

Dearborn Park Advisory Council, residents explore dog park initiative

By Marie Balice Ward

A committee of the Dearborn Park Advisory Council held a meeting at Dearborn Station on July 19 to initiate plans for a dog park, and more than 30 local residents, including dog-owners and other interested parties, discussed problems and possible solutions.

The South Loop area, according to statistics, has more dogs per capita than any other community in Cook County.

Dog Park Committee members include Gail Merritt, Jeff Veltman, Blythe Veltman, Noelle Gaffney, and Tina Phillips.

Committee members explained that the project is in the planning stages, and no specific area has yet been identified for a park that would be used by dog owners. Once a plan is formulated, the political leaders of the community will become involved.

Specific guidelines by the Chicago Park District for the creation of a dog park will need to be adhered to unless the land is deeded or donated, Merritt said.

The park district guidelines specify that the space must be at least 1/2-acre in size, paved, fenced in, and have ample refuse cans. More information about "Dog-Friendly Areas" is available at the Chicago Park District web site <www.chicagoparkdistrict.com>.

Gaffney explained that the process of selecting a site is quite involved and takes about a year. Steps include analyzing the designated area's current use, building community support, and developing the plan into a proposal to the Chicago Park District with the assurance that the community accepts the responsibilities associated with a dog park.

Committee members and residents alike expressed numerous reasons for a dog park, and various locations were presented as possible sites.

Among the concerns voiced were health hazards due to the attraction of rats to discarded refuse; dogs drinking from water fountains; damage to the trees, flowers, and lawns within

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and outside parks; and potential danger posed by unleashed dogs.

With the goal of reaching an amicable agreement among dog owners and residents who do not own dogs, the Dearborn Park Advisory Council Dog Park Committee presented a document that identified various courses of action. These included an outreach program for assertively communicating standards and regulations regarding walking dogs; designated dog use hours for existing parks; Chicago Park District dog-friendly areas that would use a portion of an existing or planned park); a Chicago Park District dog-friendly beach area; deeded or donated land; and corporate sponsors.

Matt Wos, president of the Dearborn Park Advisory Council, explained that at least from 1982 there have been problems with irresponsible dog owners. With the ever-increasing development in this area and the influx of more families with young children, however, this issue takes greater prominence. He added that he was impressed with the "good neighborly discussion" at the

meeting.

Volunteers are needed for the committee, Merritt said. To volunteer or to offer opinions or suggestions about whether a dog park is a solution, what alternate action might be taken, what areas should be considered for a dog park, or other related issues, log on to www.southloopdogs.com. There also is a petition on this web site.

Comments also may be made at the Dearborn Park Advisory Council board meetings. The board meets every second Monday of the month, and attendance by residents is welcome.

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