April. Geoff agreed to get the position announcement to Bill Fraser ASAP, and get it posted by the end of this week. We anticipate that the new hire would move into the Park House in May or June.

6. Distribution of information packet on boundary issue between Hubbard Park and Cliff Street property owners.

Several Cliff Street residents dropped off a packet of information with the Commission. These five or so residents own a property jointly, which is located adjacent to Hubbard Park. A park trail crosses a corner of their land, near an old stone wall up by the Tower. Park Commissioners will review the information packet they provided, and these residents will attend the March meeting to discuss the issues.

9:44 PM: Meeting adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,
Aaron J. Brondyke