



PUBLIC CORRESPONDENCE

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Date: 9/20/2021

To: The Honorable Members of the Los Altos City Council, the City Manager, and the City Attorney

From: Jeanine Valadez

Subject: PUBLIC COMMENT – AGENDA ITEM #5 – 9/21/2021: Hillview Dog Park Off-Leash Pilot Extension

Dear Councilmembers et al.,

I hereby submit this Public Comment in regards to Agenda Item #5 where the City Council will consider extending the off-leash use of Hillview baseball outfield as an unfenced, off-leash dog park past the currently ordained end date of the official pilot. This extension is embodied in a proposed Resolution 2021_50.

Moreover, I hereby disclose that I am a Parks and Recreation Commission (PARC) Commissioner, but am submitting this Comment as a private resident of Los Altos.

In Summary:

1. I stand firmly against the extension of the off-leash dog park use of Hillview past the current pilot end date.
2. I oppose any action by the City Council to extend the use of Hillview as an off-leash dog park before the PARC Subcommittee running the pilot has had time to present their findings to the PARC and before the PARC has had time to present their determinations to Council.
3. I very much favor the establishment of one or more dedicated off-leash dog parks in Los Altos, as long as each is fenced-in, gated with a safety gate (vestibule) entrance, and accessible to all.

Background:

I attended the Hillview dog park pilot many times with my three dogs this past spring and summer. I also took and continue to take my dogs to fenced-in, gated dog parks in Palo Alto, Mountain View, and Los Altos Hills. I waited to submit my Dog Park Pilot Survey response to the PARC Dog Park Subcommittee until just recently to make sure my opinions were based on nearly the entirety of my visits to the Hillview pilot.

I am also aware that a group of residents and visitors is gathering signatures to petition the City Council to extend the off-leash use of Hillview after the Sept 30 pilot end date. This group is specifically aiming to retain the use of Hillview as an off-leash dog park. After they approached me to sign the petition, I wrote to one of their leaders, whom I know personally, to detail why I will not sign their petition as written, and, while lauding their willingness to speak up, have suggested to this person that they relay to their group the alternative position I have outlined below. As of this writing, I do not know if this person has relayed my statement to the group as a whole.

And finally, it has been announced publicly that the PARC subcommittee in charge of the Hillview Off-Leash Pilot (Commissioners Teresa Morris and John Corrigan) will be delivering their first post-pilot report to the PARC in the Oct 13 PARC meeting.

My reasons for not favoring an extension to the pilot:

- 1) The proposed Resolution is ambiguous as to the precise end date of the pilot extension. The final WHEREAS in the proposed Resolution 2021_50 prescribes that the pilot shall be extended

“until such time that the City Council receives a recommendation from the PARC and the Council takes action.” In the same Resolution, the eighth (8th) WHEREAS states that the Hillview Baseball Field will close on November 15. The Staff Report cites that if the PARC takes its fully allowed 60 days to make a recommendation, the earliest the Council will take action on the PARC’s recommendations will be in the November 30 City Council meeting. While it is possible that the PARC will take less time to come to its recommendation, Ordinance 2021-475 is clear that Council action may very well happen after the winter closure of the field. Therefore, there is ambiguity as to when the field will actually close.

- 2) Open (unfenced/ungated) dog parks pose a public safety liability to the City. Dog parks should be completely fenced and gated with a vestibule-type safety gate. I personally am NOT in favor of off-leash dog activity in unfenced/ungated parks in any location. The risk to both people and animals is substantive in unfenced areas. I therefore dispute the seventh (7th) WHEREAS in the proposed Resolution, which is further disputed in Items 2, 3, 4, and 6 below.
- 3) Open dog parks are inequitable to several segments of our community. Beyond the general risk that open areas pose, I have particular concern for
 - a. humans who fear dogs,
 - b. humans who are inexperienced with most dogs’ physical playfulness (including unaccompanied children who happen upon an open dog park),
 - c. human passersby with or without dogs who have no interest in interactions with dogs that exceed the invisible boundaries of an ungated enclosure,
 - d. humans with immature dogs who need the socialization the most, and
 - e. dogs that are unfairly expected to understand invisible boundaries.
- 4) There is no such thing as absolute voice control over dogs. Off-Leash dog parks in unenclosed areas often impose the rule that dogs must always be under the voice control of their custodians, as the Hillview pilot has required. But, in fact, NO dog is ever ALWAYS under control of their human custodian when off-leash. Many mishaps involving even highly trained and mature public safety dogs and care dogs have demonstrated this reality. Moreover, socialization for dogs is MOST important when they are young; immature dogs (first 18-36 months, depending on breed) are in no way ready to be under voice control to the extent that safety is assured in an open enclosure. Are we really saying that our youngest dogs must be kept away from the dog park and then abruptly introduced to the park after they have matured? That’s ill-advised, and ultimately ineffective dog care.
- 5) The walking path between Edith Avenue and the Community Center is sorely compromised. It is common that unassociated persons traverse the park on bikes, skateboards, jogging, etc. These visual surprises can be triggering to dogs, whose reactions could prove terrifying to certain persons. But even for unfearful persons (who may also be walking dogs), playful off-leash dogs often block the path and interfere with the thoroughfare’s function.
- 6) Dog parks are for the benefit of dogs, not for the benefit of human-to-human social interaction. A preponderance of dog trainers and behaviorists profess that dog parks (and even indoor day-care facilities) are truly beneficial to dogs only when humans are focusing on them doing

training, tempering, and socializing, all the while demonstrating active leadership over their dogs. Unleashed parks are not beneficial to dogs when their humans are socializing amongst themselves, yet allowing a free-for-all amongst the dogs.

- 7) Sports fields should not be used as dog parks. The pristine condition of the park is critical to ensure safety and wellness (healthfulness) for human users. Dogs will absolutely mar the surface (ruts, worn areas, pits, divots and loosened turf chunks, etc.) and soil the ground with feces, urine, and vomit. We all know how no one wants to play sports on marred fields and no one wants to put their hands, body and face where a dog has peed or pooped!
- 8) Hillview baseball field is unique. The Hillview baseball field is the only younger-age baseball diamond on Los Altos city land. It is the local home of LA Little League's younger Minors divisions. It should remain for that purpose until a replacement is built elsewhere.

What I personally favor and encourage the City Council to support:

- 1) Defer any decision on the dog park until Council has heard from the PARC and considered public input thereafter.
- 2) Allow only entirely fenced-in and vestibule-gated dog parks.
- 3) Identify and endorse multiple locations within the city; at least one to start and several over time.
- 4) Agree that only one park needs to be on the scale of Hillview outfield and it doesn't have to be the first one established; most dog parks would actually be more useful if smaller, where dog owners can really focus on socializing and training their dogs and the City can sponsor and hold classes for dog training.
- 5) Endorse the establishment of a "Friends of Los Altos Dog Parks" type volunteer organization to help the City with beautification, functional outfitting (Los Altos youth sports leagues do with the fields they rent), and fundraising for dog park features.
- 6) Special note on Hillview Baseball Field: I have already stated the reasons I do not favor this site (or any other unfenced/ungated site) for an off-leash dog park. However, there are a specific set of circumstances where I could favor Hillview Park as a dedicated dog park:
 - a. This field is shut down for baseball and human recreational activity use and dedicated to dog park usage, AND
 - b. Another baseball field is outfitted elsewhere in Los Altos for this age group of baseball and other appropriate human (non-dog) recreational classes/activities, AND
 - c. The park is entirely fenced, AND
 - d. The park is outfitted with at least one gate, with all gates having a "vestibule" mechanism so that owners can calm dogs during ingress/egress to the park and not let other dogs out inadvertently (see pictures below for examples; all dog park entrances should be outfitted with these types of gates), AND
 - e. The path along the field's north boundary is widened to be a proper two-way bike and walking path with sufficient spatial and visual buffer from the dog park, AND

- f. The enclosing fencing should be at least four feet tall chain link or similar with any portions that are adjacent to paths or parking to be made nearly or entirely opaque with screening to shield fearful passersby or unassociated dogs from interaction with dogs within the fenced area.
- g. Addendum: diagram and picture of a standard vestibule-type safety gate for dog parks:

