Dog Park: Yes or No?

Major Vote Coming for Clark Park

By Brian Siano

Once again, the membership of the Friends of Clark Park will address an extremely important (and contentious) issue: whether to support the creation of a dog run in the North Park. This decision will be put to a vote during our upcoming General Membership Meeting on January 18th, 2006.

In 2003, in response to concerns raised by parents and dog owners, FoCP President Tony West convened a special Dog Committee to examine issues regarding dogs and children in Clark Park. The Dog Committee evaluated several actions proposed to reduce any dangers or discomforts, including fences, stricter leash-law enforcement, organization of dog owners, and the construction of a dedicated Dog Park.

Committee members Stephen Fisher and Linda Amsterdam assembled a more detailed proposal for a dog park. This proposal outlined such issues as location, costs, maintenance issues, and the impact a Dog Park might have on the use of Clark Park. Their proposal—illustrated on the following page—has an estimated cost of $30,000 and $70,000. The Planning Committee has also spoken with representatives from other city Dog Parks, to better understand their successes, failures, and what we might expect.

On September 22nd, the FoCP Planning Committee voted 4-2 to not support the construction of a Dog Park. The Planning Committee also voted unanimously to move that Friends of Clark Park advocate the enforcement of leash laws.

On December 13th, the FoCP Board voted 6-4 (with 1 abstention) to support construction of a dog park along the lines of the proposal submitted. In addition, the Board voted 8-0 (with 3 abstentions) to advocate enforcement of leash laws in the park.

The question must now return to the general membership. So we urge you to persuade as many of your friends and neighbors to attend (and to join the FoCP), so that this decision reflects as much of a community consensus as possible.

A Dog Run in Clark Park

By Linda Amsterdam and Stephen Fisher

Imagine a nice sunny day with a day care group playing in the playground. The teachers round up the kids and start to march them into the bowl to play games. Now imagine at the other end of the bowl, two dog owners are chatting as they crest the outer rim of the bowl and promptly release their dogs. The dogs come dashing down into the bowl. Then imagine the teachers seeing the dogs racing into the bowl, frantically trying to gather their kids together to remove them from the bowl before the dogs reach their end of the bowl. The confused and unhappy kids are collected and forced to retreat to another part of the park.

These dogs may have been friendly. They may not have been any of the dogs who frequent the park and are known to have bitten people or attacked and killed other dogs. However, how could the teachers know? How could a parent know? When a dog recently came running into the children’s playground, it was ok; the dog owner assured a scared parent and child that the dog was safe. The owner also happened to be nowhere near the dog at the time and if you know anyone who’s afraid of dogs, you’d know that someone calling from across a park with assurances isn’t very comforting when an
unknown dog is running at you. When a woman was recently running around the park and an off-leash dog come running towards on the side walk, she didn’t feel any safer when the owner called out that the dog was safe. When a dog owner was walking his leashed dog at the park, the calls from another dog owner weren’t very helpful when that owner’s off-leash dog attacked his on-leash dog.

These events and events like these happened and continue to happen regularly in Clark Park. Dogs have also been attacked and killed by off-leash dogs in the park. Off-leash dogs have run out into traffic on Chester Ave, killed squirrels near kids, chased peoples’ Frisbees and balls, and disturbed soccer games. Dog feces in the “Bowl” present a health risk to park users.

The University City section of West Philly has seen dramatic changes in the past few years. With the creation of a new elementary school and other local services, there has been an influx of residents and development. Accompanying these increases is a decrease in open space available to residents and more residents trying to use the space that is still available. As more people are further pressed for space, we need to come up with new ways to better use the space we do have. Clark Park as a wonderful green, open space is now starting to suffer from these pressures. As more people frequent the park, we are now starting to see conflicts in how people use the park.

Clark Park is a multiuse urban park with a variety of other park users. However, sometimes an intervention or change is needed to safely accommodate the various park users. In January 2004, the Friends of Clark Park Board created a committee to examine the issue of potential unsafe interactions between people and off-leash dogs. Seven months later the committee presented the Board with many different options for resolving the issue. Of the seven recommendations, the two most popular recommendations were to build a dog run and advocate for the enforcement of the city leash laws. In December 2004 the Friends of Clark Park Board formed a Task Force to create a proposal for a dog run in the park, to specifically detail what this option would look like. This proposal was presented to the Board in January 2005. Over the past year the proposal was considered by the Friends of Clark Park Board. In December 2005 the Board voted to support the proposal and the enforcement of the city leash laws.

A dog run in Clark Park will provide a safe place for people to exercise their dogs, and allow for others to use the park unmolested by off-leash dogs. The proposed dog run will mimic the size of the Schuylkill River Dog Park at 25th and Locust St, which is very successful and well received among dog owners. The University City Dog Owner’s Group is a non-profit corporation that will assist with the creation and maintenance of the dog run. After its original creation, maintenance will be funded by users of the dog run, modeled after the Schuylkill River and Chester Avenue Dog Parks.

People polled during the Summer 2005 Farmer’s Market were overwhelmingly in favor of a dog run (about 80%), for various reasons, which included safety while jogging, safety for small children, and less feces to slip in during soccer games. The principal of Alexander Wilson School also expressed his support for a dog run in Clark Park. The school, located a block from the park, currently avoids field trips to the park because “we’re uncertain of the safety of this due to the dogs.”

A dog run will be a single use facility, creating park land that is dedicated to a single park group, just as the playground and basketball courts are single use. However, right now, the Bowl is considered by many to be a single use facility when dogs are present,
which is most of the time there are people using the park. The proposed dog run is
significantly smaller than the size of the Bowl, located on a largely unused part of the
park, and will free up this much large space for others to enjoy. The dog run will also not
eradicate the off-leash dog problem, but should significantly mitigate the situation. The
Schuylkill River Park found that without leash law enforcement, about 85-90% of their
dog owners would voluntarily use the dog run.

As specified in the dog run proposal presented to Friends of Clark Park, the dog run
will give life to a part of the park not greatly utilized, beautify this part of the park, and
more importantly would solve most of the off-leash dog problems by creating a healthy
and safe social environment for people and dogs.

For more complete information about the Dog Run Proposal, go to
http://www.PhillyDog.org or contact Linda Amsterdam at (215) 748-3440.

Against the Dog Park

By Chris Leswing

Having been involved with Clark Park for over 20 years, I can honestly say that I
have never seen the park cleaner, safer or more vibrant than it is now. By and far the most
significant improvements are the direct result of the efforts of the Friends of Clark
Park/UCD in implementing maintenance, security and infrastructure improvements.
These efforts have allowed Clark Park to become what it should be… the town commons
of our University City/Spruce Hill neighborhood.

If anything, the park needs to be bigger just to hold all of the demands on its limited
space. Park activities should coexist peacefully and mutually define the unique character
of place. The “infrastructure” of healthy trees and lawns, bright lights and clean benches
make the park a comfortable place to be.

However, this success has come with a price. In addition to the usual day-to-day
activities, Clark Park is attracting more organized events and programs, including the
Farmers’ Market, festivals, Youth Soccer, volleyball, flea markets, and others. This
increased use threatens to overwhelm the park’s infrastructure. This is the challenge
facing the FoCP; how to balance these activities while maintaining the infrastructure that
makes it such a community resource.

I feel that restricting an area for a single use would shatter the delicate balance that
currently exists. The proposed dog run will have minimal benefit for the community as a
whole and create huge problems for other users of the park.

A dog run does not solve the problem of off-leash dogs in the park.

Off-leash dogs have existed in the park since for decades. Residents have reluctantly
tolerated ‘bad dog’ owners who don’t clean up after their dogs or allow their dogs to
turbust others using the park. Over the last couple of years, there have been several
incidents where off-leash dogs have created incidents with children using the
playgrounds and ‘bad dogs’ haven’t played nicely with other off-leash dogs.

Dogs are supposed to be on leash at all times. The city has leash laws that prohibit
the everyday activity in the park, but is unable to enforce them. This dog run proposal
will only benefit the few dog owners who don’t want their dogs threatened by ‘bad dogs’.
The problems of bad dogs and their owners will remain.

A dog run will reduce green space and community open space.
This neighborhood also has a deficit of green space, which helps to filter the air, support wildlife (including puppies) and manage stormwater. Clark Park functions as the neighborhood’s lungs and liver. Dog runs are intense uses that destroy trees and lawns with high concentrations of dog waste, digging and heavy traffic. (Some of these trees, including the Saucer Magnolia planted for Fran Byers’ mother 20 years ago, are memorial trees.)

University City/Spruce Hill needs more open space not less. Access to clean and safe open space for recreation is crucial to maintaining high quality of life in urban areas. Clark Park serves as the only significant public open space for thousands of people in the neighborhood.

Clark Park is just not big enough to support the luxury of a dog park. The small size of the park requires that everybody share fairly. The creation of a fenced in (single-use) dog run is a taking from a community that already has an open space deficit.

A dog run will restrict and drive away existing people who use this area of the park.

The proposed dog run will occupy a significant portion of prime multiuse space in the park. Many people use this quiet, passive area of the park for formal and informal activities. A dog run will eliminate this area for other uses. Also, the noise, smell and bustle created by a dog run will make people (like the long-established volley ball community) less likely from using adjacent spaces. It will shrink this side of the park, alter traffic patterns for residents who don’t want to pass by a dog run, and force redesign of long-established events like the May Fair.

A dog run will ultimately damage the health, safety and welfare of the community by making the park less clean and safe.

The FoCP has done a great job raising additional money to keep the grass cut and trash picked up by supplementing meager Department of Recreation resources. Additionally, the FoCP has planted dozens of trees and has raised money for the playground and other infrastructure improvements. Without these improvements, the park will be less clean and less safe. A dog run may well create a very nasty and very public battle that will harm long-term fundraising efforts, and drive many of the key people associated with these efforts away from FoCP.

A dog run will isn’t friendly and will only benefit a small number of people.

Clark Park is just not big enough to support the luxury of a dog park. The small size of park requires that everybody share fairly. A dog run is a permanent installation. It is only used for one use by a small percentage of neighbors, and restricts others from using the common space.

Ultimately I ask you to vote against the creation of a dog run in the park and this proposal in particular. While there are problems with off-leash dogs, the proposed dog run doesn’t solve them and will negatively impact the park and the community. These issues require a human solution by the dog community to police themselves and address leash laws-- not a physical solution to fence off an important part of the park.