

Menlo Park: Fatigued council debates dog park, again

by [Kate Bradshaw](#) / Almanac

Fatigue appeared to weigh on City Council members as they heard a presentation on May 24 by city staff, asking for advice on how to move forward with the restoration of Nealon Park's baseball field and part-time dog park.

Talks about how to make a dog park work at Nealon Park have gone on for about 12 years now, according to remarks by Cherise Brandell, community services director; Todd Zeo, recreation supervisor; and Derek Schweigart, community services manager.

In 2004, it was decided that the baseball field at Nealon Park could be converted to a dog park for a couple of hours each weekday morning. Back then, Mayor Rich Cline was serving on the Parks and Recreation Commission.

Over the years, to maintain the field's cleanliness, it was watered for at least half an hour each day, city staff said. In the last few years, however, drought conditions, emergency water restrictions and a failing irrigation system on the field have taken hold, leaving the field in bad condition, they said.

Something needs to be done to fix the field, a project that has already been approved in this fiscal year's budget, said Ms. Brandell, and whether it is reseeded or converted to artificial turf will determine whether or not dogs will be allowed there.

She said staff is looking around to see if there are other places where artificial-turf sports fields double as dog parks, but they haven't found any yet.

Ultimately, Mayor Cline urged staff to repair the baseball field to as high a standard as possible, using as little water as necessary.

Maintenance on the Nealon Park baseball field will continue as determined necessary by the Public Works Department, said Ms. Brandell.

Meanwhile, this winter, staff will talk to the community and the council about what kind of surface should be installed on the renovated baseball field.

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In the spring, she said, the city will pilot a program to temporarily move the dog park to a proposed location near Little House while the baseball field undergoes its annual six- to eight-week spring restoration, during which no dogs are allowed there. The actual renovation of the baseball field may not take place until fall 2017, she said, to avoid conflict with baseball season.

The 'Great Lawn'

[Last November](#) preliminary concept plans proposed placing a dog park on an adjacent open lawn, rather than the baseball field at Nealon Park. The space is called by some the "Great Lawn."

Numerous emails of opposition from nearby residents and users of the "Great Lawn" flooded the council's inbox. Opponents said they use the field for children's birthday parties, impromptu gatherings and "unstructured" child play space, and don't want it taken over by a relatively small number of dog owners. (Dog owners say that roughly 30 to 40 people bring their dogs to the park during its open hours each day.)

That field has since been removed from consideration for a dog park. Two alternate proposals for dog park locations at Nealon Park, each a half-acre in size, were proposed: one between Middle Avenue and the tennis courts, and the other adjacent to Little House senior activity center. To be a full half-acre at the Little House site, however, the boundaries might have to encroach slightly onto the "Great Lawn."

Without organized advocacy by dog owners, or a willingness to help pay for maintaining a dog park, Mayor Cline said, "I'm skeptical that a solution is something that's going to work."

Whoever had been heading DOGMA, or the "Dog Owner Group of Menlo Park," seems to have disappeared, said Ms. Brandell.

One dog owner at the meeting, Kathy Schoendorf, said an enclosed space for her dog is necessary, because it will run away otherwise. She has used the dog park

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for four years, and believes that at least a half-acre space is necessary. Anything smaller, she said, and dogs can become territorial and may fight with each other.

"We're willing to work with you," she said. "We are happy to pay for poop removal (or) whatever it is."

Council member Peter Ohtaki suggested another workshop to solidify community consensus on whether the Nealon Park alternative spaces could work.

Council member Catherine Carlton, on the other hand, said she wanted a decision to be made and for talks on the subject to end.

As Menlo Park resident Mary Kuehler put it, "A decision has to be made, and the neighborhood has to be kept informed. Nobody wants another workshop."