



Committee on Community Resources and the Northampton City Council

Committee Members:

Chair: Councilor Gina Louise Sciarra

Vice-Chair: Councilor Dennis P. Bidwell

Councilor Alisa F. Klein

Councilor James Nash

Meeting Minutes

Date: February 25, 2019

Time: 7:00 pm

Location: Council Chambers, 212 Main St., Northampton, Massachusetts

1. **Meeting Called to Order and Roll Call.** At 5:01 p.m. Councilor Sciarra called the meeting to order. Present on roll call were Councilors Gina-Louise Sciarra, Dennis Bidwell, Alisa F. Klein and James Nash (5:15 p.m.). Also present was Mayor David Narkewicz.
2. **Announcement of Audio/Video Recording**
Councilor Sciarra announced that the meeting was being audio and video recorded for broadcast by Northampton Community Television (NCT).
3. **Public Comment**
Although people were present for the discussion of community interest in a public dog park, there was no general public comment.
4. **Minutes of October 24, 2018 and November 13, 2018 Joint Meeting of Community Resources and Legislative Matters**
Councilor Klein moved to approve the minutes of October 24, 2018 and November 13, 2018 as a group. Councilor Bidwell seconded. The motion carried 3:0 (Councilor Nash absent).
5. **Discussion of Community Interest in Public Dog Park**
Councilor Sciarra prefaced the discussion by explaining that she was approached by Councilor Klein with the report that a group in the community was having a robust discussion amongst themselves about the possibility of a community dog park and wanted to find a way to involve the city. She thought the Committee on Community Resources (CCR) would be a good venue for this discussion but didn't think it made sense to have a conversation without involving someone from the Office of Planning and Sustainability (OPS) and Parks and Recreation. She recognized Mayor Narkewicz for a brief overview.
 - A. **Brief Overview by Mayor Narkewicz**

Planning Director Wayne Feiden and Recreation Director Ann-Marie Moggio were not available, Mayor Narkewicz advised.

As a starting point, city officials have been looking at the concept of a dog park, Mayor Narkewicz confirmed. Some may recall there was an issue with the former Northampton State Hospital (NSH) lands managed by Smith Vocational. The city went through the process of renewing its lease with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and it involved having to be clear that those lands could not be used for recreational purposes because they are restricted for agricultural use. Out of that came renewed interest in the city looking into the possibility of developing a dog park.

In the Open Space Plan approved for 2018 – 2025, one of the long-term goals is to “explore future dog park and playground needs.” It was not one of highest priorities but was certainly a goal culled out of public input. Also back in 2011, the city did a survey and there was some discussion about possible reuses for the landfill. Of 234 respondents, 229 were from Northampton and 62% owned dogs. There was some interest in a dog park but it was determined at that time that in order to reach the critical mass needed to support it, it needed to be located near a resource center. Also to meet operational costs the city would need to establish a Friends group to do fundraising.

In 2015, continuing that research, staff did some costing out of what a site selection study might cost, and it was approximately \$8,000. Parks & Rec did some research and identified possible funding sources such as the Stanton Foundation and Community Preservation Act (CPA) funding.

Parks & Rec has done significant studies of other dog parks in the area and has determined with OPS that probably the ideal model would be an urban dog park with separate smaller enclosures for larger dogs. Rather than trying to purchase and acquire a new property planners thought of locating it at an existing park. A few that have been looked at include 1) Sheldon Field, which is on the list for potential renovation and has parking, 2) Veterans’ Field, which is already kind of an informal gathering space for dogs (there are a lot of wet areas there that may prove prohibitive, however) and 3) Ellerbrook Field off Route 66.

Another factor that came into play is the proposed redevelopment of a former brownfield area, the former quarry area off Glendale Road as “Waggin’ Trails” Dog Park. Sarah Schatz stepped forward and through some crowd funding and other work has purchased the former gravel pit area off Glendale Road. She has gone through the Planning Board and public planning process and gotten permits and is looking to develop a fairly unique dog park that would provide people with the kind of open space akin to areas where the city has gotten complaints about user conflicts. Because of that development, city employees have not accelerated the process of looking at a city dog park because frankly they want to see that come to fruition. The current approach to a public dog park would be to locate it in a current recreation area. The city could not convert a current conservation or agricultural area to recreational use without special legislation, he stressed. There is a built-in conflict with these uses so they would probably focus on existing recreation lands.

Planners are continuing to explore this as part of their long-range planning program although it is not as high a priority as some other goals, Mayor Narkewicz concluded. They want to explore the Waggin’ Trails effect before moving forward. Administrators also want to confirm that there is a groundswell of support for the operation, not just people looking to divert users from conservation areas. They would

probably develop it as part of the redevelopment of a recreation area as opposed to as a stand-alone park.

He is on the board of Look Park and tried to encourage Look Park management to take on the project but they did not want to pursue it. He said he would like Ms. Schatz to have the opportunity to give an update on the private park.

Councilor Bidwell asked if there is a plan to proceed with the \$8,000 site selection study.

They first want to make sure there is a constituency in terms of people that want this urban dog park, Mayor Narkewicz advised.

Councilor Nash arrived at 5:15 p.m.

Understanding the desire for it is still in question, Mayor Narkewicz continued. The city also has to keep in mind its capacity. It would be under the jurisdiction of the forestry, parks and cemetery division. Considerations for any park would be a) is it going to get used and b) how are we going to maintain it.

Councilor Klein asked the number of people in the city with dogs.

He doesn't have that number but could get it from the City Clerk, Mayor Narkewicz responded. It would be the number of dogs registered.

Ms. Schatz said she thinks about 2,500 dogs are registered in Northampton. She has done her own surveying. There are about 10 of these membership parks with trails around the country. The parcel she bought is 50 acres, 20 of which she is finalizing to become conservation land and 20 of which will become trails. The front of the property would be a fenced area, parking and a small building for rest-rooms, an office and dog wash. She has 2,500 people on her mailing list from the entire western Mass. area. Planned construction is starting in late spring to open in the fall. She has been working on the project for four or five years.

She definitely sees a need for a dog park. Most people who answered her survey were looking for a trails experience but having it fenced in for safety. To become members, dog owners would have to fill out an application and show that their dogs are licensed and rabies vaccinated. They would enter with a membership fob.

Complaints from owners of the Audubon land led her to start investigating this. The closest park to here is Ohio. She's been to about 100 dog parks.

Councilor Klein asked if she knew if there are public parks in cities where there are private parks.

She thinks all of them have a municipal park relatively close by. Most places she visited were larger than Northampton. She thinks it's great to have options, honestly. She thinks her park wouldn't work well for everyone. From a dog behavior standpoint, they can coexist.

She can see people using both in Northampton but the reason people would pay to join her park would be the peace of mind and exercise and social aspects of it. She thinks people are really interested in the social aspect, she shared.

Education about dog behavior will be integrated into her park. Visitors will watch a video on dog behavior such as what to do if a dog jumps on you.

She stressed that she would not view these as conflicting parks and would be in support of a public park. "I don't see a conflict really at all," she professed.

She'd be curious about who would be using the city park. She thinks her customer base would be people interested in using the trails. For Sheldon, she doesn't think it is going to solve the problem.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Dave Hershops of 22 Warburton Way said he went to a conference sponsored by Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition about a year ago. Part of the program was an hour-long presentation on the adverse impacts of dogs on conservation areas. He is here in the context of his membership in the Broadbrook Coalition which manages the Fitzgerald Lake Conservation Area. Fitzgerald Lake has a 'national emergency' in the form of off-leash dogs, he observed; he sees them all over the place.

The conference was chapter and verse about the problems various land managers have across the country. Someone told him about off-leash dog parks that are quite successful.

BBC's objective in having a dog park is to take some of the pressure off the city conservation areas, he acknowledged. Hopefully, Waggin' Trails will be successful in this regard. If it weren't for an area at Village Hill it would be even worse. BBC sent a letter to the Conservation Commission in October about the negative impacts of dogs and circulated some informational slides.

The Stanton Foundation provides up to \$25,000 design grants and will pay for up to 90% of construction costs up to \$225,000, Mr. Hershops presented. The foundation requires the city to provide the land and 10% of construction costs. It is based in Cambridge, MA and has provided grants for close to 40 dog parks. South Hadley and Amherst have both gotten design grants.

He talked to David Ziomek, the Assistant Town Manager and part of the dog park task force appointed in the summer of 2017. By June of 2018 the group had found a site for a dog park, done a lot of preliminary work and had a check for the design. Mr. Ziomek said he would be happy to meet with Northampton city officials. Amherst has the same problem with dogs in conservation areas such as Amethyst Conservation Area and Mill River. In both of those parks people could bring their dogs and allow them to run off leash. It proved so frustrating that they decided they had to do something.

Everybody on the task force but Ziomek was a dog owner. He would strongly suggest if the city is going to create a task force that it be composed of dog officers. He has had a conversation with Northampton's animal control officer and she has been very cooperative.

In Amherst, the size of the municipal dog park is two acres, and the budget is \$245,000 to \$285,000. Town officials have a commitment to pay 10% of the construction costs with CPA money.

Mr. Herships urged city councilors to talk to dog owners. "Without the full and active support of the dog owners, the project is not feasible," he proclaimed.

Westfield opened a dog park in 2015 with dog owners themselves doing all the leg work, it was noted.

Councilor Klein asked if it is just dog waste that creates issues. . .

It is off-leash dogs confronting hikers and the dogs of other dog owners, Herships explained. Perceived lack of safety and dog waste are both issues, he confirmed. Also commercial dog walkers with eight dogs, etc.

He mentioned an area that changed its regulations to require that all dogs be on leash. He confirmed there are roughly 2,500 licensed dogs in Northampton.

City officials statewide have been struggling to accommodate dog owners.

Councilor Bidwell asked if Friends' groups are responsible for operations in other communities.

Communities were made to sign an agreement that if Friends didn't step up to this responsibility, the city would, Mr. Herships said. Commercial dog walkers are basically running a business on city-owned land by being allowed to walk around.

Councilor Nash asked how dog waste affects conservation areas.

Dogs disturb ground-nesting birds in the spring, Mr. Herships said. Mass. Audubon doesn't allow dogs on any of its properties. Where there are streams, dogs will go down and have a field day. Mill River is polluted by dog waste from Village Hill. He offered to send his slide show to committee members.

BBC member Bob Zimmerman commented that "there's certainly good reason to have both public and private dog parks available to people." BBC's motivation to participate in this is that they really feel it's inappropriate to have dogs running freely in the conservation area. Disturbing wildlife is one of the main things that dogs running free in the woods do. The frustration is not having themselves or anyone else in the city to enforce the leash law in the conservation area. The conservation area is big and they have no authority as BBC members to enforce the rules that exist, he explained. That's why they're very anxious to have both private and public dog parks in the city.

The tradition is to have a small fenced dog park for small dogs (.4 acres) and 1.4 acres for larger dogs, Mr. Hership related. He thinks the site in Amherst will be the old Belchertown landfill. Two acres is not a lot of room. People want to get out and run with their dogs and give them a good workout. It's unfortunate that Smith Voke land is not available because of the restriction on the use of agricultural land. He said he would send the slides to Councilor Klein.

Mayor Narkewicz thanked Mr. Zimmerman and Mr. Herships. Conservation land is managed by and is the property of the Conservation Commission and the animal control officer (ACO) has no jurisdiction on those lands, he advised. The ACO has no enforcement authority because leash laws are for public ways. The same problem occurred when people were trying to deputize her to solve the problem on Smith Voke lands. The regulation now for conservation land is that visitors are supposed to have dogs

on a leash and to pick up their droppings but the challenge is in enforcement. He doesn't know how much they have explored an education campaign. A key thing with the Stanton Foundation as was mentioned is that applicants have to have a commitment from a community group. Will they come and will they manage it are key questions, he indicated.

Other than these flare-ups, there isn't a groundswell of people saying, 'we want to start a group; we want to start a dog park,' he asserted. That is why it wasn't identified as a major priority in the context of the Open Space Plan.

Councilor Klein wondered if there would be more interest if people weren't continuing to access the Smith area. She also wondered if a survey done in 2018 would show increased interest (over 2011).

With Smith Farm Fields, they ended up going with the same rules as they have on conservation lands. Visitors can bring dogs to Smith Field but they have to stay on the trails and can't let them go into the fields, Mayor Narkewicz said.

We know that people don't adhere to that, Councilor Klein commented.

Mayor Narkewicz pointed out that people are probably also walking their dogs in the meadows and other areas. "It is a challenge," he acknowledged. In terms of the city's planning and planning priorities, it has not come to the fore. It is a community-led process in some respects, he observed.

Councilor Sciarra asked if he would recommend that interested individuals come together and form a Friends group, and Mayor Narkewicz confirmed that would be part of the impetus. . . Judith Fine was involved in trying to organize a Friends group up at Smith Farms Fields, he volunteered.

Councilor Bidwell noted that it is like a 'chicken and egg' thing. There may be general interest among dog owners but they may need a more specific plan to elicit formation of a group, he suggested.

SHELDON FIELD

Sheldon Field is one area Ms. Moggio and Mr. Feiden looked at as a possible site, Mayor Narkewicz reiterated.

"It seems like a fine use of the property that the city owns near the highway," Councilor Nash said.

The way people relate to their dogs has changed dramatically over the years and people are relating to their dogs in new ways, he commented.

Mayor Narkewicz said he thinks there are informal dog parks such as Agnes, Veterans' Field and Sheldon Field. The city has put waste collection receptacles in and is looking at adding additional waste collection.

Ms. Schatz said the next step is bringing in an anaerobic digester that converts dog waste into energy. She actually doesn't think there would be enough waste at her dog park. It would need to be a city-wide program. At her park they can DNA-test droppings to see whose it is.

Lydia Shields identified herself and her companion as local dog owners who just came to hear the plans and see what is going on. They're very interested in having a park in a supervised area, she confirmed.

As far as community interest in a dog park, her companion - Dave Collins – said they walk their dog three times a day. They run into many other people walking their dogs and he can't tell them how many times people say, 'I wish we had a dog park - a place we could let them play.'

They don't have a fenced yard and can't let their dog off leash. To have a fenced area and let them be in with other dogs is something a lot of people are interested in, he asserted.

Mayor Narkewicz said he would chat with the planning director to see if they could do some kind of survey again. They are actively looking at existing recreation areas, he confirmed.

Mayor Narkewicz left for another meeting.

Mr. Hershops stressed that they have the full cooperation of the ACO and he didn't mean any criticism of her. BBC members worked with Bridgette Glackin and met with the landfill reuse committee, a subset of the DPW formed when the landfill deal collapsed, several times last fall. They were very helpful. Some communities have created posse squads of young volunteers who go after the offenders, he added.

Robert Jonas, who said his wife is the minister of the Episcopal Church in Amherst, told members he was jogging six or seven years ago and was attacked by an off-leash dog on Village Hill. It has been an ongoing problem.

Councilor Klein asked fellow members whether they thought the CCR had any role it could play in an ongoing way or whether they would be satisfied leaving it with the Mayor to work with planning to put out a survey.

Councilor Bidwell said he would be curious to see where the Mayor, Ms. Moggio and Mr. Feiden are headed as far as their analysis of which of the three recreational areas might work. He continues to think that until there is an identified site it will be hard to generate a Friends group. He suggested making it a follow-up agenda item.

Mrs. Krutzler said could she create an agenda item to follow up in several months.

It would be good if some arm of the City Council could take responsibility to see that a survey is done, Mr. Zimmerman suggested. A lot of good ideas have been advanced but they remain sort of isolated and separate. It would be very helpful to have some component of the City Council following what's going on.

Councilor Sciarra stressed that they can't compel a city department to do something. She would commit to staying on this idea and checking in. Councilor Nash said he thinks that is their way of checking in, by putting it on the agenda.

Councilor Sciarra proposed having people promote the idea of organizing a Friends group to interested dog owners. She thanked the public for coming out.

6. **New Business**

The next meeting on March 18th at 7 p.m. will be on the subject of short-term rentals, Councilor Sciarra reminded.

7. **Adjourn.** At 6:11 p.m., Councilor Klein moved to adjourn the meeting; Councilor Bidwell seconded. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 4 Yes, 0 No.

Prepared By:

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