

COUNTYWIDE DOG EXERCISE AREAS
WORK GROUP REPORT

(May 4, 1999)

Preface

The Standards for Arlington County Dog Exercise Areas (Attachment A) is the result of the work of a citizen/staff work group initiated by the County Manager, to develop a comprehensive approach for providing Dog Exercise Areas (DEAs) throughout Arlington County within the context of the Open Space Master Plan. The DEA Standards address the size, use, carrying capacity, sponsorship, rules, siting process, environmental impacts, containment, ground cover, funding, maintenance/management sharing responsibilities, complaints and evaluation of DEAs.

Background

Since the late 1980's, Arlington County has recognized the needs and desires of a significant portion of the community that supports the provision of off-leash DEAs within the context of and priorities of the Arlington County Open Space Master Plan. Arlington County provides many facilities and opportunities for children and adults to participate in outdoor recreational activities. Similarly, DEAs provide safe opportunities for dogs and their human companions to socialize and exercise together. In March 1998, the County Manager, with the concurrence of the County Board, initiated a joint citizen/staff Countywide Dog Exercise Areas Work Group to address the provision of off-leash DEAs in Arlington County. The Work Group conducted a community wide planning process to gather information pertinent to the development of DEA Standards appropriate for Arlington County. The Work Group also evaluated and made recommendations to bring existing DEAs into compliance with the newly developed Standards. The Work Group held public meetings on a monthly basis from June 1998 to March 1999, and conducted two well attended public forums on October 27, 1998, and February 18, 1999.

Work Group research discovered that the Treasurer's Office, which is responsible for administering dog licenses, estimated that there were 8,000 licensed dogs in Arlington County in 1998. According to statistics provided by the Treasurer's Office, licensed dogs are evenly distributed throughout the County at the rate of about one dog per acre. In addition, Animal Control estimates that there may be up to 10,000 additional unlicensed dogs residing in the County. It is believed that many of these unlicensed dogs reside in the more densely populated areas of the County where homes, such as high-rise or townhouse communities, leave little or no open space for dogs to exercise.

In a 1998 Work Group-sponsored survey (Attachment B), a majority of the 1,982 owners of licensed dogs responding said they already use DEAs or would use them if they were safe, convenient, and properly managed and maintained. The recent dramatic rise in user demand for DEAs, coupled with limited open space resources, prompted a comprehensive approach to the provision of DEAs in Arlington County. According to the

DEA Standards, the total 1998 DEA carrying capacity is approximately 360 dogs at any one time or approximately 162,000 square feet (3.7 acres) of open space dedicated to DEAs. As a goal, the DEA Standards recommend a total carrying capacity for 500 dogs or approximately 225,000 square feet (5.2 acres) of open space by 2010. Therefore, the Work Group strongly recommends that DEAs be accorded a priority equal to all other open space uses, and when plans are finalized for new open space areas, equal consideration be given to the inclusion of DEAs.

There are currently seven DEAs in Arlington County. They are located at Benjamin Banneker Park, Fort Ethan Allen Park, Glencarlyn Park, Lucky Run Park, Shirlington Park, Towers Park and Utah Park. Utah Park is the only completely fenced DEA in Arlington. Utah Park recently completed its initial year of service and the information gathered in the first annual evaluation was utilized in the development of the DEA Standards. (Attachment C)

Discussion

The Standards for Arlington County Dog Exercise Areas is a comprehensive approach to providing the appropriate number, size and location of DEAs in Arlington County, and to ensure the appropriate maintenance and management of these heavily used facilities. Some DEA Standards, such as size, use and carrying capacity, correlate with the standards for other recreational facilities in Arlington County parks. Much like soccer fields or playgrounds, DEAs should also have specified areas of play, hours of operation, and numbers of users who may use the area at any one time. DEA Standards are generally to be the norm, although they may be adjusted based on neighborhood concerns and recommendations. More importantly, the Standards should open the possibility of explicit and intentional experiments in the design and operation of DEAs.

The DEA siting process is similar to the County siting process in that it is an inclusive community wide planning process, which solicits input from users, neighbors, sponsors, County staff, relevant civic associations, and appropriate County advisory commissions and committees. This process is the same process that is used to site other park amenities like ball fields and playgrounds.

However, DEAs do differ in some respects from other traditional park activities. Based on a survey of the Internet, observation at the non-sponsored County DEAs, and the evaluation of the sponsored Utah Park DEA, it is clear that the success of a DEA is based on the ability of users to self-monitor it, from cleanliness to funding to complaints. The Work Group strongly recommends that each DEA have an identifiable County sanctioned sponsor, who would organize and monitor the DEA, and promote the DEA Standards. Accordingly, the Standards specify the requirements and duties of sponsorship. The Work Group believes that the sponsor will add credibility with neighborhood associations when establishing new DEAs and managing existing DEAs. Sponsors can also raise the funding necessary to provide added amenities not provided by the County. Sponsors will sign an agreement with the County, accepting responsibility to represent dog handlers.

The agreement includes monitoring DEA use, handling neighborhood complaints, and coordinating maintenance and management. The sponsorship agreement has been instrumental in the success of the Utah Park DEA. The agreement may be in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or an Adopt-A-DEA Program.

The rules governing user conduct in an Arlington County DEA are also largely a product of the Utah Park DEA Pilot Program. The Work Group believes that the prescribed rules are fair and will provide a reasonable code of conduct for DEA users. In the event of rules infractions, steps have been established to correct the infractions through information, education, and appropriate remedial action up to and including banning habitual offenders from County DEAs.

The DEA Standards address environmental concerns around the siting and use of DEAs. The Work Group feels that it is imperative that DEAs conform to normal environmental assessment procedures followed by the County, including but not limited to, the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Ordinance and the application of Best Management Practices (BMPs) to mitigate negative impacts. DEAs must also be located away from user conflicts and must not create potential problems for wildlife and habitats. There are unresolved environmental issues including the question of what part Arlington's large dog population plays in the raised fecal coliform counts in County streams. While lacking definitive information, most critics and supporters can agree that if DEAs are properly established and maintained, they may be a means of reducing these water borne pollutants. Successful DEAs can be a way to concentrate and filter dog waste before it contaminates the watershed, and a means to educate and inform dog owners about pollution and health issues.

The Standards view containment as a means of maintaining the benefits of DEAs. Containment allows dogs to exercise off-leash and run freely in relative safety. Containment allows the siting of DEAs near other park activities without being disruptive to or impacted by those other uses, and establishes a visible boundary for the DEA, which allows enforcement of off-leash rules and guidelines. The Standards envision fencing as the primary form of containment, but do allow that fencing is not required where existing features provide the same level of containment as fencing.

The preferred ground cover for DEAs is grass. However, the Work Group realizes that maintaining grass in a DEA might be resource prohibitive, and/or unsuccessful even with reasonable resources. This is not different from other highly active open space uses. Attempts to maintain a grass ground cover during the Utah Park Pilot program were unsuccessful. Similarly, all of the other heavily used DEAs in Arlington have been worn down to mud/dirt due to use, weather and drainage issues. Depending on the availability of sufficient resources, staff intends to continue to explore ways to maintain grass in DEAs while testing cost effective, alternative ground covers.

According to the DEA Standards, the County has the primary responsibility for providing the resources necessary for the establishment, maintenance, and management of DEAs.

The standards specify that the County will provide at a minimum, fencing and gates, trash receptacles, benches or picnic tables, signage, water spigots, grading, drainage, dog waste bag dispensers, storage facilities and bulletin boards or kiosks. The DEA Standards also prescribe that sponsors and users provide additional amenities deemed appropriate by the County, such as dog exercise equipment.

Likewise, the maintenance and management of DEAs is a partnership between the County, the sponsors, and the users. The DEA sponsor/County agreement clearly spells out the responsibilities of the sponsors and County staff. The sponsors and users chief responsibilities include keeping the DEA free of animal feces, alerting the County to maintenance needs, educating DEA users, monitoring DEA Standards, and addressing citizen complaints. The chief County responsibilities include supporting the sponsors, providing and maintaining the basic amenities, removing trash and dog waste and addressing unresolved complaints.

According to the DEA Standards, DEAs should be evaluated one year after they are first sited and established. After that, DEAs should be evaluated on every three-year anniversary. An evaluation should be held in the interim if users, sponsors, the neighborhood association or the County determine that conditions warrant an interim review. The evaluation should include environmental impacts, utilization, community and fiscal impacts, and a satisfaction survey of users and neighbors. This evaluation process is similar to the evaluation process used at Utah Park DEA.

Evaluation of Existing DEAs

One of the tasks of the Work Group was the evaluation of the seven existing areas (Attachment D). The Work Group concluded that with sufficient resources, Benjamin Banneker, Fort Ethan Allen, Glencarlyn, Shirlington, Towers, and Utah Park, could be renovated to meet the new DEA Standards. Lucky Run is actually located within Allie S. Freed Natural Resource Open Space Area and there is no possibility of bringing it into compliance with the new DEA Standards. The Work Group recommends closing the Lucky Run DEA once a replacement area has been opened. There was considerable community debate regarding the appropriateness of the Glencarlyn DEA, which is contained by geographic/geologic features, including Four Mile Run and Long Branch. The consensus of the Work Group is to support the continued use of the Glencarlyn DEA, contingent on positive annual evaluations and environmental assessments.

The Work Group recommends that the County upgrade the six existing DEAs and develop an alternative site to replace Lucky Run. The Work Group supports the continued use of the Lucky Run DEA without extensive improvements, until an appropriate replacement site is operational. Staff is currently investigating potential replacement sites for this DEA. Staff is also anticipating citizen requests for additional DEA sites throughout the County to meet current and future needs.

Fiscal Impacts

Additional County resources are required to bring existing DEAs into compliance with the new DEA Standards, to develop additional new DEAs, and to manage and maintain DEAs. There are currently no operating funds dedicated specifically to DEAs. Staff estimates that the additional funds required to bring the existing six DEAs into compliance, to establish one new DEA, and to manage and maintain seven DEAs is \$176,700 in FY 1999 dollars. The total includes a one-time cost of \$104,700 for improvements and amenities, and annual costs of \$22,000 for 1.0 FTE (Full Time Equivalent or 2080 work hours), and \$50,000 (\$0.32/sf) required for the ongoing maintenance of seven DEAs. The FTE would be dedicated to the maintenance and management of these heavily used park facilities and to working with sponsors to ensure compliance with DEA Standards. Ongoing maintenance includes repair and replacement of ground covers, equipment rentals, material costs, repair and replacement of amenities, utility bills, and administrative costs associated with managing DEAs. The Work Group recommends several funding scenarios as follows:

1. Fund DEA improvements in the FY 2001 Park Bond or Pay-As-You-Go Capital, and add appropriate funds to the County operating budget for annual maintenance and management.
2. Fund the total amount of the DEA improvements and operating funds, approximately \$176,700, immediately from available funds, or as part of the FY 2000 budget cycle.
3. Fund the DEA improvements in increments over the next three budget cycles, or approximately \$35,000 per fiscal year. Two to 3 DEAs per year would be brought into compliance. Provide appropriate funds in County operating budget for the annual maintenance and management.
4. Increase/improve the efficiency of collection of dog license fees, and use the dog license revenues for improvements to DEAs. Provide appropriate funds in County operating budget for annual maintenance and management.
5. Direct sponsors to seek funding for DEA improvements through alternative sources such as the Small Parks Program, Neighborhood Conservation Program, donations, and fundraisers. Provide appropriate funds in County operating budget for annual maintenance and management.

The cost for each additional DEA sited on County-owned open space will include 0.1 FTE or \$2,200, plus \$0.32/sf for maintenance, plus the start up costs for development and amenities.

Conclusion: There is a significant portion of the community that supports the provision of off-leash DEAs. Based on the 1998 survey of Arlington's dog owners, the majority are either using DEAs or would use DEAs if they were more convenient to where they live, were made safer to use, and were better managed and maintained. Most dog owners who support the provision of DEAs say that DEAs should receive the same resource considerations as other County park facilities, and that they should be managed and maintained at the same or higher standards. Both users and non-users agree that properly

managed and maintained DEAs can be a means to mitigate some of the negative social and environmental impacts of Arlington's large dog population.

The DEA Standards assume that the current amount of open space dedicated to DEAs is the minimum acceptable level, and that the County should continue to increase the amount of open space for DEAs over the next decade. The Work Group recommends that the Standards for Arlington County Dog Exercise Areas become an appendix to the Open Space Master Plan, when it is next revised.

Recommendations

1. Direct staff to develop implementation strategies to bring existing Dog Exercise Areas (DEAs) into compliance with the Standards for Arlington County Dog Exercise Areas developed by the Countywide Dog Exercise Areas Work Group.
2. Direct staff to work with the community and sponsors to locate and develop alternative DEA sites to replace the existing site that is slated for closure.
3. Appropriate \$104,700 in additional resources required to bring the six existing DEAs into compliance with DEA Standards and develop one replacement site.
4. Appropriate the additional resources required for the annual maintenance and management of seven DEAs, which totals \$72,000 and includes \$50,000 (\$0.32/sf) for maintenance and \$22,000 for 1.0 FTE.
5. Direct staff to initiate the selection of alternative and/or new DEA sites, as prescribed in the DEA Standards.
6. Include the DEA Standards as an appendix, when the Open Space Master Plan is next revised.

Attachments