

PERKS OF THE PARKS

Monroe County's off-leash dog parks are satisfying canines and owners alike

BY MARTHA CLEMENT ROCHFORD

What's the biggest green space trend in America's largest cities? According to a study by the Trust for Public Land, it's off-leash dog parks.

On a bright Saturday afternoon, well over a dozen cars line the lot at the Ellison dog park and at least as many dogs play in the generous enclosure, steps away. The place is peaceful — no barking to speak of, and the only discernable sounds are of paws on stone dust, the murmur of voices and the occasional clang of a gate.

"It's a beautiful park!" said Jennifer Brand, who comes to the park from Webster with her golden-doodle, Maggie. They live on a main road without a fenced yard, so the park is essential. "She needs her exercise and free time to play."

Ellison is one of four designated off-leash play areas for dogs in the Monroe County park system. Ellison and Greece Canal Parks are run by Monroe County, which entered into a reciprocal arrangement with the towns of Henrietta and Sweden that also run dog parks. Registrants have access to all four.

Look Up Park is home to Henrietta's first dog park, open for about two years. The park features jumps and ramps the dogs can play on, and a

water feature that runs through the park. Heather Voss, deputy town clerk in Henrietta, said "the space used to be a par-three golf course, so it has a large grassy area for the dogs to play."

Greece Canal Park has Monroe County's original off-leash area for dogs, and the Sweden Town Park's dog play area recently opened, in November 2015.

Dog parks provide registered canines with safe, off-leash exercise and socialization. Heidi Wisniewski of Hilton has been to every dog park in the system. She said her dog, Duncan, "knows the words 'dog park' — we have to spell it at home so he doesn't go crazy!"

Matt Hogan of East Rochester brings his dog a few times a week. "It's a wonderful opportunity for her to hang out with other dogs, have some fun and get some exercise," he said, adding, "She's happy to play with anyone, and that's part of the fun of coming here — there is always a wide variety of dogs."

The benefits of a dog park extend to dog owners. Jennifer Resnick of Rochester finds that the dog park "is a great community builder. You get to talk to people and learn about toys and tricks and training and treats. It's an outlet for puppy parents."

Hogan said, "I haven't read any research on this but I'm quite sure dog



Dogs run off leash at the Ellison Park dog park.

owners have a certain quality to their personalities." He added, "obviously, I'm biased."

There are rules for the county's dog parks. Only dogs 6 months or older may use the parks, and owners must get dog licenses and show proof of rabies vaccination. Brand said "there are some hoops to go through, but it's well worth it."

Larry Staub, the director of Monroe County Parks, said local dog owners "are quite passionate about the facilities." According to Staub, there were 2,427 dogs registered for the Monroe County Dog Parks.

Anyone can register their pets, regardless of their residence. Voss, the Henrietta deputy town clerk, said "even people coming to visit relatives will register, because the parks are a good place to take their dogs while they're on vacation."

An April 2015 study by

the Trust for Public Land determined that "off-leash dog parks are growing faster than any other type of park in America's largest cities." The number of off-leash dog parks grew 6 percent in 2014 and was up 20 percent over the previous five years, according to the *2015 City Parks Facts* report.

There are active movements to establish off-leash dog parks in the City of Rochester and in Ontario County. Rochester City Council members agreed in March to test-drive at least one fenced-in, off-leash area within city parks. A location has not been chosen yet, but the city is considering a park near the Cobbs Hill Reservoir and another near Norton Road.

There are also plans in various stages for parks in Farmington and Geneva. In Canandaigua, the mayor, city council, and an active

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DOG PARK 101

From the Monroe County website:

Monroe County Department of Parks hosts Off-Leash Dog Areas (Dog Parks) at both Ellison and Greece Canal Parks, as well as a reciprocal agreement for use at Look Up Park in the Town of Henrietta and Sweden Town Park in the Town of Sweden.

- ▶ HOURS: 7 a.m. to dusk
- ▶ Each dog visiting must be a registered member of the Monroe County Dog Parks.
- ▶ Entrance will only be allowed to those in possession of a valid Monroe County Dog Parks tag for each dog.
- ▶ Dogs must be wearing the up-to-date Monroe County Dog Parks tag.
- ▶ The annual fee for access to all Monroe County Dog Parks is \$24 per dog (\$25 if paying by credit/debit card).
- ▶ Cash, checks, and credit cards are accepted for payment.
- ▶ Bring proof of dog's age (all dogs must be at least 6 months old to register), a current copy of your dog(s) license from your town or city, with current address, a current copy of Rabies certificate (the documentation, not the metal tag).

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citizens group are determined to develop an off-leash park, as well.

Nancy McCarthy, the founder of Friends of Canandaigua Canine Campus, is spearheading an effort to open a membership-based dog park there, with the enthusiastic support of city officials. She said “it is a very desirable and useful amenity, especially for dog owners who don’t have large fenced-in yards or who want their dog to socialize with other canines.”

Residents may be uncertain what impact a dog park will have on a neighborhood. “When

dog parks first started, they were installed in remote areas,” McCarthy observed. “Today, in urban neighborhoods, a dog park in an accessible, walkable location drives the real estate up, not down.”

Dog owners who have never visited a dog park may express concern for their pets among unfamiliar dogs. In Resnick’s experience, that hasn’t been a problem. “We haven’t encountered any problems or any mean dogs — people are really watching their dogs to make sure they’re being well behaved.”

Reported incidents in area dog parks are few. There is what Bruce Cavallaro from Irondequoit calls “pig-

gybacking” which is when unregistered owners and their dogs follow registered users through the security gate to enter the park. But Staub and Voss are confident that the majority of people get a permit and try to follow the rules.

Back at Ellison, three dogs race each other along a trail that circles the long, shady pond. In the large dog enclosure, Matt Hogan’s American mutt is trotting along with a curly-coated mix the color and shine of a new penny. “A tired dog is a happy dog,” he says. “And a happy owner.” •

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Martha Clement Rochford is a Rochester freelance writer.

Pet tech aims to keep animals safe, healthy and connected

BY TERENCE CHEA

Technology isn’t just for humans anymore. It’s also for their furry friends.

In Silicon Valley and beyond, a growing number of startups are selling devices to keep pets safe, healthy, entertained and connected when their owners are away.

Entrepreneurs see a big opportunity as pet ownership grows and owners show a willingness to spend serious money on their four-legged companions.

Nearly two-thirds of U.S. households, or 80 million homes, have pets. “The number of pets in the world is growing extremely fast, and that opens up the market,” said Peter Harrop, chairman of IDTechEx, a technology market research firm. “I’m sure five years from now there will be all sorts of things we can’t imagine.”

Already, there are devices that let your pets call you (PetChatz), play games and win treats when they’re home alone (CleverPet) and even



The Whistle pet tracker, a GPS-enabled device, in action.
AP PHOTO/ERIC RISBERG

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speak with a human voice (Petspeak).

But experts caution owners against relying on them too much.

“The technology can be useful as an adjunct, a way of enriching your relationship with your pet, but certainly not a substitute for time spent with your dog,” said Pamela Wyman, who runs the DogEvolve training school in Oakland, California.

The Petzi Treatcam lets Anne Ryan check on her dogs Oscar and Reggie at her home when she’s working or traveling out of state.

The Internet-connected device lets her see her dogs, talk to them, take photos and even

dispense treats — using an app on her phone.

“I turn it on, get to see them, get to talk to them, and it changes my mood and puts me back in a positive frame,” said Ryan said. “I didn’t know that I needed it, but now I don’t think that I could live without it.”

The Treatcam comes from the company Petzila. The startup also created a social media app that lets owners share pet photos.

“All of the most current crazes and fads in technology were touching everything but the pet,” said CEO David Clark.

The startup company Whistle sells a GPS-enabled Pet Tracker that alerts owners when their pets have left their “safe zone” and helps find them if they get lost. The device also lets owners track how much exercise and sleep their animals are getting.

Ben Jacobs, Whistle’s CEO and co-founder, said the pet-tech market is expanding fast as pets move up the household hierarchy.

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Terence Chea is a writer for Associated Press.