

**Backgrounder and a Proposal**  
**Prepared for Robin Korherr/Community Services Subcommittee**  
**By Ken Zeserson and the TCDOG Executive Council**

**WHAT IS TCDOG?**

The Tompkins County Dog Owners Group (TCDOG) is comprised of dog owners who are committed to encouraging responsible dog ownership and who wish to ensure that there are adequate recreational opportunities for themselves and their dogs. Reconstituted in March 2005, TCDOG currently is about 200 strong, and growing.

A primary focus of TCDOG is our work with local governments, the Finger Lakes Region of the NYS parks system, and state legislators to provide areas for owners to exercise their dogs off-leash in our community. Working with data provided by the Town governments, TCDOG estimates that there are nearly 10,000 dogs in Tompkins County. At this time, the only space that permits opportunities for dog owners to play with their dogs off leash is the Jacksonville Community Park which granted TCDOG the privilege of using this space in May 2005. The Jacksonville park has proved to be problem-free and a good option for people who live on the northwest corner of the county, but it is not central enough to meet the needs of most of the dog owners who currently frequent the Treman marina area.

**HISTORY OF OFF-LEASH DOG PLAY IN TREMAN MARINA AREA**

There is a long history of people bringing off-leash dogs to the Marina area. For at least 30 years, dog owners have gathered there to walk and chat while they throw balls and frisbees for dogs in the mowed fields, or sticks for retrievers in Cayuga Lake. The number of dog owners using these fields has ebbed and flowed over that period, but from the late 1990's through July of 2004, even a conservative estimate would indicate that more than 100 people brought their dogs to the park most days, with more coming in the summer and fewer in the coldest part of winter. In 2003 and early 2004, the number of dog owners using the park approached 300 per day in spring, summer and fall. Park usage decreases but by no means stops even in the worst of the Ithaca winter. When there is deep snow on the ground and the icy wind is whipping off the lake, dog owners and dogs can be found at Treman all hours of the day. While consistent ticketing by the NYS Park Police in late 2005 and 2006 has cut deeply into the use of the park by dog owners, there are still dozens of people running dogs there most days, even though they are aware that they may well be ticketed at any time.

It is not surprising that dog owners have been drawn to this space. While this area has little variety in either plant or animal life because it has been a mowed field with little ecological diversity for many decades, it does have the features needed for a successful dog park. In fact, it satisfies all of the requirements generally accepted as optimal for a putative dog park, namely topological variety; good sight lines over large areas; space for dogs to chase each other: mowed areas for running; access to shady rest areas and, most important, water for drinking and swimming. And the Treman area is blessed with natural barriers around most of it thus avoiding the need for fencing.

## **WHY DOES THE COMMUNITY NEED SPACE FOR OFF LEASH DOG RECREATION?**

There are several benefits to communities that have off-leash dog parks. The first is the benefit to the human park users. As several landmark studies have noted, many people walk outside only because their dogs need it. Healthy exercise for humans is a necessary by-product of dog walking.

Our local experience has shown that the “dog park” at the Marina is as much a community center for dog owners as a space for their dogs to run. In effect it is a non-commercial town square providing an opportunity for socializing and exercise in a safe environment.

Dogs benefit from off-leash activity too which in turn is healthy for the community at large. Dogs need to socialize off-leash when they are young in order to learn how to get along with other dogs and with people. Many breeds need vigorous exercise to maintain mental and physical health. Communities with access to off-leash recreation have fewer dog bite incidents and fewer complaints about barking dogs.

Locally, there is a third benefit for creating a centralized area for off leash dog recreation. There are several delicate ecosystems in Tompkins County that are endangered by dogs running off leash. These include the Six Mile Creek Natural Area and places where migratory birds congregate. The “dog park” concentrates dog use in an area comprised of filled-in marsh land, already a highly degraded ecological system, and of little natural value.

Another benefit from an off-leash dog park is more speculative, but data is beginning to be developed in support dog parks as an economic asset. There are now over 2000 off-leash dog parks in the United States. Dozens of web sites have sprung up to guide people who seek them out. Increasing numbers of baby boomers are traveling with their pets, and dog-friendly cities are starting to compete to be their destination of choice. Until ticketing ramped up in 2005, the Tompkins County Tourist Information Bureau included the Dog Park as an attraction on its map of the area, and directed tourist there regularly. Several local motels and Bed and Breakfasts are featuring dog agility facilities or dog-friendly hiking in their promotions. Off-leash dog parks have become valuable assets in drawing tourist dollars to a locality.

### **TCDOG’S PROPOSAL—A Satellite Park Initiative**

We are currently working toward a solution involving state legislators, the Finger Lakes Park Authority and NYS Park System headquartered in Albany. This is necessarily a slow process. Meanwhile, we have a proposal to ease the pressure on dog owners and other park users alike in the Treman area and other places where people walk dogs off leash, namely a Satellite Park Initiative.

Our initial discussions with the New York State Park Authorities have made one thing clear—our community must demonstrate its commitment to some other “satellite” off-leash zones in addition to whatever solution is eventually adopted at the Treman Marina. Ongoing deliberations with the Ithaca Mayoral Task Force on Dog Parks currently chaired by Joel Zumoff

have identified some areas on city-owned land where the local leash law might be rescinded. We have discussed a few such areas including Baker Park off Elmira Road (a relatively unused park) and the so-called “Festival Lands” owned by the city leading into the Treman Marina Park.

While Baker Park and the “Festival Lands” do not fulfill the criteria for an optimal dog park listed on page 1 of this document, they are a step in the right direction. TCDOG is asking the city to rescind the leash law on these two pieces of city property. Since it is located on Elmira road in a busy residential area, the Baker Park off-leash area would require some fencing. However, the “Festival Lands” (which are used daily by dog owners even as speak) require no new infrastructure at all. TCDOG suggests that the only alteration to the property in its current state be some appropriate signage, a board listing a Code of Conduct for dogs and dog owners (emphasizing each owner’s responsibility for the behavior of her dog) and a companion message board and suggestion box.

The area is already equipped with a very effective waste management system, namely conscientious dog owners utilizing plastic bags courtesy of Wegman’s plus the adjacent dumpster maintained by the state.

It should be noted that with the city’s permission, TCDOG at its own expense erected a linear barrier on the Festival Lands this past summer which separated dogs from people using the picnic tables near the parking lot. People and animals on both sides of this fence applauded this effort. We are prepared to demonstrate the same kind of support to help maintain Baker Park and/or the Festival Lands if our proposal is accepted. We are also ready and able to self-police the area (as we currently do on a daily basis) discouraging unfriendly dogs and their owners from using the park and helping to maintain an environment safe for all park users, those with or without dogs.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

The Case for Space  
Map of Festival Lands

Please contact Ken Zeserson at 256 7139 or [kenz@zeserson.com](mailto:kenz@zeserson.com) for more information.