



Madison Parks Division

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October 31, 2022

To: All Alders

From: Eric Knepp, Parks Superintendent

The following memorandum was sent to the Board of Park Commissioners on Thursday, October 27, for consideration at the November 9, 2022, Board of Park Commissioners meeting.

Recommendation

Refer the dog status designation of parks to the Long Range Planning Subcommittee for further analysis of the dog-free park policy, and for a recommendation on process improvements and standards for dog status designation changes.

Background

On March 3, 2020, the City of Madison amended the Madison General Ordinances to allow for leashed dogs to be present at the majority of parks in its system ([MGO 8.195](#)).¹ As a part of this ordinance update, leashed dogs are allowed to be at parks categorized as mini, neighborhood, and community parks. Dogs are not allowed at conservation parks, at playgrounds, at beaches, in park shelters, or several other specific locations.² Unleashed dogs are only allowed at designated off-leash dog recreation areas. The Board of Park Commissioners has designated 35 parks to be dog-free.

As part of the update to the ordinance, and to ensure it had a mechanism to receive community feedback about the changed ordinance, the Board of Park Commissioners directed staff to return to the Board annually to review the status of dog-friendly and dog-free parks. In October 2021, five parks were changed from dog-free to dog-friendly, three were changed dog-friendly to dog-free, and eight requests for changes were not implemented. With these changes, three additional dog-friendly parks were changed to dog free in order to keep a numerical and geographical balance to the ratio of dog-free to dog-friendly parks.

In August of 2022, staff began the public outreach process again. The public process in 2022 included an online form for residents to submit their request and postcards were sent to residents near parks that had received a request for a change notifying them that the change would be considered at the November 9, 2022 Board of Park Commissioners meeting.

At the October 12, 2022 Board of Park Commissioners meeting, the Commission considered an informational item on the dog park status designation process. At that meeting, staff gave a verbal update on the process, describing the outreach done and that any parks with one or more requests for

¹ https://library.municode.com/wi/madison/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=COORMAWIVOICH1--10_CH8PUPR_8.195DOR&https://library.municode.com/wi/madison/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=COORMAWIVOICH1--10_CH8PUPR_8.195DOR&AR

² <https://www.cityofmadison.com/parks/dogfree>

a change would be submitted for consideration. Commissioners expressed concern that the threshold for considering a change in the dog park designation was too low, indicating that it would create an undue burden on staff to manage, a burden on the Commission’s time, and set unrealistic expectations for the public to make a change to a park policy with such a small number of interested residents.

Analysis

During the 2022 process, residents requested a change in dog status designation in 13 parks. Of the 13 parks, 10 had more requests to change from dog-free to dog-friendly than to stay dog-free. Residents requested that two parks change from dog-friendly to dog-free. The parks that residents have sent in feedback on are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Requests for change in dog status

Park Name	Current Status	Requests for Dog Friendly	Requests for Dog Free
Brentwood Park	Dog Free	3	1
Esther Beach	Dog Free	11	1
Forest Hill Cemetery	Dog Friendly	103	20
Haen Family Park	Dog Free	18	2
Hawthorne Park	Dog Friendly	0	1
Heifetz Park	Dog Friendly	1	0
Kingston-Onyx Park	Dog Free	5	0
Merrill Springs Park	Dog Free	20	4
Portland Park	Dog Friendly	0	1
Quarry Cove Park	Dog Free	13	6
Veterans Memorial Park	Dog Free	1	0
Zook Park	Dog Free	3	0
Sugar Maple Park	Dog Free	18	2

This year, the average number of status change requests per park is 10 (excluding Forest Hill Cemetery), and the requests to change from dog-free to dog-friendly outnumber the requests for dog-friendly to dog-free. The majority requests we have received since 2021 is for more dog-friendly parks. While initially instituted as a way to balance the needs of the City’s residents, it may be time to reconsider if managing multiple dog-status designations throughout the City is meeting the needs of our community.

As a testament to the success of the policy change, the number of calls regarding dogs in parks has declined since 2020. During 2020, the Rangers fielded 671 calls for service regarding dogs. Last year, in 2021, there were 384 calls for service, and this year there are 240 calls to date. If the number of calls for 2022 were to remain at the same pace, the Rangers will end the year with just over 400 calls, a reduction from 2020. This is likely an overestimate, as with the change in seasons the number of calls has been lower than in warmer months.

Conclusion

The overall implementation in the MGO 8.125 that allows leashed dogs in parks has been an overall success. For the last two years, staff have collected feedback from residents on the dog park status designation. Since its adoption, requests for more dog-friendly parks have been the majority of requests, however, the number of those requests has been small. Staff recommends that the Commission refer this item to the Long Range Planning Subcommittee to consider if the current dog-

free park policy is still relevant to the community's needs, and if so, what standards and process should be utilized to modify the designation of dog-friendly or dog-free.