

A Brief History of Dog Walking at the Festival Lands and Treman Marina and Some of its Benefits

Even before New York State began operating a marina in Ithaca, the City of Ithaca developed a city-owned Marina on the site of what is now known as the Alan H. Treman State Marine Park ("Marina"). In the late 1960's, the City agreed to transfer the Marina to the State of New York, and the State Parks officially opened the Alan H. Treman State Marine Park in 1976. The City retained ownership of adjacent parcels of land, including one parcel which adjoins the Hanger Theater and is known as "the Festival Lands." As part of the land transfer the City of Ithaca also gained concessions that limit how the State of New York can operate the Marina – most notably, that no fee can be charged for access to the Marina property.

Almost since its inception, the mown grass of Treman Marina and the Festival Lands (collectively referred to as the "Park"), has been used and enjoyed by people walking their dogs, both on and off leash. There are members of TCDOG who have walked their dogs there for nearly 30 years, and they remember others already in the habit of doing so when they began going there.

Dog walking has been beneficial for the Park in many ways. Not only does it bring more people to enjoy the Park, but the increased usage of the Park at all times of the day by dog walkers creates a sense of security to others who also enjoy the Park. One local resident, who does not own a dog, wrote in the Ithaca Journal last year that she feels safe walking in the Park because its popularity with dog walkers means that she is never alone there. Another writer said that the Park was not used as a hang out for drinking or drug use any more because adult dog walkers were too likely to be present.

In addition, dog walkers have been helpful in monitoring environmental problems in the area. In the fall of 2000, off-leash dog walkers were the first to discover a number of dead ducks by the lakeshore at the Park, a find that spurred DEC officials to investigate and determine the source of their poisoning. Since then, because of their acute sense of smell, off-leash dogs have several times alerted their owners, who then notified Park officials of wildlife kills.

Use of the area for dog walking has ebbed and flowed, but in the 1990's, the numbers increased significantly. As a predictable result, dog waste there also increased. In 2000, a group of individuals who were dog walkers at the Park formed the not for profit group, Tompkins County Dog Owners Group ("TCDOG"). TCDOG held its first informal meeting in 2000, and shortly after that members began to conduct weekend "poop patrols" at the Marina as well as at Six-Mile Creek. One TCDOG member arranged with the Park Manager for a metal trash bin that would be used for dog waste disposal, along with signage and a dispenser for plastic bags donated by Wegman's.

After walking through the marina area that fall, Regional Superintendent Jack Clancy noted with approval how clear of dog waste the area had become.

Also in 2000, TCDOG began working with the Finger Lakes Region of the State Parks to develop a proposal for an off-leash pilot dog park that would include much of the land lying northwest of the Marina. The Ithaca Journal endorsed on its editorial page the concept of an off-leash dog park that would be similar to the more than 400 such parks then operating in cities around the country. The City of Ithaca passed legislation that provided for a trial off-leash area on the Festival Lands if the State agreed to a pilot dog park at the Marina. Unfortunately, in early 2002, the TCDOG proposal was rejected by the State Parks administration, which instead offered a very small fenced area (less than three acres) without access to shade or water. TCDOG members felt that a park operated under these conditions would be unsafe and was doomed to failure, and negotiations broke down completely.

Despite the breakdown in negotiations between the State Parks administration and TCDOG, between 2000 and 2003, the numbers of dog walkers increased even more. The Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce included the dog park on its tourist maps and directed area visitors there. A few dozen hardy souls could be found there even on cold and blustery winter days, while in good weather, 50-80 people walked their dogs off-leash there. A community of dog owners grew up, and people met there for walks and summer picnics. A listserv was put into place to serve this community, which distributed information and coordinated social and maintenance events. There were few if any complaints during this period, and few if any tickets for off-leash dogs were issued.

This came to an end in August 2004, when a Vestal attorney, who was a boat owner at the marina, wrote letters to NYS Attorney General Spitzer, Ithaca Mayor Peterson and NYS Park Commissioner Castro, threatening legal action if the leash law was not enforced. Ticketing of dog owners with off-leash dogs had happened sporadically during the fall of 1999 and most of 2000, but had been uncommon since then. Following these letters, however, far more tickets were issued by the State Park Police and some dog owners began avoiding the park as a result. In February 2005, while court appearances by off-leash dog walkers were still pending, The Ithaca Journal editorially endorsed an off-leash dog park at Treman Marina. A month later, a revitalized TCDOG held its first membership meeting and resumed working for a legal resolution to the problem. In this regard, TCDOG has been working to re-establish relations with both the City of Ithaca and the State Parks administration in an effort to work collaboratively towards a proposal that would provide mutual benefits to all parties involved.