

Pet boosters begin piecing dog park wish list

Dog PAC members enlist help of city officials in identifying ideal locations

By LYDIALYLE GIBSON
Staff Writer

Plowing ahead in hopes of securing a dog park for as-yet-leashed canines across the South Loop, members of a pet booster group met with city officials Monday to discuss whether and where public land might be devoted to dogs. That confab, which Dog PAC spokesman Gail Merritt called "pretty positive," followed a decidedly more heated public meeting last week.

Armed with a map of potential dog park locations and a comprehensive set of admonishments for responsible ownership, a handful of pet advocates offered a handful of their South Loop neighbors some ideas for finding canine-only space in the neighborhood, and easing the tension between dog-owners and residents with urine-stained flower beds. Tina Phillips read aloud a list of "rules of the road" she said could be posted throughout the neighborhood, which urged dog owners to be respectful and quiet, and to pick up after their pets.

"We just have to educate dog

owners," she said. "These are some rules of the road so we can keep the peace or make some harmony."

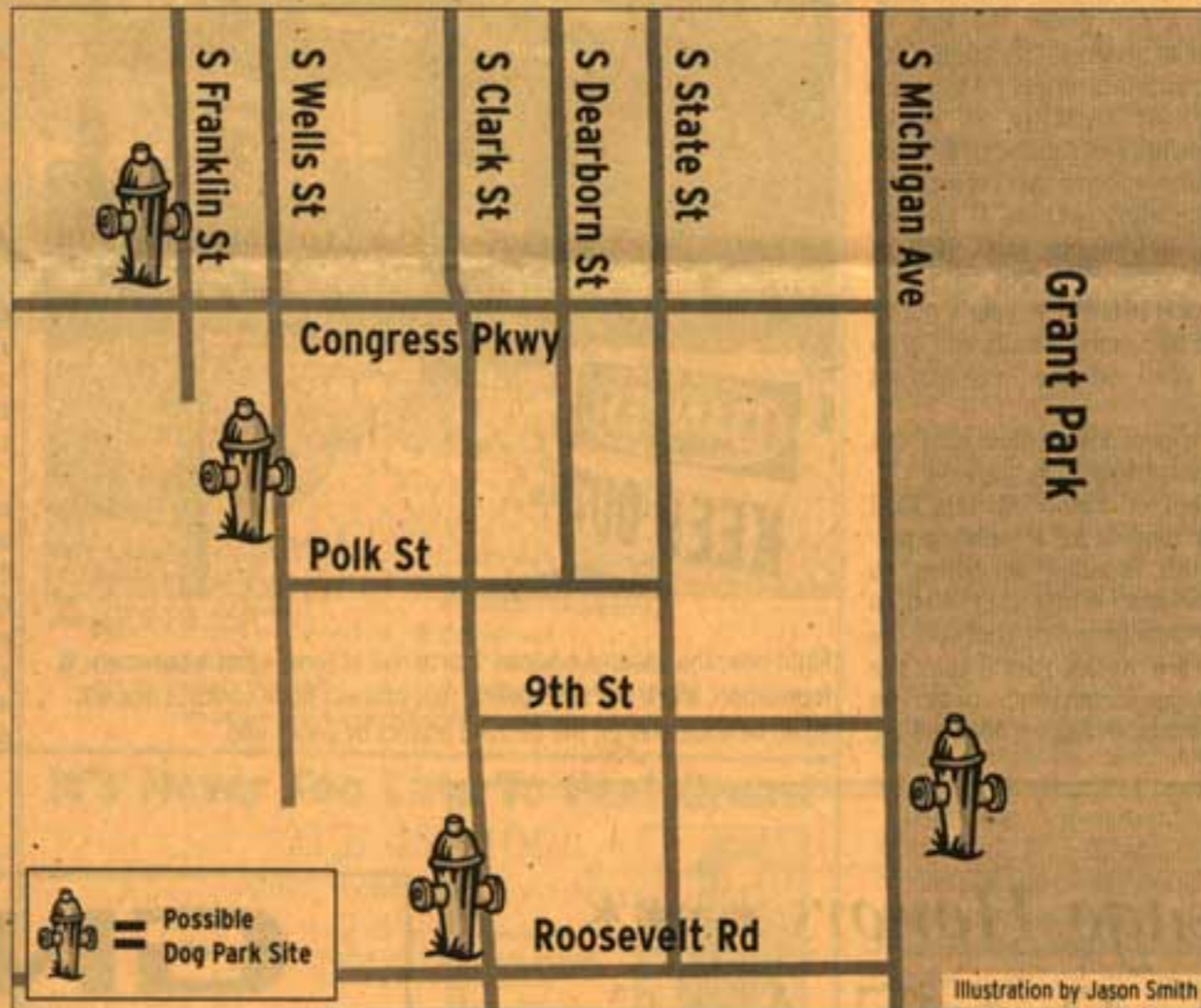
She was answered by a salvo of complaints about incorrigible, even mean, dog owners who cover pet droppings in snow—or simply leave them—and bring noisy dogs out late at night and early in the morning. Some recalled being cursed by people they'd confronted with these transgressions.

"What you're talking about now really boils down to responsibility," said a 21-year resident who identified himself only as Roy. "We're talking about irresponsible people or people who don't think. No matter what you do, you still get people who don't care."

The owner of two dogs himself, Roy said he patrols his block of Dearborn twice a week and regularly picks up four to six pounds of abandoned dog droppings.

Still, Phillips insisted, most dog owners are trainable.

"You're always going to get nasty people no matter what," she said. "But you can educate the rest of the people. Dog owners have started talking to dog



owners about this."

Meanwhile, Merritt pointed out a few locations Dog PAC members have been eyeing for a dog park. Those included not only the controversial land adjacent to Roosevelt Park under Clark Street, but also the recently adopted—and fenced—Gallery 37 space in Grant Park between 9th and 11th. Merritt said dog boosters had also identified a parcel north of River City and D'Angelo Park, at Franklin and Polk, as possibilities. Some dog owners already exercise their dogs in a few undeveloped areas west of

Clark Street, and one resident suggested the group pursue open space from developers.

"I think we need to get in real early and do everything we can to encourage them to give us land," said Mary Gerace, who works in real estate. "Who are these people? What are their phone numbers? Let's get in there early."

Although amenable to most any other South Loop dog park location, some meeting-goers resolutely opposed creating one in Roosevelt Park. Valerie Antimuro and Joe Tucker, whose homes face the park, cited noise,

traffic, security, and cleanup among the drawbacks to the strip of land under Clark Street, which remains a fenced-off haven for the homeless.

"It's not safe to open up under Clark Street," Antimuro said. "There are so many undesirable. And the barking under there will echo. Dog owners go back to their quiet homes... we're stuck with that noise 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

But in a meeting Monday morning, city officials seemed to prefer Clark Street to Grant Park or nearly anywhere else, accord-

ing to Merritt. Laura Khoury, in charge of dog-friendly areas for the Park District, and Kristen Groce, South Loop project manager for the South Loop, both "cringed" at the mention of Gallery 37's Grant Park space and brightened with talk of Roosevelt Park, Merritt said. Dogs and their owners often drive away the kind of "unsavory characters" that might congregate under Clark Street, Merritt said, and dog owners wouldn't be taking any land from what's already public space. Merritt also wants DPD officials to keep Dog PAC members in mind when negotiating with developers for public land.

"They recognize that there's a lot of dogs in the South Loop and we're interested in maintaining its dog-friendly reputation," Merritt said.

Still, if pet advocates hope to set up shop under Clark Street—and Merritt said they haven't yet set their hearts on it—they'll have to first cajole their neighbors into going along with the plan. Park District rules demand a lot of community support for such ventures. Still, Merritt said she thinks there may be less opposition than meets the eye at dog park meetings. In any case, she's keeping her options open.

"I'm reluctant to characterize Valerie [Antimuro] and her friends as the community at large," Merritt said. "Certainly people who live right on Roosevelt Park have concerns about noise and traffic. We haven't yet polled people in the neighborhood to find out how widespread that is."



1468 South Michigan Avenue • 2nd Floor