

Pre-interview with landscape architect Maryse Beliveau-Nance for @Issue episode on green spaces and dog parks.

In preparation for an interview about green spaces, dogs and dog parks to be aired on Wednesday June 4, 2014, @Issue submitted a number of questions for landscape architect Maryse Beliveau-Nance. Ms. Beliveau-Nance has extensive experience designing municipal parks and green spaces, including dog parks. She is a resident of Stottville in Columbia County.

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Please tell us about yourself and your background.

Maryse Beliveau-Nance

In a nutshell, I am a landscape architect and most of my experience has been working for municipalities and public agencies, developing parks and open spaces in Canada, the US and the Middle East. I have been instrumental in establishing the first dog parks in Washington, DC

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Since you have a lot of experience in green space and parks planning, we would love to hear about their advantages and benefits to communities.

Maryse Beliveau-Nance

I am a big believer in sound, safe, well-designed public realm which includes streets, parks, playgrounds, trails, green and open space. Note the emphasis on public. Green spaces and parks are essential to a city, big or small. Parks increase property values, provide opportunities for socialization and community cohesion. The environmental benefits are many: they improve the quality of the air we breathe, they create habitats for wildlife in urban settings, and provide a place for children and their family to reconnect with nature and recreate. They provide health benefits and also mental health benefits.

But you cannot have parks without people. Parks must be planned and developed with people in mind, with the community in mind. And this means all members of the community –and that includes dog owners. The parks in a community are a reflection of the quality of life of its residents.

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How might a 2.2 sq mile city like Hudson with very limited space available, better use the space we do have?

Maryse Beliveau-Nance

By proper planning and an understanding and acknowledgement that dog owners are as legitimate as any other special interest group, and that their needs should be taken as an integral part of the city's master planning and decision making process. If space is limited, then integrating dog activities with other park users may be the solution for a more efficient use of the space available. A good master plan should be able to address the issue of equitable distribution of resources. If your master plan does not achieve this, fire your master planner!

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What are the obstacles and concerns that come up repeatedly when communities propose dog parks. Which concerns are legitimate and which are not?

Maryse Beliveau-Nance

The obstacles come mainly from the local governments (municipalities, town or a councilmember). In my experience, the resistance is mainly a resistance to change. But there are also legitimate concerns such as the cost of implementation, of maintenance, legal responsibility (insurance), budget.

Other obstacles include finding a suitable location (besides the under used space under the bridge), setting up a cohesive Friends-of group for the park, raising sufficient funding to build and most importantly to support the on-going maintenance, the neighbors fears of noise and smell which are not always founded.

And then often a proposed dog park is seen as an "either or" situation. The argument that the town should spend money on children before they spend it on dogs or that the dog park is in direct competition with children for space again comes from the fear of change. A dog park should be seen as a community amenity, just like a playground. Yesterday I was approached by a man in Philadelphia who complained that we were about to inaugurate a brand new schoolyard playground in an under-served community – he would rather have seen the money spent on books. You cannot please everyone.

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Is there a negative or positive impact when a city bans dogs from green spaces?

Maryse Beliveau-Nance

A negative one for sure. Dog owners walk their dogs at least twice a day, they are on the streets, they are in the parks, they are seen and they see. One of the strategies of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design, a multi-disciplinary approach to creating safer public spaces and a greater sense of safety in the community, rely on the presence of people in the public open spaces. Banning dogs from open and green spaces remove this opportunity. It removes the “eyes on the park” and the “eyes on the street”.

Many people, even non-dog owners, will actually use a park when dog owners are present. Diversity of use and a high level of foot traffic in the public realm are two factors that make a city “street safe”. You eliminate dogs from green spaces, you thin out activities, and opportunities for crime increase. Allowing dogs (on lead) in green spaces and parks is an effective way of providing natural surveillance, reducing crime, reducing the fear of crime and improve the quality of life.

Anyway, banning dogs from green spaces is unrealistic and does not work in the long run. Unduly restrictive access policies are eventually perceived as inequitable and likely to be counterproductive in managing relationships between law enforcement and citizens who own dogs. Punitive leash laws generally result in a non-compliance response. If there is no legal place to let a dog on lead, let alone off-leash, people will eventually defy the local ordinances and tensions in the community will rise. If a city bans dogs from green spaces, then it must be able to provide them with a legal place to go. Close to 40% of American owns at least one dog. That is a lot of community members to ban or antagonize...

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What are the positive impacts of dog parks? Are there any negatives?

Maryse Beliveau-Nance

Dog parks have many positive impacts. Again, they provide an opportunity for these ‘eyes on the park’ that I was talking about earlier. The presence of dogs (going to and at the park) has been found to reduce the opportunity for crime and increase the sentiment of safety in the community.

Dog parks make it easier for a municipality to enforce its leash law: there is no more reason for dog owners to allow their dog to be off-leash outside the dog park.

A dog park is a proven community asset with both social and economic benefits and contributes to make a town inclusive and attractive (provided the dog park is well designed and well maintained). Not only a dog park provides a designated safe place to take dogs to play, exercise, and interact, but the dog owners have the opportunity to interact and socialize with their neighbors. Residents who do not own a dog also benefit because well exercised dogs are less likely to bark.

Negatives impacts arise when the dog park is not well managed and maintained. Most complaints about dog parks are from dog owners about other dog owners. The new Friends-of group needs to be very realistic about the problems caused by uneducated dog owners and self-police to avoid serious issues. A dog park that is not well located can bring along issues of noise or excess traffic in an otherwise quiet neighborhood. A dog park that is not well designed can also raise environmental issues, especially from the feces and urine. A dog park that is not well managed can be a soup of communicable diseases. But a good dog park can also be a community catalyst and a source of education.

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What is the key for a community to get a dog park completed and sustained successfully?

Maryse Beliveau-Nance

The key is to create a strong Friends-of group that will become the steward of the dog park. Without this, don't even think about establishing a dog park. It will not be sustainable and will not work. The group and the town must be ready to partner and share responsibilities like cleaning and maintenance (with the group taking on the majority of the tasks). The dog parks that are the most successful are the one where the dog owners are fully vested in their park from the design stage to the on-going self-policing that will be necessary to keep the space civilized. The Friends-of group also need to address their project with realism. Too often people do not realize the complexity of the design, the cost of construction, and the amount of maintenance required. A strong set of rules. A good program of activity (often a Friends-of group can partner with a local vet clinic to offer health advices, vaccination clinics, etc). And funding. And not just for the design and construction but also for the on-going maintenance which can cost upward of \$15,000 per year.

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Hudson has an under-used and under-developed park called Charles Williams Park. It is away from the populated sections of the city and hardly anyone even knows it there. It currently has a playground setup and

a covered pavilion without any tables or benches. Do you see any reason not to use an area of this relatively remote park for a dog park?

Maryse Beliveau-Nance

At first, I do not see any reasons not to implement a dog park there. I would need to see the site in context (proximity to residences, proximity to streams, drainage, access to potable water/electricity, road access and impact on adjacent roads, etc). The dog run would need to be fenced in and located some distance from the playground.

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Is there anything else that you think might help this discussion?

Maryse Beliveau-Nance

There are over 83 million dog owners and more than 2000 dog parks in this country. Dog parks are here to stay. They fill an essential need in urban and peri-urban communities. They are a valued community asset once they are established. They are an important part of any city's park system. It is a quality of life issue and it is important to people and families.

Pets bring an economic boom to most economies. Hudson is not different (look at Warren Street, how many business catering to pets and dogs).

On the June 4th episode of @Issue:
Green Spaces, Dogs and Dog Parks

- Landscape architect Maryse Beliveau-Nance will discuss the importance of green spaces and dog parks to communities as well as some of the obstacles they pose and benefits they bring.
- Tiffany Martin-Hamilton and Colleen Daley-LaChance will tell us about their efforts to create Hudson's first dog park.
- Seth Rogovoy will discuss the very personal reason that he supports allowing dogs in Hudson's cemetery.

Victor Mendolia and Debora Gilbert Co-Host

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Wednesday June 4th at 10am

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