

Search is on for new South Loop dog park

New neighborhood group widens efforts to let man's best friends run free

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Few people dispute that noble Great Danes, rugged Rhodesian Ridgebacks and even fluffy toy poodles need space to romp and play. However, the confines of condominiums and stringent leash laws in Chicago's South Loop have left dog owners feeling like exercising their pets is anything but a walk in the park. With the formation of a new advocacy group, many residents hope a renewed interest in this issue will finally get them a dog park.

Community concern about dog parks runs deep in the South Loop. Last October, Noelle Gaffney formed a dog park committee in conjunction with the Dearborn Park Advisory Council, meeting with some 30 South Loop residents to discuss creating an area dog park. That meeting sparked community interest, which, in the last two to three months, has developed into a full-fledged dog park council serving a wider area than the subcommittee of the Dearborn Park Advisory Council could. The new group's goal, though, is the same as the old one: finding a solution to the challenges of living with dogs in the city.

At its first meeting last Thursday in the Dearborn Station atrium, the council—hoping to quell canine concerns within a quadrangle stretching from Congress to 19th Street and from Central Station to the Chicago River—attempted to do just that. Printer's Row resident Gail Merritt, who facilitated the meeting, solicited suggestions and support from dog owners and non-dog owners alike. The group discussed several possible solutions, although Merritt emphasized things are very

much in the planning stages, and the council very much in need of volunteers.

"We're not here to sell you on anything," Merritt said. "We're here because we want to talk about what it takes to get a dog park in Chicago."

The Chicago Park District lists six dog-friendly areas throughout the city. But some South Loop dog owners say local fenced areas are inadequate and overcrowded—and they'd like a dog haven closer to home.

Gaffney described Coliseum Park's dog run at 14th Street and Wabash Avenue as narrower than the row of four wooden chairs at Thursday's meeting, with sharp zigs and zags that make throwing a ball nearly impossible. El trains clanging on the tracks overhead make dogs skittish, she added.

So far, most community members have focused on the possibility of converting part of existing Chicago Park District land—such as the area adjacent to the tennis courts in Roosevelt Park or even a section of Grant Park—for dog use.

But under Park District guidelines, establishing a dog park is more complex than simply fencing off a half-acre rectangle and putting up a sign permitting owners to unleash their dogs. In organizing a local dog park, the Park District, in a flier distributed at last week's meeting, says residents need to shoulder the burden of locating a site, circulating a petition, holding public meetings, submitting a written proposal, and helping maintain the park. Consequently, it's nearly impossible to create a dog park without strong community support.

"I don't want to scare anybody, but we should go in with our eyes open," Merritt said of



Chicago Journal file photo

A council of pet-owning South Loopers hope to convince their dogless neighbors to set aside some local greenspace for neighborhood canine runs.

the strict Park District guidelines.

But, as Merritt explained, using Park District land may not be the only, or even the best, option. One member of the Dogs Advisory Working Group which formed Chicago's first dog park, Wiggly Field, told Merritt that if DAWG members had it to do over again, they'd look for vacant, undeveloped land and maintain it privately. Finding adequate space in downtown Chicago presents its own difficulties, however, as developers continue to snap up vacant lots.

In the end, both dog owners and their dogless neighbors seemed supportive of a canine park nearby, saying a designated dog area would help decrease conflict between the two groups.

"We just need a place to separate dogs from people who don't want the dogs," said resident Jeffrey Veltman.

But it's not quite that simple, say many non-dog owners.

"It's a never-ending battle," said Valerie Antimuro, who fears a nearby park would attract animals from outside the area, increasing traffic and noise. "They think we're cruel for telling them to put their dog on a leash. Well, I think they're cruel for keeping them locked up in a condo."

With this type of conflict in mind, Merritt encouraged dog owners to be responsible by picking up after their pets, being sensitive to other residents, and holding each other accountable.

"How do we as dog owners coach other dog owners to be responsible?" she asked. "Until we get our own area, we have to show some respect."

The next meeting of the dog park advocacy group is Sept. 20, though there's no word yet on where the meeting will be hosted. After the September meeting, members plan to get together every other month, on the third Thursday of the month.

Cityside

Tempers flaring, and smoking, at South Loop School

With South Loop Local School Council members openly calling last year for the removal of Interim Principal Karen Wilson was bound to cause some friction. Well, with Wilson still very much behind the principal's desk at the school and with reform-minded LSC members now ending a somewhat disappointing year that saw little reform, there's not only friction, there's smoke.

During the group's July 12 meeting, Wilson and LSC member Larry Young were openly and visibly annoyed with one another. Young, who has twice been elected to the council as a community representative, is one of the reformers who've tried to remake both the South Loop School's image and its reputation. In the last year, those efforts have ranged from trying to have the school renamed to having the building opened up for community activities to having the board of education OK a search for a new, and permanent, principal. So far, the school's still named South Loop and there are no plans in the works to make a change; the building remains available only to those community groups able or willing to pay \$125 per hour to rent it out after-hours; and the board, which is involved in a lawsuit with former principal Shirley Woodard, has shown no interest in further complicating the administration of South Loop.

Wilson and Young, who skirmished early in the meeting over building access, really went at it over \$30,000 in balance transfers the LSC had approved at their June meeting. In an effort to make sure the school didn't lose access to the federal funds, council members OK'd a measure designating the money for the purchase of 30 computers. However, at the time of the vote, there was no detailed accounting of what, exactly, would be purchased—just that Wilson would go out and buy what she could for the computer lab.

Two weeks ago, Young said he and his fellow council members had yet to see any sort of accounting of what the money'd been used to buy. Wilson suggested the wish-list spelled out what she had been looking to buy.

"I don't think that's thorough enough," Young said repeatedly.

Wilson eventually agreed to provide a more detailed list of computer purchases by the council's next meeting.

Finally, the 411 on local tai chi guy

We give up. In the week since we ran last Thursday's news feature about tai chi devotee and teacher Bob Therriault, reader after reader's been calling Chicago Journal headquarters, clamoring for the address and phone number of Therriault's tai chi loft of health and equanimity, and bizarre decorating. Well, for those of you still out there who think tai chi may be the cure to what ails you but are too shy to call, here it is. Therriault's holed up in the top story of 2010 S. Wabash Ave. His phone number's 312-225-4342. Live long and prosper, Grasshopper.

—compiled by Lydialyle Gibson and Brett McNeil