

Drafting a Management Plan for Hubbard Park: Leashing Dogs and Other Proposals

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Parks are cherished spaces that mean many different things to different people, plants, and animals. In order to encourage a shared respect for these diverse values and preserve them for future generations, the Montpelier Parks Commission is currently finalizing a management plan for its two largest properties, Hubbard Park and North Branch River Park. This commentary responds, in particular, to recent concerns about the proposal to designate two existing trails in Hubbard Park as open to leashed dogs.

What is the Proposed Change?

The current draft of the management plan recommends requiring dogs to be leashed in the vicinity of the two shelters and on two Hubbard Park trails: (1) the Tower Loop and around the tower itself; and (2) the new Interpretive Trail. The plan also designates roads and parking areas as on-leash zones, in keeping with an existing Montpelier City Ordinance. This change would convert one mile of existing trail to on-leash, leaving an additional seven miles of Hubbard Park trails open to off-leash dogs, including the wide, gradual gravel road to Seven Fireplaces. This eight miles of trail does not include roads or the off-leash trails in the new northern section of the park.

Didn't We Already Vote on Leashing Dogs in Hubbard Park? Why Change Things Now?

The city of Montpelier did hold a special city council advisory vote on whether to require dogs to be leashed in Hubbard Park in 2017. The majority (678 people) voted no, but by an extremely thin margin (637 people voted yes). This vote was non-binding and intended to gauge public opinion rather than create a new law. Today the Canine Code of Conduct (montpelier-vt.org/215/Canine-Code-of-Conduct) drawn up by two volunteer committees in 2013 remains in place, and a form (montpelier-vt.org/FormCenter/Parks-Forms-6/Incident-Report-Form-49) on the parks website invites visitors to report incidents in the park, although relatively few negative encounters with dogs are actually reported.

In recent years, the Parks Commission has observed the deep, ongoing division over this issue. A representative community survey of 1,346 respondents in 2021 found that the leading reason people do not visit the parks relates to dogs, including fear or discomfort around dogs, anxiety about unpredictable off-leash dogs, and the presence of dog waste. Park users have emailed the Parks Commission and posted to Front Porch Forum describing everything from unsolicited canine contact and surprise encounters to children being knocked down, dog bites and attacks, trauma, and serious physical harm to both dogs and humans. This and other feedback at Parks Commission meetings and via surveys has emphasized how even the most highly trained dogs can be unpredictable, and all it takes is one incident to cause trauma.

The proposed recommendations are meant to address ongoing calls for equitable access to the parks by offering a few areas where people can expect dogs to be leashed in Hubbard Park. Reflecting the split evident in the 2017 advisory vote, this proposal has elicited strong opinions about the need to let dogs run free. Input received from emails, surveys, and public comments at Parks Commission meetings emphasizes how this park is the only public land in Montpelier where dogs are allowed off-leash and where people can run and cross-country ski with their dogs. This feedback notes how most dogs and owners who visit the park are respectful of others and how important it is to be able to exercise and socialize dogs in the park, relax with one's dog in nature, and walk safely without having to worry about being tugged around by one's dog.

How Can a Management Plan Help?

The drafting of a management plan has given both the Parks Commission and the community a chance to revisit this topic and plan for a better future. Based on the commission's institutional knowledge, research, and community input, the plan identifies objectives and recommended actions to preserve and improve Hubbard Park and North Branch River Park over the next 10 years. As a guiding and an evolving document, it makes recommendations, rather than directives, and the pursuit or achievement of these goals will ultimately depend on the dynamic needs of this community and a range of financial, logistical, and environmental factors. In 1908 Hubbard Park's first designer, the landscape architect Dana F. Dow, noted its "rugged and picturesque" feel and the importance of making the park inviting to visitors (see his full report at vermonthistory.org/documents/digital/Doc420-01_MontpelierParkCommission.pdf). Today, this balance between wild and civilized remains the park's greatest challenge and its greatest strength.

The Parks Commission invites public comment on the leash proposal and other topics addressed by the draft management plan! You can view the proposed plan at montpelier-vt.org/1317/Draft-Management-Plan-Update—2023. Please share your thoughts via email (k.randzio@gmail.com) or at the upcoming Parks Commission meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 7 from 6 to 8 p.m.

Donaldson is an anthropologist, author, Montpelier Parks Commissioner, mother, and dog owner who wrote this piece on behalf of the Parks Commission.