

City of Cambridge Off-Leash Working Group Recommendations June 2015

Off Leash Use in Cambridge

Over the past several years the City of Cambridge has been continually working with residents to explore strategies for dogs to be off leash in city parks and open spaces. There have generally been three approaches taken by the City to meet the demand for off leash space: dedicated off leash areas, shared use off leash areas, and shared use hours.

Dedicated off leash spaces are specific areas where the primary use is to allow dog owners to have their dogs off leash. These areas are generally fenced in to avoid potential conflicts with other users or passerby, and facilitate the containment of the dog. There are dedicated off leash areas at Pacific Street Park in Cambridgeport and at Danehy Park in North Cambridge. The off leash area in Pacific Street Park will be expanded and improved in summer 2015. **Shared use off leash areas** are places where dogs are allowed off leash that are not necessarily separated from other uses and activities. Fresh Pond Reservation (West Cambridge) and Fort Washington Park (Cambridgeport) are two examples of shared use areas in Cambridge. **Shared use hours** are certain times that dogs are allowed off leash. Shared use hours have been established during morning hours at Gold Star Mothers Park in East Cambridge and Corcoran Field (Raymond Street Park) in Neighborhood Nine.

Background

In 2005, the City began a process to look at open space opportunities for dogs and their owners while also considering the wider community's open space needs; field conditions and maintenance; school and athletic use; historically sensitive areas; potential rules and regulations; and examples from other similar cities. Both shared use options as well as opportunities for dedicated off leash spaces in Cambridge were explored. Open spaces were considered that:

- Were relatively underutilized at the time
- Met certain size requirements
- Not a part of school grounds
- Not heavily used and scheduled athletic facilities
- Contributed to achieving geographic distribution of off leash opportunities throughout the City

In spring 2008, the City conducted a series of meetings to establish shared use hours at certain parks throughout the City. The meetings focused on getting information and feedback from nearby residents, park users and dog owners on the general idea, and also the appropriate times, seasons, locations, and other considerations to take into account for such a program. Similar shared use hours programs have been undertaken in other cities where open space is relatively limited as a reasonable way to accommodate dog owners who desire regular periods of time for legal off leash activity. The initial areas considered, by virtue of their layout, would not necessarily require additional fencing or significant physical changes to park grounds. There was also an effort to distribute the potential spaces geographically throughout the City. There were community meetings regarding shared use hours at Gold Star Mothers (Gore Street) Park in East Cambridge, Corcoran Field (Raymond Street Park) in Neighborhood 9, Clement Morgan (Columbia Street) Park in Area 4, Rafferty Park in the Cambridge Highlands, and Riverside Press Park in the Riverside neighborhood.

As a result of that effort, a shared use off leash hours pilot program began at Corcoran Field (Raymond Street Park) and Gold Star Mothers (Gore Street) Park in 2009. Dogs are allowed off leash in the open

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grassy areas at those locations between 6 AM and 9 AM only. The rationale for morning shared use hours was:

- Morning hours minimized interference with other park users
- Offering a designated time for dogs to be off leash would encourage responsible dog owners to have their dogs off leash at the appropriate time, rather than at other times
- Enforcement could be focused on the times when dogs were not allowed off leash
- Providing this option could potentially help facilitate observance of other rules regarding dogs in parks

In addition to the shared use hours pilot program, new dedicated off leash areas were constructed at Pacific Street Park in the Cambridgeport neighborhood in 2008 and on a portion of Danehy Park in North Cambridge in 2009.

Since that time there have also been several community meetings specifically to explore establishing off leash use in other parks around the City including at: Longfellow Park in West Cambridge, Joan Lorentz Park in Mid Cambridge and on a portion of Fresh Pond Reservation along Huron Avenue.

Off Leash Working Group

In 2013, an Off Leash Working Group of city residents was appointed by the City Manager to work with city staff and the community to formulate recommendations on further improvements that can be made for dogs in parks that are beneficial to all park users. Discussions with staff included topics such as off leash usage trends in City parks, potential modifications or expansion of the current off leash shared use program, exploration of new off leash opportunities, effective signage, amenities in off leash areas, enforcement, communication, and outreach strategies. There were also a series of public meetings throughout the City in winter 2014 on the Working Group's recommendations in order to get input and feedback from the community.

Some key findings:

- Through geographic analysis of existing open space facilities that allow off leash use; addresses associated with licensed dogs in the City; and observed patterns of off leash use; Mid-Cambridge and Area IV neighborhoods were identified as a priority for additional off leash opportunities.
- Throughout the community process, there was general support for dedicated off leash areas from both dog owners and non-dog owners. However, because there is a limited amount of open space in the City, with increasing demands on use, tradeoffs will need to be considered at any potential new off leash location.
- While walking a dog on-leash is allowed in most public parks during regular park hours it is recognized that there is a desire for additional opportunities for dogs to be off leash in the evening hours. Evening off leash opportunities are more challenging to achieve due to other heavily scheduled uses during certain times of year, including athletics, recreational uses, and school activities; further, the winter months result in shorter park hours, which are typically dawn to dusk.

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- The opportunity to interact with other community members was identified as a significant factor in making certain parks attractive to dog owners to have their dogs off leash, regardless of whether the location was actually designated for off leash use.

The recommendations of the Off-Leash Working Group are intended to create changes that will, over time, provide a broad network of open spaces that offer opportunities for dogs to be off leash so that all neighborhoods have access to off leash opportunities and no one location is more intensely impacted.

The recommendations are meant to work within the parameters of current resources available to the city in terms of enforcement, maintenance, and space, and include both short and long-term approaches to off leash issues in the City. It is anticipated that once adopted, the City will work to implement the recommendations through collaboration and regular meetings among the Animal Commission, Community Development Department, Department of Public Works, Recreation Division of Human Services Department and the City Manager's office. Throughout the implementation process, staff may also continue to collaborate and get feedback from the Working Group, and at public meetings when necessary.

The success of these recommendations will also rely heavily on good communication, education, and responsible park users, both those that own dogs and those that do not. These recommendations should be revisited periodically as dog ownership trends, practices, and technology evolve.

Recommendations

- Continue allowing shared use off leash hours at **Gold Star Mothers Park** and **Corcoran Field (Raymond Street Park)** between the hours of 6am and 9am.
- Provide additional locations for shared use off leash hours. All new and existing shared use sites should be periodically reviewed for impacts on physical conditions, and feedback from users and the general public.
 - **Joan Lorentz Park** (Mid Cambridge neighborhood) - AM shared use (8am to 10am)
 - **Hoyt Field** (Riverside neighborhood) - AM shared use (6am to 9am)
 - **Greene Rose Heritage Park** (Area IV neighborhood) - AM shared use (6am to 9am)
- Monitor and evaluate impacts on open spaces where shared off leash use is allowed regarding field conditions and maintenance, dog waste, animal related complaints, and city resources through regular communication between the Department of Public Works, Animal Commission, Recreation Division, and Community Development Department.
- Work with the Historical Commission to explore the possibility of shared use hours at Longfellow Park with particular attention to the sensitive nature of field conditions and historical significance of the site.
- There should be appropriate information regarding shared use hours at each shared use location so that all park users are clear about the times they are available. Specifically, through new signage, and more proactive outreach.

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- As new parks are created and renovated, the City should look to include off leash opportunities (including shared use and or dedicated spaces) where appropriate. In the next few years open space is anticipated to be created or renovated at:
 - Sacramento Field in the Agassiz neighborhood
 - Open space on Rogers Street in East Cambridge
 - Parcel on Binney Street in East Cambridge and Kendall Square
 - Parcel on First Street and Land Boulevard in East Cambridge and Kendall Square
- Consider seasonal opportunities for shared off leash use. For example, athletic facilities that have limited or no use during winter months and where maintenance issues might be more easily addressed, such as tennis courts.
- The Working Group supports the city Animal Commission's policies regarding enforcement, including proposed ordinance changes to the "Animal Control Regulations" that are currently before the City Council and include an increase in fines and certain fees comparable with those in surrounding communities, new kennel requirements, and authority for park rangers at Fresh Pond Reservation to enforce Animal Control Regulations.
- Support efforts to promote and facilitate opportunities for community building at locations, and during times, which off leash use is encouraged. Some examples might include events, giveaways, morning coffee, as well as social activities and events aimed at promoting good dog behavior and owner responsibilities.
- Continue to explore new outreach and education strategies regarding off leash policies responsibilities and expectations, especially for new residents, students, and renters in the city. Consider ways to provide information and get feedback through the dog license application process.
- Improve signage regarding off leash areas, with an emphasis on visual and graphic cues. Explore branding strategies to create easily recognizable, friendly, and consistent signage and information.
- Use social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter and others, to proactively get relevant real time information out to dog owners such as field conditions, maintenance schedules, and other issues facing the off leash community as they arise.
- Continue to work with the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) regarding off leash policy and opportunities at DCR open spaces within Cambridge.
- Continue to review best practices and new ideas regarding off leash issues from other locations that may be applicable for Cambridge.