

Introduction

A growing number of conflicts between trail and park users, including injuries to dogs and humans and hostility between equestrians and dog owners, shows there is a pressing need on the island for clearly designated areas where individuals can safely walk and play with their dogs off-leash, and where those who do not wish to encounter off-leash dogs can also be safe and enjoy the natural resources of the island.

In response to this need, a group of volunteers and interested parties was created, *Vashon Unleashed*. This group has met several times to discuss and assess the situation and develop a case and a proposal for a variety of off-leash dog areas on island. Members of the group have also met with representatives from the King County Park District and Vashon Park District to gather and share information.

We are aware that there are also many other volunteer groups seeking to effect policy and regulations regarding park usage, and we look forward to sharing our thoughts and working with those groups more closely.

Situation

Parks and public lands on Vashon

Policies regarding allowable use by dogs are varied, not widely understood, and not well-communicated to the public.

Vashon parks and other areas where dogs congregate are managed by several different entities with different policies regarding dogs:

- King County Park district – dogs must be leashed
- Vashon Maury Land Trust nature preserves – no dogs allowed
- Vashon Park District – policy statement says off leash dogs allowed, conditionally, in some areas and not in others, while signage at many of those same locations generally says dogs must be leashed.
- Private land such as KVI beach, KOMO fields, Sunrise Ridge – no clear rules

There is no fenced-in area designated for dogs on the island.

Conflicts between users

There appears to be increasing conflict and acrimony between various trail/park constituencies such as horseback riders, joggers, families, environmental stewards, and those seeking exercise and socialization for their dogs. There have been many heated posts on various online Vashon sites and pages about everything from dogs biting people and horses, to dog owner unwillingness to bag and remove dog feces.

While it is difficult to obtain accurate data on the number of dogs on island, statistics show that more than 25% of households in Seattle have dogs. As a rural community, Vashon's percentage is likely higher. With about 4600 households, we can assume the island is home to more than 1000 dogs. While some homes have fenced yards, all dogs need socialization, exercise, and enrichment in environments beyond their own home. And dog owners who are also trail users want to bring their dogs with them for a jog or hike. However, it's clear that increasing conflicts are making what should be a peaceful, fun, and rewarding experience in nature, in many instances, stressful and sometimes dangerous and injurious.

A Possible Solution

It is the suggestion of Vashon Unleashed that if specific areas of trail were clearly designated as "off-leash", and a fenced play area for dogs were established, the community would see several key benefits:

- Dog owners would concentrate their off-leash activity to these designated areas and therefore would likely be more willing to leash their dogs in other areas.
- Other users could avoid off-leash areas, or at least be aware that they are likely to encounter off-leash dogs.
- Volunteers and park staff could work to actively educate other dog owners about the importance of feces removal and also donate hours to trail/dog park clean-up.
- Dogs would have greater opportunity to exercise and socialize, which would lead to better behavior overall.
- Programming and information about dog training and trail stewardship could be offered.
- Conflicts between community members and trail users would decrease.

To that end, the members of Vashon Unleashed have surveyed and assessed various park locations around the island to determine if some portions could be designated for off-leash use. Our suggestion would be to mark certain trails and trail areas as "Off-Leash", and also find a place for a fenced-in dog play area, where dogs without reliable recall can play, exercise and socialize in safety. The fenced-in area would not require any infrastructure other than fencing, which we are confident could be obtained through donations.

Our site assessments included the following:

- Accessibility
- Current use
- Parking
- Surrounding residences
- Ease of demarking the area from the rest of the site

Potential Off-Leash Areas

Agren Park

A VPD property with playing fields.

Accessibility – mid island, easy to find

Current use – mixed playing fields and walking path

Parking and facilities – ample parking, Port-A-Potty

Surrounding residences – minimal

Recommendations: There are a set of trails to the west of the entrance, between Agren and Fisher Pond, that could be marked as off-leash and even potentially fenced.

Burton Forest

A VPD property, where dogs are regularly allowed off-leash. No signage regarding official policies.

Accessibility – Burton loop

Current use – Off-leash, walkers, visitors to the retreat center

Parking and facilities – Ample parking at Jensen Point, bathrooms

Surrounding residences – Few adjacent

Recommendations: Install signage that notes this is an off-leash area and outlines VPD rules for dogs on park facilities.

Burton Skate Park

A VPD property; no signage on dog rules, not included in VPD statements on dog rules.

Accessibility – Just off Vashon Highway, north of Burton

Current use – Skate park, garden, disc golf

Parking and facilities – Ample parking, Port-A-Potty

Surrounding residences – Limited. Woods on two sides and roads on two sides.

Recommendations: Install fencing in lower field and use as a dog play area. While the lower field had some disc golf posts, it seems to be unused. The site is flat, has separate parking, and one side is already fenced.

Dockton Forest/Maury Island Site

A KCPD property. Dogs are supposed to be leashed, but often are not. Limited signage re dog policy.

Accessibility – Maury Island, easy to access trails

Current use – Extensively used by walkers, equestrians, mountain bikers.

Parking and facilities – Ample on-street parking, Port-A-Potty

Surrounding residences – Limited

Recommendations: Create off-leash area in SW corner, in gravel area and section of trails in adjacent madrone forest. Consider creating fenced-in play area in the gravel field. This area is accessible by a flat, gravel road, and can easily be avoided by people seeking to use the rest of the site. There is a section of forest designated for mountain bikers, so designated use areas already exist.

Frog Holler

A KCPD property. Dogs are supposed to be leashed, but often are not. Limited signage re dog policy.

Accessibility – South end of island

Current use – Less heavily used than other parks, but increasing steadily; history of use by runners and equestrians.

Parking and facilities – Limited on-street parking in low-visibility area.

Surrounding residences – Many trails lead directly to homes.

Recommendations: This park includes a large, flat field that would make an ideal fenced-in dog play area. However, parking would need to be developed either along the road or directly in the park. As this is a relatively new park, our hope is that dog-specific uses will be considered as planning continues.

Island Center Forest

A KCPD property, heavily used by a wide range of people, including equestrians, walkers, runners, dogs, etc. As the island's most popular park, it is also the site of the many conflicts between users. Increased signage emphasizes the requirement that dogs be leashed, but this policy is regularly ignored.

Accessibility – Center of the island, with multiple entrances.

Current use – Most popular park, heavily used, variety of people, horses, and dogs.

Parking and facilities – On street and in designated lots.

Surrounding residences – Limited.

Recommendations: The Borrow Pit and surrounding trails are tucked into the NW corner of the park, with a separate entrance. Marking the trail around the pit and a small section of North and Middle Fork trail would provide about 1.5 miles of trail for off leash usage. This section could easily be signed and avoided by other users who did not want to encounter off-leash dogs. In addition, fencing the actual Borrow Pit would provide a safe play area for dogs. While that area is wet in some seasons, it would still be usable.

There is parking along the street, and some users would park in the lot at the Cemetery road entrance and walk through the Forest to the proposed designated off-leash area.

KOMO Field

Privately-owned large field and surrounding stream and woods. Property manager reportedly is accepting of dogs on the property.

Accessibility – Maury, next to Engels

Current use – Dogs are reportedly welcome there off-leash.

Parking and facilities – Limited on-street parking.

Surrounding residences – Limited.

Recommendations: While this is a beautiful piece of property to walk with dogs, it is privately owned. We can have no lasting influence on its long term availability to dogs, or make any capital improvements, such as fencing.

Maury Island Marine Park

A KCPD property. Dogs are supposed to be leashed, but often are not. Limited signage re dog policy.

Accessibility – Maury Island

Current use – Plenty of use by equestrians and walkers.

Parking and facilities – Plenty on street and in lot on 244th. Camp sites, picnic/education shelter, Port-A-Potties

Surrounding residences – Very few

Recommendations: There are two areas, one at either end of the park, which could be designated off-leash without impacts to the bulk of the trails: a short lollipop loop in the NW corner and a short section of trail that leads to the beach in the SE corner. Both of these areas have geographic features that help separate them from the bulk of the site and other trails, which would make it ever easier to keep unleashed dogs separate from other users.

Sunset Ridge

A privately-owned property with multiple users and non-profit organizations with offices there.

Accessibility – Center of island

Current use – Ball fields, helicopter pad, food bank, health center, etc.

Parking and facilities – Several lots and buildings.

Surrounding residences – Nearby home with livestock.

Recommendations: The large field at the top of the property is currently in regular use as an off-leash area. There is a lower field, as well, but it is frequently wet and close to the road. Because ownership is private, we can have no lasting influence on its long-term availability to dogs, or make any capital improvements, such as fencing. We also feel that there are too many users of the surrounding buildings and ball fields to make it a safe place for dogs to be off-leash.

Bellingham – a example to emulate

As many other municipalities and communities are facing similar issues, *Vashon Unleashed* reviewed policies and procedures from several other communities, including Portland, Oregon and Seattle. A scouting trip to Bellingham was instructive in how one community handles and serves the needs of their dog and dog owning population.

Bellingham has an extensive series of parks, paths, and other public spaces, which are very well utilized by an active population of biking, hiking, jogging, and equestrian college students, families, and retirees. In every park visited, signage regarding dogs was clear, prevalent, and often very friendly and even humorous in tone. Examples included below. Policies are also clearly stated on municipal websites and handouts. In extended visits to three different locations, compliance with signed usage guidelines seemed nearly universal, dog feces was not in evidence along the trails, and users negotiated the proximity of friendly and less social dogs fluidly and without apparent conflict.

Lake Padden Park

This park includes a paved walking path around the lake, playing fields, adjacent golf course, and a corner of the park where there are both fenced play areas for dogs and a large section of mixed use, wooded trails designated as off-leash. All dogs on the paved path were observed to be leashed, as directed. The fenced areas were clearly frequented by many dogs in a wide variety of sizes, breeds, and temperaments, but no conflicts were observed, and the area was clean of feces. The off-leash trails were used by walkers both with and without dogs, and both social and aloof dogs. No conflicts were observed, and several spontaneous play sessions ensued when compatible dogs encountered each other.

Whatcom Falls Park

At this centrally-located park, which is surrounded by homes and includes a children's play area and a fish hatchery, dogs must be on-leash. During a walk through most of the trails, every dog encountered was leashed, there was no feces on the trails, and potential interactions between pro-social and anti-social dogs were handled with a polite and friendly exchange between their human handlers.

Arroyo Park

A weekend morning visit to this extensive trail system through a wooded area showed ample use by joggers and hikers, certainly more than is typical on Vashon trails. Approximately one third were with dogs, some leashed, some un-leashed. Again, no feces was observed along the trails,

dogs were under voice or leash control and were readily moved away from groups of runners and other dogs, or were allowed to socialize and play where it was appropriate and welcomed. Signage showed clearly where horses were allowed and prohibited.

Suggestions and recommendations

For any system to work, and for conflicts to decrease, we feel several steps need to be taken. We are hopeful that these initiatives can take place in conjunction with creating designated off leash areas, but many of these efforts would be useful even in the current circumstances.

Create and communicate clear and consistent policies

Every time there is a conflict between users, social media blows up with conflicting and insistent declarations of what the rules are, have been, or should be. More consistent policies, better communicated through signage, flyers, media, etc., would help everyone abide by the rules and enforce the rules.

Training and education

A public information campaign on rules and policies, as well as on why it is critical to leash and pick up after your dog, as well as subsidized or free classes on basic manners training for island residents held at convenient times and locations would be helpful, positive, and proactive steps to reduce conflicts and assist dog owners gain better control of their dogs.

Trail ambassadors

Volunteers, who have been given basic training and supportive educational materials, could be recruited to communicate policy and protocol to neighbors, friends, and other trail users. By relying on informative hand-outs to communicate, volunteers could be proactive and sidestep personal conflicts.

Fenced area and more options for disposal

A fenced area where dogs could safely exercise and socialize would help give people who have less control over their dogs a place to take them and thereby reduce conflicts. More garbage cans placed in more interior locations in the parks and along trails would encourage poop pick-ups by those who are reluctant to carry waste with them on their hike or trail run.

Next steps

Vashon Unleashed wishes to share this proposal with representatives from the Vashon Park District and the King County Park District and seeks advice and recommendations on best next steps to improve trail usage and play areas for dogs on the island. We welcome the opportunity to attend meetings, confer with other groups, collect and disseminate helpful information, organize volunteers, raise funds for fencing and other infrastructure, and lead training sessions for community members, as appropriate and useful.

Our goals are simple: reduce conflicts and improve the lives of our dogs. We are ready and able to participate with the community in whatever ways will best effect positive change.

Vashon Park District Rules for Dogs on Park Facilities

Dogs in Park Facilities

- A. Dogs must be on a leash at the following parks: Ober Park, Paradise Ridge, VES Fields, and Agren Ball Field.
- B. Dogs can be off leash only if not disturbing others at the following parks: Wingehaven, Pt. Robinson, Burton Acres, Jensen Point, Lisabeula and Inspiration Point, Tramp Harbor. Dogs are not allowed in the fenced area of the guest houses at Point Robinson.
- C. Dogs are not allowed at Fern Cove or Village Green.
- D. Large events, special events, concerts in park or any other event in which a group of people gather in any park, dogs must be on a leash at all times. Event sponsors can request no dogs allowed.
- E. No dogs allowed on conservation properties.
- F. No dogs inside the play area at Ober Park defined by the sidewalk.
- G. No dogs allowed on park district athletic fields when prepared for play.
- H. Any person whose dog is in any park area shall be responsible for the conduct of the animal and for removing feces deposited by such animal.
- I. Any restrictions on access to district property by dogs shall not apply to service dogs.

Disturbances by animals prohibited

No person shall allow his or her dog or other pet or domestic animal to bite or in any way molest or annoy park visitors. No person shall permit his or her dog or other pet or domestic animal to bark continuously or to otherwise disturb the peace and tranquility of the park.

Vashon Park District

Welcomes you to your park and hopes that you enjoy your visit. VPD asks that park patrons observe the following rules:

Alcoholic beverages are prohibited.
Call 911 to report violators.

- Dogs must be kept on a leash.
- Cutting, picking or destruction of plant life or property is prohibited.
- Removal of any park property is prohibited.
- Parking in designated areas only. No parking after closing time.
- Unauthorized possession of firearms or weapons is prohibited.
- Household and/or commercial garbage dumping prohibited.
- Keep all vehicles on roadways.
- All fireworks are prohibited.

Vashon Park District
Parks are open from dawn to dusk.

**Dogs
MUST be
on Leash
at all
Times**

Bellingham sample signage and policies







Welcome

Off-leash Exercise Area

Enjoy the facility & respect others

Enter at your own risk

You are responsible & liable for your dog's behavior

Unattended dogs will be removed by animal control

Dogs in heat are restricted from the off-leash area

Dogs that exhibit dangerous or aggressive behavior

biting, fighting & excessive barking

are banned from this facility

You MUST:

Carry a leash for each of your dogs inside the area

Deposit feces in appropriate containers

Closely supervise young children

Remove pinch or choke collars before entering



**PLEASE REMEMBER TO PICK UP
YOUR DOG'S WASTE!**

**IT'S THE LAW AND IT'S FOR YOUR
SAFETY TOO!**

When animal waste is left to decompose, the pathogens it contains can end up in our lakes and streams.

In large numbers, pathogens in untreated drinking water and recreational waters can present a health risk.

11,000 pounds of waste is produced by all the dogs in Whatcom County in one day!

5 ounces of dog waste can contain 3,408,000,000 fecal coliform bacteria.

Fecal coliform is the name for a group of bacteria found in waste from humans and animals. When this indicator bacteria is found in water samples, there may be disease-causing pathogens present as well.

City of Bellingham Animal Related Regulations

The purpose of this information is to acquaint you with the City Laws and Policies relating to having animals within City of Bellingham Park facilities (Bellingham Municipal Code 8.04.070)

GENERAL REGULATIONS

All dogs in City Parks must be under control by means of being **ON-LEASH AT ALL TIMES** (the owner or handler must be in possession of one leash per dog at all times) unless in an area designated for dog exercise and training.

The owner or handler of any dog is to **REMOVE FECAL MATTER** deposited by their animal on public property or public easement before the owner leaves the immediate area where the fecal matter was deposited.

The owner or handler of any dog must have in their possession the equipment necessary to remove their dog's fecal matter when accompanied by said dog on public property or public easement.

CERTIFIED SERVICE DOGS ARE EXEMPT FROM THIS POLICY

Service Dogs are defined as those dogs that have been professionally trained and certified as Service Animals.

OFF-LEASH DOG EXERCISE AND TRAINING AREAS

All dog owners/handlers are still responsible for having voice or sound control of their animal in designated exercise areas. When possible conflict exists within use of off-leash areas (particularly trails), by other people or dogs, then the owners/handlers must control their dog by leash if necessary.

The owner or handler must respect all natural areas by staying on trails to minimize damage and preventing dogs from flushing, chasing or otherwise disturbing wildlife.

The owner or handler must also restrict dogs in heat from off-leash areas, as well as dogs who exhibit aggressive behavior.

The City has designated, by City Policy PAR 3.01.20 the following Park areas where dogs can be off-leash for exercise and training as signed.

Fenced Off-Leash areas: The owner or handler must follow specific regulations within fenced off-leash areas as posted at each site.

Arroyo Park: All Trails

Lake Padden Park: The fenced off-leash area near the ballfields in the southeastern part of the Park. Trails as designated at the east end of the Park between the fenced off-leash area and Galbraith entry on E. Samish. A dog water exercise area near the ballfields area (east side of lake) is signed for dog training/exercise. Dogs are restricted to entering Lake Padden only in this area.

Sunset Pond: All trails plus the water are designated for water exercise and training area.

Behome Hill Arboretum: All secondary trails. Dogs must be on leashes on all paved trails plus the Jersey Street and Arboretum Walkway which are the two trails at the bottom of the Arboretum abutting the University campus.

Biodeel Donovan Park: 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. year round. If wet weather results in turf damage, off-leash dogs will only be allowed south of the parking lot, at the discretion of the Director of the Parks & Recreation Department.

Whitcomb Falls Park: The Waterline Trail (south of Whitcomb Creek) west of the Water Treatment Plant to Bayview Cemetery and the trail from the Waterline Trail south to Lakeway.

Little Squallicum Park: All Trails. (Note – Little Squallicum Creek may contain hazardous chemicals which may be harmful to animals. Also, the Little Squallicum Beach area is NOT owned or regulated by the Bellingham Parks and Recreation Department.)

Post Point Treatment Area: The field and trails adjacent to the treatment facility are open for dog training and exercise. City park regulations apply to this area.

Maritime Heritage Park: 6 a.m. to 10 a.m. year round.

ANIMAL RESTRICTED AREAS

Due to heavy use by the public plus safety and health concerns, as well as sensitivity to art and gardens, there are several park areas where dogs and domestic animals are not allowed.

- A. Playgrounds
- B. Spray Parks
- C. Athletic Fields including but not limited to:
 - Civic & Joe Merrin Fields
 - Frank Ger & Doerner Fields
 - Squallicum Creek Park Ballfield
 - Batesby Field
- D. Tennis Courts
- E. Big Rock Garden Park
- F. Woodstock Farm

