

Recreation Commission Meeting: Off Leash Dogs Public Meeting
12/4/2023
Zoom

DATE: April 25, 2024
TIME: 2:25 PM

Commission Attendees: Paul Cowing (Chair), Dave Lind (Vice Chair), Cortney Eldridge (Secretary), Anthony Ferrante, Anthony Ferrante, Mike Capitani, Theresa O'Connor, Steve Warner

Town Attendees: Brandon Fitts, Suzanne Trasavage

Belmont Media Center: Jeffrey Hansell

Public: nearly 60 members of the public

Call to order 5:30pm

Review and Approve November 20th Meeting Minutes

Approved: Mik Capitani, Cortney Eldridge, Theresa O'Connor, Anthony Ferrante, David Lind, Paul Cowing

Dog Program Conversation and Possible Vote

- Paul teed up the plan for the evening: discussion tonight, and presentation – many of the Recreation Commission have not seen the presentation yet
- A possible vote from the Recreation Commission, and then the Board of Health; then it will go to the Select Board, and then 6-month pilot program

Brandon/Suzanne: presentation of the program: Paws in the Parks

History

- Formerly known as the Off-Leash Dog Program, and prior to that, the Goosebusters program
- Discussed current bylaws (60-200) – not proposing any bylaw updates, but are reviewing for context
- 60-200 C – Board of Health can permit other groups (e.g., Recreation Department) dog allowance
- Goosbusters off-leash program was implemented in roughly the 1990s to address geese on the fields; program was revised in 2019 and we are reevaluating now (2023, to pilot H1 2024)
- Not a lot of changes in the way the program is currently written, but clarifying rules, regulations, communication, and signage
- In 2023, created a working group of key stakeholders to discuss and work towards a fair solution for both dog-owners and non-dog-owners
- Working group included Belmont residents, dog owners, sports groups, and Town employees/departments

Overview of the Program

- Renaming to “Paws in the Parks” to clarify it’s not only the off-leash program, but on-leash as well
- Solution being proposed is similar to existing/previous program
- Rec Department will implement better communication for both dog- and non-dog-owners

Registration and details

- Updated registration to be all-digital
- Once you have your license, must sign a code of conduct – similar to youth sports organizations, and other recreation programming
- To take your dog on-leash, you must register for a free on-leash dog tag
- To take your dog off-leash, you must register for an off-leash dog tag
- Similar to existing policy: no more than 3 dogs per residence, fees are as follows:
 - \$0 for resident on-leash tag; \$5 for non-resident on-leash tag
 - \$50 for resident off-leash tag; \$100 for non-resident off-leash tag
 - Maximum of 3 dogs per residence
- You must attend a 15-ish minute orientation via Zoom

Locations

- Grove St
- PQ
- Town Field
- Winn Brook
 - No dogs on campus while school is in session
 - During pilot, Winn Brook location will be closely reviewed with Rec Commission, Schools, Animal Control, residents, and other stakeholders to determine how to move forward

Program Rules

- You must be registered (for on-leash and/or off-leash) to bring your dog to the park
- If you are not enrolled (in on-leash and/or off-leash) program, you may not have your dog in the park
- Hours will change seasonally based on field usage; calendar will be distributed to permit holders
 - Jan-Mar does not have many permitted groups, so Paws in the Park hours will be greater than in the spring/fall
- If park/field is permitted to a group of any kind, dogs are not allowed off-leash; on-leash is permitted (with permit)
- Dogs are not allowed within 50 feet of a playground (and dogs are not allowed in/on playgrounds)

Communication and Outreach

- Town staff is working to improve outreach and communication
- Increased signage will be available at all Paws in the Park locations
- Alerts, emails, and other communications will be extended to those who have opted in to Rec Commission emails to notify of changes, weather closures, etc.
- In addition to dog-owner-orientation, more/better communication, information, and consultation will be provided to/with permitted sports groups and coaches

- Belmont Rec Dept is currently working on establishing a better communication system to report issues with parks and playgrounds, including dog issues, facilities issues (e.g., equipment in need of repair), etc. More to come!

Program comparison

Previous off-leash program	Paws in the Park Program
4 Parks (Grove, Winn Brook, PQ, Town Field)	4 parks (Grove, Winn Brook, PQ, Town Field)
Limit to 200 off-leash permits	No limit on permits
Orientation required (but not enforced)	Orientation required in order to obtain tags
Dog hours suspended during times when field is permitted (to groups)	Off leash program suspended during times when field is permitted (to groups)
Not well managed/poor (no) oversight	Better managed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calendars produced and distributed • Formalized on-leash procedures (e.g., during times when fields are permitted) • Clarification around rules/times at Winn Brook • Better coordination with youth sports groups and permitted groups • Code of conduct agreement for dog owners

Discussion & Q&A

Q Quentin Fennessy: will Belmont provide signage describing policies for each location?

A Yes

Q Ira Kanor: do "fields" exclude tennis, pickleball and basketball courts?

A The current (and future policy) is that dogs are NOT allowed on courts.

Commission discussion

Q Anthony (Commission): How will this be enforced?

A Tags are the enforcement – if you registered for off-leash vs on-leash – it's visibly recognizable by Suzanne, other dog owners, etc. We will need to coordinate with the licensing program. The program will also need to rely heavily on community buy-in and community support. The hope is that people will take pride in and respect the program to help each other out. People did not know about the previous program – what it was, what it consisted of, and even that it existed.

Q Cortney (Commission): Comment for when we do schedules/calendaring: suggest the Winn Brook times include before-school times, e.g., dawn till 7:30am; note "after school to dusk" will likely not work in Winn Brook, probably, due to after school program.

Q Cortney (Commission): What is needed from us/the commission tonight in terms of a vote, or not

A Yes, a discussion, public meeting, and then vote before moving to the Board of Health

Q Dave (Commission): Is for the proposed program and have it as a pilot to learn, adapt, and adjust from there? How many dogs?

A Roughly 2000 dogs in town and have not sold 200 off-leash permits since Brandon has been here (in 2023, sold 151 tags), 2022 we sold 191

Q Mike (Commission): Current language is off-leash permits are suspended when fields are saturated – suggest updating to “when wet” and discuss communication plans please

A We will send an email to those who are registered, post on social media, and – in the future – will try to get A-frames or other signage up when parks are closed

Q Theresa (Commission): Most dog owners understand this is a privilege that has been extended to us; are trying to approach this from a community and education approach – not a compliance approach. A Optimistic that dog owners will help others comply with the program. In the past, the communication and signage has been lacking. This will be improved, and we will receive input from the community.

Open Q&A

Q Suzy Feinberg: Does "permitted use" only apply to permitted sports?

A No: permits include any group who has a permit for using the field (e.g., scouts, schools, etc.)

Q Lisa Pargoli: Why not just fence in a small section of the park like every other town? Dogs running around loose has ruined our beautiful fields, causes health issues as they are urinating and defecating all over the park where our children play. PQ has had bad dog bites already. They should use Rock Meadow as when I moved here. PQ was absolutely beautiful now it's disgusting! These are for people and children not for the leisure benefit of the lazy dog owners. I have several personal stories of why it's a bad idea.

A The group addressed what it would look like for a dog park in the town, or cornering off sections of fields exclusively for dogs. We determined this would not work with the needs of the town and current dog owners.

We found there was a lot of inter-generational community-building happening naturally with users

Q Katie: Is orientation yearly? Have the program always had NR too?

A Yes – after you get your license, each year, you will take the orientation

Q Quentin Fennessy: Does this cover pets other than dogs?

A No, only dogs.

Q Phyllis: Did the working group consider enclosing a small area in each of the parks for dogs to use as an entirely off-leash run around area?

A Yes, they considered it, and it is not part of this pilot

Q Marina Entin: Will there be a time limit on when the games end? I.e. in June people play frisbee until late night which is unfair to the dog owners.

A HS fields under construction has impacted field use; we will be able to spread out field use more to different areas

Dave: clarifying – if a permit ends at 7pm but the users stick around until 8pm, they are no longer a permitted user (after 7pm) – they have the same field-use rights as anybody else, including dogs

Questions submitted via chat; answered live (or read into the record)

Q Joanne Adduci: How many dog owners from Winn Brook are members of the working group?

A At least one (Paul, who is also the chair and a member of the working group); there will be an upcoming Winn Brook working group that will be set up; this is a unique space because schools use a recreation facility during the day/for school

Q JA: It has been vague to figure out what the hours are – interested in hearing about those specific hours.

Q Lisa Pargoli: Lives near PQ and when she moved here (nearly 4 decades ago), PQ was much nicer. Now, she avoids PQ. She's an animal lover but doesn't think animals should urinate and defecate on the fields. The dogs should go to Rock Meadow.

[secretary note: this individual repeated her comment from previously in the meeting]

A Hopefully we can approach some of these issues – one issue in town at all the fields is overuse, by all users. We are hoping that as the HS fields are open, we can rest the fields and bring them back to some of their previous condition. We do not have purview over Rock Meadow – this is owned by the Conservation Commission; we can work with them in the future.

Q Jennipher Burgess: Expressed appreciation and is in favor of addressing this as an educational approach; do not think that any animals (i.e., dogs) should be on the school property during school times. Recreation going late at PQ was an issue but this was addressed.

A few concerns: why are we not accessing other places like Payson Park, Underwood, and Claypit? One of the struggles as a dog-owner is knowing when things are scheduled. I would LOVE if there could be ambassadors for each park. Started the PQ dog page where we used to have doggy park dates, etc. and despite what other people might think about dog owners – most are responsible. And is not in favor of owning a dog being public record.

Will there be scholarships for those who cannot afford this?

A Yes

We can only control the areas under our purview (e.g., not Claypit Pond, Lone Tree Hill, Rock Meadow, etc.); we will take this all into consideration as we roll out the program

Q Patrick Whittemore: On Bartlett Ave and is an abutter to the park. A child was hurt by a dog and if the enforcement agent is not down here issuing tickets and enforcement, then it will not work

Q Jim Fong: people from other communities hear about off-leash places, and it can snowball as they spread the word. communications need to extend to non-Belmont people

A Agree: signage in the parks, communicate via Constant Contact, etc.

Q Anonymous Attendee: Where does the money that this program generates go? Can it go towards more infrastructure to help dog owners, like more trash cans or poop bag dispensers?

A Field maintenance fund

Q pfj: How will dog owners know if an event is officially permitted? There are times when it seems like there unofficial practices or games...

A If it is not officially permitted, then it is not permitted. Belmontrec.com has the up to date schedule.

Q The O'Connor's: As a nearby dog owner with an off leash license, how can I learn more about and become involved with the Winn Brook pilot program?

A Email the Rec Dept – recreation@belmont-ma.gov

Q Anonymous Attendee: I suggest that we return to the original Goose Busters Identification by purchasing custom bright color bandanas for dogs that participate, one color for the on leash and one for the off leash. That would allow everyone to identify the participating/registered dogs for each of the programs, on leash and off leash

A Identification of sorts is in the works – working with Suzanne on this

Q Donna Ruvolo: Noting here that parents/visitors of out of town teams are unlikely have an on-leash/off leash permit, and have their dogs at games. It might be an idea to include a rule for these outliers to any on-site signage.

A Yes, this is in the works (signage) – we will have non-resident fees too

Q Justin Chapman: you'd probably get way more people to buy off leash dog permits if we had the ability to just make the payment online. I haven't purchased one yet because of the hassle of having to print and mail or drop off in person

A yes! We will do this all digitally this year. You can pick up or we can mail out dog tags after your orientation.

Q Anonymous Attendee: Thank you for your work, how many dog owners were part of the working group? Also have you think of a space for a dog park since you are taking a big chunk of the dogs time in the parks?

A Ten, I think. Open to a dog park but we do not have the space at the moment.

Q Anonymous Attendee: Will there be any signage or outreach put towards non-program parks like Payson or Chenery?

A We cannot put signage in areas we don't control, but we can work with the DPW on this

Q Anonymous Attendee: Will there be better enforcement of soccer cleaning the fields at the end of games?

A This is something we look at when permitted groups use the fields – if there is excess trash

Q Jason Fairchild: We would happily pay a higher fee for the program to include bag dispensers and additional trash cans specifically for dog waste. It is harder (I believe) for someone to neglect picking up their dogs waste when there is a dispenser/trash can specifically for that purpose.

A Thank you – we are always looking for how fees can support our programming

Q Alex Machado: Could you create an FAQ document to cover what wasn't answered?

Q Yes

Rec Commission discussion

Discussion on Application and Overview

Clarification on timeline for registration fee (it is annual, even though the pilot is 6 months)

MOTION

Move to approve the Paws in the Park program and fees as amended by the Recreation Commission, pending approval by other departments including the Board of Health and Select Board.

Vote: Unanimously in favor

Cortney Eldridge, David Lind, Anthony Ferrante, Mike Capitani, Theresa O'Connor, Steve Warner, Paul Cowing

Next steps: Board of Health will accept or reject the exception (e.g., Paws in the Park Program); go before the Select Board, who will make the final decision

Other news/business/discussion

Brandon will try to determine who our Select Board Liaison is now that Adam is no longer on the Board

Brandon will be the interim council on aging director – Dana is leaving/found a new job

Next Meeting

Timing

- January 8th: 5:30pm on Zoom
- February 12th: 5:30pm on Zoom

Meeting Adjourned 7:28pm