

More pleas for local dog park

Despite silence from Oscar D'Angelo, South Loop pet owners hope to secure his namesake greenspace as a haven for local canines

By LYDIALYLE GIBSON

Staff Writer

With the help of a few bush-beating neighbors, South Loop dog park advocates have, since last month, coaxed more than 360 petition signatures out of local residents who support a canine area at nearby D'Angelo Park. And even if pet boosters haven't won the blessing—yet—of Oscar D'Angelo himself (despite repeated and faithful calls, they said) they have won the blessing of petless neighbors who've come to dread dog-related noise and nuisance outside their back doors and in Roosevelt Park.

But at a Thursday Dog PAC meeting, convened in the mezzanine party room at 899 S. Plymouth Ct. on one of the coldest nights the season has offered so far, only a couple petition signatories turned out. And they were outnumbered by meeting organizers who, in lieu of much news on the dog park front, offered a plan of action and a declaration of their resolve.

Dog PAC member Gail Merritt said she'd originally hoped to secure D'Angelo's approval before moving forward, but as it's not been forthcoming so far—and since it's the city, and not D'Angelo or even the Park District, that owns and manages the park—pet boosters have turned their attention to

City Hall. While not exactly optimistic that officials there will turn over the greenspace to four-legged South Loopers, Merritt said she's hoping to convince them.

"In spite of some people's sentiments, that no way the city will go for this, we want to pursue it until it's a dead end," Merritt said. "We've demonstrated neighborhood support, and I'm sure we could get the neighborhood organizations and the local businesses to lend their support. So if the city listens to people ..."

"Our backup is LaSalle Park, that big undeveloped property on the other side of Printers' Row," Merritt said. "We'll try to track down the owner and talk them into letting us use it until it's developed."

Bounded by Roosevelt, Polk, Clark and Wells, the 28-acre site is slated for mixed-use development that includes residential, commercial, and retail units, plus a three-acre park.

Merritt added that city officials had, once upon a time, mentioned a swath of land at Financial and Polk. The property is narrow, Merritt said, and a little smaller than dog park advocates have envisioned, but it may have to do in a pinch.

"But the issue never went anywhere," Merritt said, noting that no formal offer was made. "And it's not city land. It's part of somebody's development."

At last Thursday's meeting, pet activists also reviewed a few ideas aimed at encouraging fellow dog owners to pick up after their canines and quelling what Dog PAC member Jeffrey Veltman called "a spell of E-mails" posted on his South Loop dog-dedicated Web site (www.southloopdogs.com/DOGPAC) from people complaining about abandoned pet droppings. Among the suggestions kicked around at last Thursday's gathering were visible signs admonishing neighbors to clean up after their dogs and Park District trash cans outfitted with free plastic bags. Meeting-goers also considered taking an afternoon to mark local dog droppings with small, bright flags bearing acronyms like UFO, for Unidentified Fecal Object, or POOP, for Pooch Object On the Premises. Afterward, said Veltman, group members would clean the area.

"So people can actually see how much is left behind," said Veltman's wife, Blythe. "The problem is, you don't ever see anyone actually do it. Either they look around beforehand, or it's 4 a.m. and it's dark outside and they don't have a flashlight or they're not awake or something. With the bags and signs, maybe we'll get a few more people."

"It's really a dilemma how to deal with it," Merritt said. "If you don't catch them in the act, how do you deal with it?"