

Albuquerque Model City Council Curriculum

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Underused Parks May Go to the Dogs

By Isabel Sanchez

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The citizens of Albuquerque have 253 parks for their fun and games, their picnics, their reunions. The dogs of Albuquerque have two and one-eighth.

City Councilor Eric Griego, believing dogs and their owners deserve better, has sponsored a resolution calling for the city to add at least six more dog parks.

It's a quality-of-life issue, he said. If the city wants to encourage the humane treatment of dogs and discourage, for example, the use of chains to keep them in yards, the city should also offer the owners some options.

"You've got to put your money where your mouth is," he said.

The resolution, which goes before the full council March 15, calls for the administration to come up with six locations in existing parks that are underused by Dec. 31.

It's hard to put a dollar figure on the proposal, Griego said. Parks that already have fences, parking and water could be converted very cheaply because little more is needed.

A companion bill would allow the city to impose a fee for the "off leash dog exercise areas," perhaps on top of the city pet license or as a separate dog park user fee. That money would be used to maintain and operate the parks.

How the fee will be structured— or even whether it will be imposed— hasn't been decided.

"We haven't worked it out," Griego said. "We're going to see how the parks (department) budget looks. If we find a couple of parks we can do cheaply, we may not have to assess anything."

Currently, there are dog parks designated at Tom Bolack Urban Forest near I-40, Roosevelt Park on Coal Avenue and Rio Grande Triangle Park near Tingley Beach.

Griego had brought his dog, Zorro the Wonder Mutt, to the Triangle Park when the dog was younger.

There, he and Zorro met other dogs and their owners, and the first issue that his dog park constituents brought up was that the park was run down. But the larger issue, he said, is that even a totally improved Rio Grande dog park doesn't solve the problem.

"Dogs are hard on parks," Griego said. "We need to have more of them."

Imagine if the city had only one park— instead of 150— in which to practice soccer, said Janet Saiers, a member of the dog park task force and a former city parks planner.

"Dog parks are happening all over the United States," she said. "For most places, a dog park is nothing more than an area with a fence around it, so we're not talking the Taj Mahal."

The task force, created by Griego, visited 15 parks, such as USS Bullhead Memorial Park next to Veterans Administration Hospital, Saiers said.

Behind the four softball fields at Bullhead, Saiers said, "is a wonderful grassy area with trees. That would be an example of an underused area. It's about 100 feet wide and

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linear. The only people who go back there are retrieving home run balls."

The bill allowing fees is an amendment to the city's animal services ordinance. It also adds rules for dog park users, human and canine.

Many of them are already posted at the parks but are not written into law. Dogs that can't "interact safely" with others are not allowed. Neither are dogs without collars and vaccination tags. Dogs that bark too much must leave. No digging or destructive behavior. Owners are responsible for dogs' behavior and for picking up their "nuisances."

"Most (dog park users) are responsible dog owners," Griego said. Putting the rules in the animal services law will reassure neighbors, nearby businesses and people using the rest of the park "that we're not just letting the dogs run wild."

Wild is how Riley ran, before owner Edna Sprague took him to the dog park.

"He was 3 when I got him and completely uncontrollable. Uncontrollable on a leash, uncontrollable off a leash. Going to the dog park burned off all the steam he used to act badly," she said.

Sprague goes with Riley, an Irish wolfhound-terrier mix, and Sasha, a Lab-chow-wolf-Akita, to the Rio Grande park every day in the summer and less often in the winter because the park has no lights.

The dogs love it, she said.

"It's a total play group. It's really amazing to see how the animals interact."

And, she said, "It solves every discipline and bad behavior dog problem I've ever had."