

Paw parks draw area enthusiasts

Greater Cincinnati responds to demand

**By Cindy Schroeder
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From Mason to Boone County, Greater Cincinnati residents are begging for dog parks.

Whether they're elaborate or just fenced-in plots of dirt, "paw parks," - contained areas where dogs can run off-leash and socialize with other pets - are increasingly seen as necessities in communities across the United States.

"It's an idea whose time has come with the urbanization of America," said Ken Hund, Boone County's director of parks and recreation. "A year ago, there were 400 dog parks in the USA. The National Recreation and Park Association estimates there will be over 900 by the end of this year."



Julie Collier, of Bellevue, tosses a ball to her mixed breed dog, Maple, in the "paw park" in Highland Hills Park, Fort Thomas.

(Patrick Reddy/The Cincinnati Enquirer)

After 18 months of planning, Anderson Township plans to open a 4-acre paw park in Kellogg Park next month. West Chester Township will re-open its newly-seeded Wiggly Field in the Voice of America Park on May 28. This Tuesday, supporters of a Kenton County paw park expect Kenton Fiscal Court to OK leasing two little-used acres in Pioneer Park in Covington.

Cincinnati also is considering an expansion of its popular dog park in Mt. Airy Forest, and officials plan to build a paw park next year in the Otto Armleder Park under construction across from Lunken Airport.

In response to residents' requests, Fort Thomas opened a dog park in Highland Hills Park on May 5. The park has been so popular that Fort Thomas officials plan to add 10 more parking spaces within the next two weeks, said Don Brindle, director of the Fort Thomas recreation department. Supporters of a Boone County dog park will start meeting next month to discuss fund raising and planning for a four-acre dog park in England-Idlewild Park in Burlington.

In the late 1990s, towns in California and Florida were the first to capitalize on the "paw park" trend. Communities in those states developed state-of-the-art dog parks - complete with fire hydrants and doggie drinking fountains - on beaches and within public parks. By the 21st century, paw parks - featuring everything from benches to walking trails to disposable gloves to scoop up dog waste - began appearing in cities throughout the Midwest.

"I'm just surprised it didn't happen earlier," Hund said. "It seems like such an obvious thing to do. So many people live in apartments and condominiums and don't have yards. And, of course, everyone has leash laws."

Tom Biedenharn, the Villa Hills man who has spent much of the past year rallying support for a Kenton County paw park, agreed.

"Sarasota County has four dog parks and one doggie beach," Biedenharn said. "Portland (Ore.) has four dog parks within the city limits. People who move here from other parts of the country can't believe how few dog parks we have."

Biedenharn is already planning activities at the dog park for everyone from singles to disabled pet owners. Once a week, he'd like to bring adoptable dogs in from the Kenton County Animal Shelter and match them with potential owners.

Judy Branam, equine manager at Petsmart in Florence, figures she's heard from hundreds of people who plan to patronize the Kenton Paw Park.

"Everybody's excited about having someplace where they can take their dogs to run and play and intermingle," she said. "So many of our clients live in apartments and condominiums. They don't really have a place where they can take their dog to run, except the Cincinnati dog park."

Since its opening two weeks ago, the Fort Thomas dog park has been packed on evenings and weekends, pet owners say. Besides allowing their dogs to play, park users say they have more time to socialize with other pet owners because they're not being pulled in opposite directions by dogs on leashes.

"We know people by their dog's name," said Debbie Mollette, as her English Springer Spaniel, Sassy, checked out a new visitor to the park last week. "I'll say, 'Oh, you're Tramp's mom.'"

Like many park users, the 34-year-old Bellevue woman said she has a small yard that's not fenced. The dog park is the only place where her dog can run free and interact with other animals.

In a separate fenced-in area bordering the area where large dogs played, Mocha, an energetic Yorkshire Terrier, bounded up and down the length of the fence.

"Mocha's always hyper," said Dianna Orme, 22, who sat on a nearby bench with her fiance, Adam Powers, 27, both of Newport. "This is a place where he can work off all that energy."