

Naples OK's creating off-leash dog park

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The city of Naples is going to the dogs and that's fine by Naples City Council.

Naples City Council on Wednesday unanimously approved a plan for an off-leash dog park on the city's campus on Riverside Circle.

"It feels really good," said Paul Frey, a Naples man who led the charge for a city dog park. "Obviously it's something the community really wants."

The dog park will be built on a piece of city-owned vacant property, 99 Riverside Circle, and will feature a fenced-in play area, drinking fountains for dogs and humans, a shade structure, benches and low maintenance and irrigation native landscaping.

Construction of the project will be funded exclusively through private donations. Will Dempsey, a spokesman for a group pushing for the park, said Wednesday plans were tweaked plans so no user fees are required for at least the first year.

The group had originally proposed a \$120 per dog, per year user fee. Those fees, supporters said, would have then paid for the annual maintenance and operational costs. Dempsey said Wednesday the group was now suggesting a \$30 per year fee, if user fees needed to be established.

The operational costs are estimated to be about \$12,000 a year, said David Lykins, the city's community services director.

The group had raised more than \$183,000 as of Wednesday's meeting and Dempsey said some things could be scaled back to pay for operational costs in the first year.

"I'm very proud of our community for doing what they've done," said Councilwoman Teresa Heitmann.

Barbara Walker, a dog park supporter, said the group would continue to raise money to make sure as many people can use the park as possible.

About 30 people filled Naples City Council chambers Wednesday afternoon for the dog park discussion. The room erupted in cheers when council voted to approve the park.

“Once you’re a dog owner, you’re always a dog owner,” said Aqualane Shores resident Sharon Kenney.

“This isn’t a park I’m going to use for the next couple of years; it’s a park, please God, I’ll use for the rest of my life in Naples.”

Users won’t be asked to pay a fee immediately but council members on Wednesday warned that the issue could come before them in the future if enough money isn’t raised to support the park.

Lykins said the city plans to require users to register their dogs before using the park. Lykins said the city will issue dog tags to show the dogs are properly vaccinated and allowed to use the park.

Matthew Kragh, a Naples architect who designed the park and a dog park supporter, said the hope is to have the park up and running sometime late this summer.

Public outcry for an off-leash dog park started last summer, after a group of residents was asked to leave the grounds of Gulfview Middle School. Community members – led by Frey, Kragh and Dempsey – worked with city officials to come up with the plan for the city’s first off-leash dog park.

“In all my years and all the committees I worked with, I’ve never seen a grassroots effort like this,” Mayor Bill Barnett said.

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