

UNLEASHED

Soon, if animal lovers can raise enough cash, several dog parks could give man's best friend a place to run and play.

Sunday, June 29, 2008

By Andrew Vanacore

By about 4 p.m. most days, the regulars roam Cabrini Park: Dante, Rusty, Stella and the rest.

They are Dobermans, Labradors, poodles and mixed breeds -- unleashed and enjoying their small patch of grass at the corner of Burgundy and Barracks streets in the French Quarter. Their owners sat recently at the center of the fray in lawn chairs, sharing a cooler full of Popsicles.

It only looks like a dog park, however.

"We don't dare call it a dog park," said Diana Drummond as she watched her poodles, Pete and Ga-Tae. "This is everybody's park."

Drummond's caution is understandable. City laws require dogs to be leashed. Despite a well-established culture of unofficial off-leash hangouts -- from Cabrini to the Mississippi River levee to the riverfront in Mandeville and Markey Park in Bywater -- the four-legged have no sanctioned park.

But a group of dog lovers aim to open a dog park like no other in Southeast Louisiana. The group, NOLA City Bark, has raised more than \$175,000 toward the project, which supporters say could be a model for running dog parks around the region.

City Park is one of a slew of locations planning to incorporate the idea in coming months. Jefferson Parish has recently opened a dog run and park at the Bonnabel boat launch; Kenner is slated to build one in Laketown; and the Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is planning a park for its 11-acre campus in Algiers.

City Bark's plans are perhaps the most ambitious. They call for a \$500,000, 4.6-acre gated oasis in City Park, with separate sides for small and large dogs, dog showers and a wading pool.

"What we don't want to do is slap up a fence on a piece of land and call it a dog park," City Bark Vice President Mary Anne Cardinale said. "We want it to be a community."

Despite some skepticism about finishing such a large project, support across the city's unofficial parks is almost unanimous. As dog owner Elena Whitecloud put it: "It would be nice to have something that's legal."



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The push for dog parks elsewhere began decades ago, pet experts say. The idea is to give dogs, by nature pack animals, a chance to exercise and socialize with other dogs. Happily tired dogs bite and bark less, the thinking goes.

West Coast cities lead the trend. Portland, Ore., has 31 dog parks, and San Francisco has 27, according to the Trust for Public Land, a land conservation group.

"Community agencies and officials are realizing that dog parks not only improve the quality of life for dogs but for their owners and the community in general," said Nancy Peterson, a responsible pet ownership specialist at the Humane Society in Washington, D.C. "Dogs just don't have enough opportunity to be off-leash and exercise in a safe environment."

Most major American cities have at least one dog park, "whether it's a sanctioned park or just an old field people have started using," said Claudia Kawczynska, editor-in-chief of Bark magazine.

In the New Orleans area, dog owners have mostly had to settle for the latter, gathering wherever they can find an out-of-the-way patch of green. Mandeville allows dogs off-leash from 5 to 8 a.m. every day along its lakefront, but it has no dog park.

The French Quarter's Cabrini Park is one of the most organized of the informal operations. Dog owners contributed \$900 for a gate, installed bag dispensers for picking up waste and set up a blog with park-related news.

"The first thing I do when I wake up is go to the dog park. The last thing I do before I go to bed is go to the dog park," said Kurt Goodman, as his German shepherd and border collie sniffed out companions at Cabrini.

Goodman likes the City Park proposal but questions having only one city dog park. Many of the dog owners at Cabrini live in the neighborhood and use bicycles to get around.

"You don't need a car if you live in the French Quarter," Drummond said. "But you do need to walk your dog."

The unofficial parks, which enjoying large followings, seem unlikely to disappear.

But boosters for the official park say they hope City Bark will be only the beginning.

"The great thing about this project is it's going to serve as a model for what can be done around the city," said Ana Zorrilla, chief executive officer at the Louisiana Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which has worked with City Bark on the plans.

"The unofficial dog parks in town have really struggled because they haven't been set up with clear guidelines about what's expected of the owners," she said, which can cause friction with others looking to use park spaces and isn't particularly good for dogs either.

Dog owners who let their pets off the leash at the Mississippi River levee have lobbied the city, so far unsuccessfully, to convert the area into a sanctioned park, in part because of those concerns.

There is nothing to separate the dogs from the bicyclists on the multi-use path or the train tracks that run parallel to it. Cyclists have been bitten, and at least one dog has been killed by a train.

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That doesn't keep dozens of dogs from the levee park on a cool Friday evening. James Lancaster, who regularly brings his two German shepherds, maintains an e-mail group of more than 200 dog owners.

But owners like Enard Lannon of Metairie worry about the liability. "If my dog runs out at one of these bikes and causes a wreck, it's going to cost the bike plus injuries," he said.

Even though Mandeville allows dogs off-leash along the lakefront each morning, dog owners there say they would like more options.

"Our dogs are well-behaved, and when they see other dogs off-leash it's great -- it's just perfect for them," said Aparna Falgoust, who walks her three Dalmatians along the lake in the mornings along with Tray Buerger and his poodles.

Would they haul their dogs over to City Park? "We'd make it our destination, for sure," she said.

The proposed dog park faces one major obstacle: cost. City Bark has a location near Popp's Fountain, but needs \$325,000 to hit its fundraising goal.

City Park Chief Executive Officer Robert Becker said he welcomes the dog park plan and has given the group \$25,000. But with more than 100 projects going on in the park, Becker said, financing usually must come from public-private partnerships.

Land preparation to make sure the area, which is below sea level, drains properly is expected to run \$180,000. High construction costs in the area since Hurricane Katrina mean the price tag will be about 35 percent higher than at parks in other cities, City Bark President Jackie Shreves said.

City Bark, a nonprofit group run entirely by volunteers, pared the design down to \$500,000 from \$1 million. Fundraising began in January. The group raised \$70,000 by the end of the first month but has brought in only about \$100,000 since. The group planned to break ground this spring but now plans to start work this summer.

Shreves said the money and the wait will be worth it, though. "We could put up a fence and call it a dog park and let it go," she said. "But it would be a dirty patch of grass in a few years."

City Bark instead plans to build a park with all the amenities to make it a regional destination, members say.

The 4.6-acre space will include a wading pool for hot days, a quarter-mile paved walk, drinking fountains, shaded pavilions and restrooms for owners.

Park members will pay a \$25 annual fee for upkeep and receive a swipe card to get in.

City Bark is confident it will be able to pay for it all.

The group has started selling T-shirts and is looking for foundation and corporate sponsorships. Its board has a fundraising expert, Dean Howard, who previously served as development director at the Tipitina's Foundation. Donors can earn titles like "Watch Dog" for a gift of \$10,000 and "Tail Wagger" for \$2,500.

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Last week, Purina Dog Chow awarded the group a grant for an undisclosed sum. Along with the benefits for dogs and owners, City Bark says, the effort will pay off as another step toward rehabilitating City Park.

"We've got to turn a negative into a positive," said City Bark's Cardinale. "There are a lot of ways that this city can come back and be better than it was before, and this is definitely one of them."

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