Summary Title: Improve Recreational Opportunities for Dog Owners

Title: Parks And Recreation Commission Recommendation that Council Direct Staff To Consider Improvement of Recreational Opportunities For Dog Owners Among Other Community Recreational Interests During the Planning and Design Phase of Park Renovation Projects and the Design Of Any New, Or Renovation Of Existing, Neighborhood Or Regional Parks

From: City Manager

Lead Department: Community Services

Recommendation
The Palo Alto Parks and Recreation Commission unanimously recommends that the Council direct staff to consider improving recreational opportunities for dog owners among other community recreational interests during the planning and design phase of park renovation projects and in the design of any new, or renovation of existing neighborhood or regional parks.

Background
The Parks and Recreation Commission has routinely heard from the public about the need for more recreational opportunities for dog owners. The Commission defines the issue, as follows:

- The City has improved many parks and playgrounds over the last 15 years, yet little has been done to improve recreational spaces and opportunities for dog owners in Palo Alto.
- Several commissioners have observed dog owners, without authorization, allowing their dogs to be off-leash at numerous parks on a regular basis. This behavior suggests there is a need to improve recreational opportunities for dog owners.
- A primary Commission and Community Services Department priority is to create a culture of fitness in Palo Alto. Walking one’s dog is a good way to be active. Providing additional spaces and/or destinations to walk one’s dog will further encourage healthy behavior from dog owners.

For the reasons above, Community Services staff coordinated a public meeting to engage the community in a discussion about recreational opportunities for dog owners. The
primary purpose of the public meeting was to discuss the adequacy of recreational opportunities for dog owners. At the public meeting, which occurred in the winter 2010, approximately 100 people attended, and the vast majority were dog owners. The primary hope of the residents who attended was for the City to establish more off-leash dog areas that are within walking distance from homes.

After discussing the outcome of the public meeting in subsequent months at regular Parks and Recreation Commission meetings, the Commission unanimously recommended to Council the policy direction urging staff to consider improving recreational opportunities for dog owners among other community recreational interests in the design of any new, or renovation of existing, neighborhood or regional parks.

**Discussion**

Off-leash dog areas provide not only exercise and socialization for healthy dogs and their owners, but also provide a significant benefit to dog owners through increased connections between neighbors. The Commission and staff however also recognize the sensitivity of off leash dog areas and the concerns and competing interests of some non-dog owners, sports clubs, and parents.

Consequently a prudent course of action for the Commission is to make a policy recommendation to Council, for staff to consider the feasibility of improving recreational opportunities for dog owners in the design of any new or renovation of existing neighborhood or regional park. Each new park and park renovation is unique, and may or may not present an opportunity to improve recreational opportunities for dog owners. Considerations of park size, proximity to homes, engineering constraints, other park activities, community support, budget among others factors will be included in the consideration.

The Parks and Recreation Commission recommendation will, at a minimum, ensure the feasibility of improving recreational opportunities for dog owners is considered as new parks and park renovations opportunities develop.

The expectation, as a result of this recommendation, is that over time it will lead to more areas for off-leash dog play as the feasibility of recreational opportunities for dog owners is routinely considered in the design process for new and renovated park projects.

This recommendation of the Parks and Recreation Commission has been delayed in its presentation to the Council for approximately one year, in part, because of department restructuring and reorganizing of Parks and Recreation responsibilities due to fewer staff and resources. Furthermore, the workload of the Recreation staff, in particular, this past year and a half has increased considerably due to the coordinating role Recreation staff continues to play in the Project Safety Community Coalition among other duties, which has caused some work items to be deferred. It is, however, not staff’s intention to
postpone the recommendations of the Parks and Recreation Commission; this is a unique circumstance, and every effort will be made to ensure future recommendations of the Parks and Recreation Commission are forwarded to the Council in a timely manner.

Resource Impact
The resource impacts will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis as staff and the Parks and Recreation Commission review park planning and renovation designs that lend themselves to improving recreational opportunities for dog owners.

Policy Implication
The policy implications are minimal; staff not only supports this recommendation from the Parks and Recreation Commission, but staff further believes that it is consistent with current practice. Over the past year, the City has had the opportunity to significantly expand the dog-run area at Greer Park and provide the infrastructure for an enclosed field for a possible shared space for field users and dog owner recreation as part of these park renovations. With El Camino Park being renovated in the near future, staff again explored park design opportunities for dog owners among other recreational needs.

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City Manager Approval: James Keene, City Manager