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Alderman takes pawssitive stand for mutts

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From all the exercise Annie gets at the park, she has developed into an athlete. From all the friends she's made at the park, she's developed a busy social life.

Annie is a 42-pound, black-and-tan, shepherd mix owned by Margaret Pride, 50, a minister at the Memorial Boulevard Christian Church. Pride regularly walks her dog to the Shaw Dog Park at Thurman and Cleveland avenues. It's a fenced-in, 10,000-square-foot area where mutts can mingle and make new canine friends. And all of them are free of leashes.

"My neighbor says Annie has a better social life than she and I do," Pride joked.

Now city officials are doing their part to see that there are more places like the Shaw Dog Park.

A bill making its way through the Board of Aldermen sets forth rules for dog parks, or fenced-in areas where dogs can run without a leash.

The bill sponsored by Alderman Lewis Reed, D-6th Ward, received a boost last week, when the aldermanic Health and Human Services Committee recommended approval by the full Board of Aldermen.

There now are two dog parks in the city: the Shaw Dog Park and one in the 28th Ward in the Central West End.

Alderman Stephen Conway, D-8th Ward, said the Shaw Dog Park has been hugely successful.

His family just signed up its dog, he said. People have moved into the neighborhood because of the dog park, he said.

The city's Land Reutilization Authority owns the ground and the Shaw Neighborhood Improvement Association rents it from the city and provides insurance.

The coordinator of the Shaw Dog Park is Susan Raney, who heads the six-member

dog park committee.

"I'm kind of feeling like we were a bit of a pioneer," said Raney, 46, an interior designer. "They're wonderful amenities for neighborhoods. They're good for people and they're good for dogs."

Raney and her husband, Mike, 46, a grain merchandiser, bring their Akita mix, Misha, to the park four or five times a week.

The Shaw park has been a way of making contacts, Raney said. "People have gotten to know each other, made some friendships."

The yearly charge for using the park is \$25 for one dog for Shaw neighborhood residents and \$50 for one dog for others. People get in by punching a keypad at the entrance. About 150 dogs use the park.

"We haven't had any big issues. We haven't had any problems," Raney said.

Among the users of the dog park is Pride, who brings her dog, Annie, there three or four times a week.

"When we get within a block and a half from the dog park, she's pulling me," said Pride, who lives four blocks from the park.

"It's great for the dogs," Pride said. "They are pack animals and they love their kind."

Annie's veterinarian praises the dog for her athleticism. "She's really in good shape," Pride said.

Annie loves to play with Ralph, a 125-pound Great Dane. Her best friend is Sophie, who is about her size and weight.

But dogs aren't the only ones who like the park.

"It's been a great way to meet people in the neighborhood," Pride said.

Such benefits are attracting others who want such a park for themselves.

Places where people are working on getting dog parks are the Souldard and Southwest Garden neighborhoods in the city and Maplewood and Chesterfield in the county, Raney said.

Alderman Donna Baringer, D-16th Ward, said she has a petition signed by 20 people who want to have a dog park in her ward.

Reed said there have been a number of requests to set up similar parks throughout the city, including three in his ward. In the 6th ward, there are proposals to set up parks in the Water Tower Park, in the Lafayette Square neighborhood and Downtown.

Reed's bill will help to make this possible, he said.

"It's going to really establish a standard in the city of St. Louis to open it up for more dog parks so that dog owners will have a venue to take their dogs to exercise in a large open area," Reed said. "The standards are very reasonable standards targeted at safety and security for the dogs and the dog owners and people that are in the park."

Under the bill, a dog park could be up to 50,000 square feet, or slightly more than an acre, and no more than a quarter of a city park where it would be located.

A neighborhood group or nonprofit organization could apply for a park if it got a petition signed by at least 25 city residents who would use the park. The local alderman would have to sign a letter of support.

The director of parks, recreation and forestry would designate city-owned property as a dog exercise area and issue revocable permits to a sponsor, which would provide a fence and \$1 million in liability insurance.

The sponsor would have to register users, provide education aimed at teaching basic obedience to users and insure the overall cleanliness of the area on a day-to-day basis. The sponsor would also be responsible for the disposal of all waste, lawn care and general maintenance.

"It will allow St. Louis residents to enjoy something that's been happening across the nation and that's an area designated where they can allow their dogs to run without a leash and still keep the public safe," said city Parks Director Gary Bess.

"It's an increase in the quality of life issue for the citizens," said Mark Ritter, acting head of the city Animal Regulation Center. "It's an increase to enable us to have more socialization for the dogs."

If the bill passes, there might be more people like Sheri Goldsmith, who brings her brindle Great Dane regularly to the Shaw Dog Park.

"He loves the dog park," Goldsmith said. "It's much better for him physically."

It's also good for people.

"It's a really nice way to meet people from your neighborhood you wouldn't normally meet," said Goldsmith, an artist.

"Dogs have a great time when they play together," she said. It's nice to have a place where they can legally go around without leashes and it's enclosed, she said.

"They play and learn from each other. They pick up each other's habits. They're actually better behaved."

Goldsmith's dog gets worn out at the park and wants to sleep when it gets home.

"They have healthier, happy dogs that live longer and they're better pets and you meet all your neighbors," Goldsmith said.

Goldsmith and her husband Matthew, a pediatric intensive care doctor, have two cats. But there's no talk of having a cat park. They have a 2,000-square-foot house, which is already enough park for the cats.

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