

THE DOG PARK PARADOX

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Manchester needs a dog park, right? According to recent news, Mayor Guinta and Alderman Betsi DeVries are hoping to convince their fellow decision makers that it's high time the canine residents of Manchester have their own space, especially since there may be an upcoming ordinance banning dogs from athletic fields and cemeteries. While there are concerns about liability, the idea seems to be gathering momentum. Most dog owners are thrilled at the prospect. After all, there's something uplifting about the vision of joyful mutts galloping at liberty and socializing with their buddies as their owners chat over lattes, and the rest of the non-dog-owning populace walks freely through city spaces without having to check the soles of their shoes or block the occasional tackle by an overzealous Lab. Peace in the Valley, and no pee in the Valley Cemetery.

On the surface, dog parks are a good idea. But to me, a dog park is a Band-Aid for a bigger problem: the growing divide between "dog people" and non-dog people. There's a difference between a "non-dog" person and an "anti-dog" person, but they are starting to mutate into a single species. A non-dog person doesn't own or want a dog, but doesn't much care if you do. An anti-dog person sees ownership as a social defect. A non-dog person doesn't "get" the bond you have with your pup, but thinks it's cute and probably calls you "the dog lady". An anti-dog person thinks you are mental, and also calls you "the dog lady", but says it the way Ted Nugent says "vegan". Dog parks aren't only the result of dog people wanting their own space; they're the result of anti-dog people *not* wanting you in *their* space. But why?

It turns out a lot of dog people they have a laissez-faire attitude toward good stewardship of their pet and their city. They turn non-dog people into anti-dog people. Stepping into an organic landmine or scraping an attack Pug off of one's lower leg will motivate a lot of folks to push for limited access for dogs, and who could blame them? It would be nice if good behavior on the part of both dog and owner was mandatory for public access, but that's just a trainer's pipedream. In the meantime, we have to be

content with well-meaning segregation as the parts of the city once open to us are deemed off limits. And while we still have access, we should think about the impression we make on the non-dog people out there, too. Are *you* doing anything that will convert them into anti-dog people? Well, knock it off, Monsieur L'Oblivious. You're ruining it for the rest of us.

If a dog park *is* for you, here are some helpful hints about getting the most out of it.

- If your dog really isn't into other dogs, don't force the issue. Remember when your dad made you join the football team when all you really wanted to do was stay home and practice piano? That sucks for dogs, too, only they can't run away from home and start an emo band and make it big just to spite you. They just get neurotic and sometimes aggressive.
- Don't bring toys, treats or anything else that might become a bone of contention. The dogs are there to play with each other.
- Pay attention to your dog. Many a scrap has happened while two owners blissfully gossip under the shade tree.
- Make sure your pup is up to date on his shots and in generally good health. Try to ally with like-minded owners so that the culture of the park is one of responsibility and that healthy, well-behaved and conscientiously attended dogs are the rule and not the exception. Because if they take dog parks away from us, where do we go next?

Here are some local dog parks to see for yourself:

Derry Dog Park, 45 Fordway Ave, Derry, NH 03038

Nashua D.O.G. locations vary; visit www.nashuadog.org/playgroup.html

Riverside Bark Dog Park, Sundeen Parkway, Raymond, NH 03077 (603)895-3163

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