



Madison Parks Division

330 E. Lakeside St
Madison, WI 53715
608-266-4711 • cityofmadison.com/parks



Date: June 9, 2023

To: Mayor Rhodes-Conway, All Alders and Board of Park Commissioners

From: Eric Knepp, Parks Superintendent

Subject: Dog Park Designation Status Update

As you may know, for decades dogs were unwelcome in Madison's parks. In 1973, an adopted ordinance essentially prohibited dogs in any public park, school grounds and City spaces. Recognizing this regulation was outdated and frustrating for park visitors. In 2015, Madison Parks established a more dog-friendly pilot program through thoughtful planning and public input. The pilot allowed leashed dogs, on a park path in 26 parks. The success of the program allowed for an approved extension and expansion of dog-friendly parks later that same year.

As Madison's population continued to grow, the number of dog owners increased as well, prompting a thorough review of the long-standing ordinances. As further evidence, the 2018 – 2023 Park and Open Space Plan stated dog walking as one of the top recreational activities to do within the City of Madison Parks.

During the summer and fall of 2019, Parks Long Range Planning Subcommittee (LRP) reviewed the dogs in parks policies and City ordinances. During that time, the LRP held a [robust public input process](#), including five citywide community workshops and an online survey – garnering more than 1,900 responses. Hearing significant support for this change as well as some concerns, mainly about unleashed dogs and owners leaving dog waste, the LRP drafted the revised ordinances. In February 2020, the Board of Park Commissioners (BPC) and the Madison Common Council revised the Madison General Ordinances (MGO) [8.19](#), [23.32](#) and [1.08](#) to allow leashed dogs in most Madison parks. Per MGO, dogs are not allowed in the following parks or greenways, or areas within the following parks or greenways:

- *Conservation parks.*
- *On or within 20 feet of any burial mounds.*
- *Olbrich Botanical Gardens.*
- *Playgrounds and areas within 20 feet of a playground surface.*
- *Splash parks and areas within 20 feet of the splash park surface.*
- *Goodman Pool and Breese Stevens Field (except for special events where dogs are specifically invited).*
- *Programmed sports fields and facilities that are enclosed or substantially enclosed by a fence, whether in use or not.*
- *Programmed, non-fenced sports fields such as soccer, ultimate fields or softball/baseball diamonds while they are in use for programmed activities.*
- *Inside of park shelters or other buildings.*
- *Groomed cross-country ski trails.*
- *In the water or on the beach at designated beach locations.*

- *Park special events, except where the sponsor has requested to allow dogs, with the Park Superintendent's approval.*
- *Parks designated as dog-free parks by the Board of Park Commissioners.*
- *Parks designated as dog-free parks, for up to 90 days, by the Parks Superintendent.*
- *Greenways designated as dog-free greenways by the City Engineer.*

In the spring of 2020, Parks staff began [implementing the new policy](#), allowing dogs in most neighborhood, mini and community parks. As part of the change, the BPC approved approximately 30 "dog free" parks. Since then, under annual review by the BPC, the community provided feedback and notably most often requested a dog free park change to dog friendly. These annual designation changes have understandably created confusion for some park users and caused additional educational and enforcement work for the Park Rangers.

In early 2023, LRP discussed these ongoing dog designation change issues and how to best maintain and select dog free parks. With the feedback and support of the Park Rangers, the LRP subcommittee is proposing leashed and licensed dogs with valid dog park permits be allowed in all general parks, with continued notable exceptions consistent with MGO.

Dog owners are expected to keep their dog leashed and under their control at all times as well as always pick up their dog's waste. This proposed change allows Park Rangers to better monitor and enforce through education and citations.

At the Board of Park Commissioners meeting on June 14, 2023, staff will provide an informational presentation regarding the Proposed Dog Park Status update. In July, the BPC will review the proposed change, to allow leashed and licensed dogs with valid dog park permits in most parks except as prohibited by MGO. The community is invited to provide feedback by [email](#) and/or attend the Board of Park Commissioners meeting in-person on [Wednesday, June 14, 2023](#) or virtually on [Wednesday, July 12, 2023](#).

Forest Hill Cemetery is under the management and control of the Board of Park Commissioners. Please note that despite the Cemetery having been previously discussed as part of the Dogs in Park Policy, it is not considered a park or greenway. As such, it will be necessary to address rules specific to dogs in the Cemetery separately through an update to the [Forest Hill Cemetery Rules and Regulations](#). Staff anticipates that the Board of Park Commissioners will consider any proposed updates at the July 12 meeting as well.