

Off-Leash Dog Task Force Meeting Minutes Thursday, June 16, 2005

Present: Ald. Fischman (Acting Chairman), Amy Koel, Dr. Leslie MacGregor Levine, Patrolman O'Connell, Paula Palumbo, Francis Rice, Norman Richardson and Richard Tucker

Absent: Ald. Albright

Ald. Fischman reviewed Ald. Albright's memo to the task force. Ald. Albright has spoken with the Director of the Board of Health in Weston, who was very helpful and will likely be able to attend the July meeting to share Weston's experiences. Brookline has recently extended their off leash dog program for another year and will most likely join the task force in July.

The task force reviewed some of the information provided in the packet attached to Ald. Albright's memo. Included in the packet was a resolution from the City of Boston that was adopted in January of 2005. It is Ald. Fischman's understanding that the City of Boston does not designate parks but gives groups an opportunity to petition the Parks Commission to allow dogs off-leash in parks. Mr. Richardson pointed out that Boston assigns responsibility to the group who use the area in terms of maintenance, enforcements and payments for damages. Several members asked how Boston ensured that the responsibilities are being met. Mr. Richardson felt that it was done through the year-to-year licensing process. Ms. Dorfman, a Newton resident, explained that there are a couple of dog parks in existence in Boston. Mr. Tucker felt that it is beneficial to have various regulations from different cities and towns to review because they give points of reference.

Mr. Tucker has the names of a few people who are very involved in the Brookline program. However, he has not contacted them, as he wanted to discuss it with the task force. Ald. Fischman suggested that Mr. Tucker speak with them and send notes on the conversations to the members of the task force. Ms. Palumbo is interested to know what their evaluation of the program is and whether they feel it works.

Mr. Tucker sends out a newsletter to approximately 500 residents of Chestnut Hill and included a note on the task force in the last newsletter. He received one response concerning the off leash dog parks. The person was very enthusiastic and when questioned regarding willingness to monitor, clean up and possibility commit funds to a dog park was willing to do everything.

Questions arose on how Brookline determined the off leash hours for parks, are there designated areas within the parks or is it the entire park and how many dogs use the parks. Ms. Dorfman pointed out that Brookline has seen greater clean up at the parks since the off-leash program began.

Patrolman O'Connell spoke with the Animal Control Officer in Brookline who stated that there has been an increase in the use of parks but no increase in problems. However, the officer

has noticed that there are many more non-residents who use the parks. Ald. Fischman felt it would be useful to find out which parks have the most use and visit them.

The task force then discussed the Town of Weston's dog control ordinances. Weston allows dogs off-leash everywhere as long as they are under voice control. The task force will discuss the merits and drawbacks to this regulation with the Director of the Weston Board of Health at the July 21 meeting.

Michael Cronin of the School Department joined the task force. He has had some discussions with the Parks and Recreation Commissioner regarding the usage of parks for off-leash dogs. The School Department has 22 buildings with grass areas. The Parks and Recreation Department maintains the outside of each of these buildings. The only concerns that he has regarding maintenance is students tracking waste into the buildings. The School Department is also concerned about dogs being off-leash while there are children around, in particular at the start and end of the school day. He does not necessarily have any objection to an off-leash program but it is a matter of timing. Mr. Cronin also stated that there have been no reports of dog-related problems from any of the schools.

Mr. Rice of the Parks and Recreation Commission provided a list of parks and playgrounds and all of the activities that occur in each of the parks. The activities are constant from April 1 to November 30. He is very concerned about dog waste in the parks that are used for activities by children. Dog waste is not always cleaned up and even if it is, bacteria left at the site remains for up to a year. Private organizations have contributed money to the maintenance of the athletic fields and several of the fields have wells under them.

Mr. Rice does not feel that dogs should be allowed on fields used for various sports. People do not clean up after their dogs. The task force must look at the activities and uses of the fields before determining the suitability of parks for an off leash program. He pointed out that there are other areas such as conservation land or unorganized parks, which would be more suitable for off leash dogs.

Newton's playgrounds are not large enough to support off leash dogs. If dogs are to be off leash in parks, there needs to be fenced in areas specifically for dogs within parks. Regulations will need to be strictly enforced if certain parks are designated as off leash and others are not, as people tend to go to the nearest park to let their dogs off leash.

Ald. Fischman asked Mr. Rice to submit a few parks where it would be possible to have an enclosed dog area for the next meeting. Mr. Tucker thought it would be beneficial to look at spaces that are not used for youth activities and evaluate them as well.

There was consensus from the task force that dogs should not be off leash at heavily used parks but there needs to be alternatives.

Mr. Richardson has spoken with his fellow members of the Conservation Commission and solicited feedback on the off leash dog park question. There is disagreement among the members of the Conservation Commission but all agree that there needs to be exclusion of areas

considered sensitive habitat. Aquatic areas should not be considered for off leash dog parks. The Commission also does not have funds for additional maintenance due to the additional use of conservation land.

There are also direct impacts to the land due to usage by dogs. Vegetation is trampled. Norumbega Park was turned into a dust bowl by the dogs, which had an adverse affect on the value of the land. There is also concern about concentrated urination of trees and plants. However, the commission did not look at the benefits of off leash dogs, such as greater enforcement by citizens and better maintenance of parks by citizens. Mr. Richardson will put together a list of possible conservation lands that are available for off leash dog parks. Mr. Tucker pointed out that the task force should consult with volunteer groups that maintain some conservation areas to get their input.

The Committee briefly discussed possible citizen enforcement of off leash dog parks. Patrolman O'Connell has spoken with the Brookline Animal Control Officer who has a contact person for each of the parks in Brookline. Mr. O'Connell has also spoken with his counterpart in Wellesley. The Animal Control Officer in Wellesley felt that dog owners are very respectful of the regulations concerning off leash dog parks. The Selectmen in Wellesley can remove the off leash areas in parks at any time if there is a problem.

The task force would like to know what changes Brookline has observed since the off leash program was established like whether there has been an increase in dog bites. Patrolman O'Connell will investigate and will report at the next meeting. However, he does not see the institution of off leash dog parks creating an increase in dog bites.

The task force discussed the agenda for the next meeting. The agenda will include possible off leash dog park sites submitted by Mr. Richardson and Mr. Rice, discussions with Weston and Brookline, input from the Law Department and possibly background information on Boston's experience with the off leash dog parks.