

Watson Dog Upper Valley Dog Park Committee
Hartford Parks and Recreation Department
Hartford Town Hall
171 Bridge Street, White River Junction, VT

Thursday, June 30 – 12:30PM
Meeting Minutes

Attendees: Tad Nunez, Addi Faerber, Amanda Childress, Michelle Grimes, Toni Richie, Gaylord Newcity, John G. Lewis, Mac Snyder, Phil Kasten, Len Roberts, Cassidy Neal, Laura Donica, Beth Young, Mike Morris, Dick Grassi, Marina Silvio, Dan Clark, Brett Mayfield, Fran Robinson

Meeting began at 12:30 pm

- Tad welcomed attendees to the meeting and reminded the group that we were not here to discuss elements of the recent incident in the Watson Dog Park as the Vermont State Police are conducting an ongoing investigation. He also noted that anyone looking for a platform for that type of discussion should be the Town Manager's Office or a Selectboard meeting. He stated that we are here to evaluate the management of the park. Chief Kasten and Major Roberts are not here to field questions regarding the recent incident.
- Introductions were made around the table.
- Addi explained that the Watson Dog Park exists as a subcommittee of the Hartford Parks & Recreation Committee and is managed through an agreement between the Town of Hartford and the Dog Park Committee.
 - The role of the department and volunteer committee is to raise funds for the management of the operations of the dog park, clean the park and make it safe, to maintain the grounds, to be liaisons for the park users, to trouble shoot issues that arise, and to act as stewards and ambassadors for the park. Tad said that he has always appreciated the two-way communications between the dog park leaders and the Recreation Department. He said that without the Dog Park Committee, there would be no dog park and gave credit to the leadership of Patsy Schneider and Leslie Carney in the early days.
 - He explained that the Town of Hartford owns the property and maintains the insurance on the dog park, but is not responsible for the support or operations of the park.
 - Tad read from the Rules and Regulations of Dog Park and asked for input.
 - Marina spoke about the difficulty with enforcing the park rules. There has been an ongoing problem with young children in the park. She shared that one person suggested that someone (an ambassador) be stationed at the park during busiest hours.

- Tad thought that there could be increased education about the etiquette of bringing a dog to the park
- Michelle (who is an animal behavioral specialist) stated that she believes any type of education or training would be beneficial. The majority of dog owners are anthropomorphic about their animals and don't want to believe that their dogs are "bad." Educating the dog owners would help them understand how to make their dogs more successful.
- Toni suggested having graphics or posters on display showing dog behaviors and signals; things to be aware of.
- Tad stated that this sort of discussion gives us an opportunity to make the park better.
- John Lewis asked that the committee consider limiting park users to one dog/one owner for better handling purposes (currently it is two dogs per owner).
- Laura Donica asked how it is currently handled when a park user is not following the rules.
- Tad asked the committee members how they feel about it. Discussion followed with members sharing their experiences with enforcement of rules.
 - Addi quoted Patsy saying, "The dog park isn't about the dogs. It's about the people," It's how the people interact. Patsy wasn't afraid to approach people when they were not following the rules and said that everyone has their own way of approaching rule-breakers depending on the situation. A lot of it is about self-policing.
 - Tad say he likes the idea of getting people together to make decisions with regard to the dog park.
 - Marina, who has been using the park for about eight years, said that early on, they were very big on self-policing. Now people are more cautious about approaching people. They have become more afraid of retaliation and this has happened. The dog park should have the right to approach park users without fear.
 - John asked to include a ban on guns in the park. Tad explained that the 2nd amendment supercedes local ordinances.
 - John reiterated his one dog/one owner idea. Tad said it was duly noted.
 - Tad introduced Parks and Recreation commission members Brett Mayfield and Cassidy Neal, stating that members of this body are also available to help with input about the dog park.
- Tad asked about the etiquette involved in visiting a dog park.
 - Addi talked about the early period of socialization, for both the dog and the owner) when a dog starts coming to the park. The owner is constantly training and working having their best behavior. Michelle

- interjected that what may be considered inappropriate in a human world may be entirely appropriate in a dog's world. Dogs are dogs.
- Tad thought that Ambassador training for human and their dogs would be helpful.
 - John suggested that iPhone use be banned from the park due to distraction of owners.
 - Tad has heard from someone who suggested that video surveillance also be installed.
 - Dan asked if, after a park user is spoken to but choose to ignore dog park rules, would it be appropriate to ask the Hartford Police Department to perform drive-bys.
 - Michele added that, from a behavioral standpoint, having a uniformed officer in the park should only be for difficult situations. The uniform/stature of an officer could cause a dog to be more anxious. All drive-bys would do is demonstrate police presence. Things could change in an instant in a dog park after the police depart.
 - Amanda added that membership education is the most important step for members to set the tone in the park.
 - Tad suggested that park users could call dispatch if they needed to. Everyone wants to make the dog park a healthy, safe place.
 - John asked if there could be a rule to have one dog leash free and any additional dogs on leach. Most attendees responded about the dangerous nature of mixing leashed and leash-free dogs.
 - Toni asked for education about breaking up a dog fight. There are a number of different suggestions. She would like instruction and guidance about how to break up a dog fight (wheelbarrow or leash around belly).
 - John stated that you have to know your own dog and if an incident occurs, both parties should stay in the park until the authorities arrive. Tad told him that he appreciated his input, but he had explicitly explained that we were not going to bring the incident up.
 - Michelle shared that the wheelbarrow approach could work, but when a dog switches from “thinking” brain to “instinctual” brain, you cannot get them back to “thinking” in that moment. Their natural instinct is to continue what they are doing. It depends on the dog and the situation. Bite sticks typically work well, but must be used only by people confident enough to try.
 - Tad brought up an “unpopular” suggestion he received to curtail certain breeds from the park.
 - Addi says that the reason that the rules say “no aggressive dogs” is that they don't want aggressive dogs. She reminded the group that we should not get into “breedism” or generalizations. She also shared

that there is no pattern in the breeds that have had incidents in Watson Dog Park.

- Michelle added that pit bulls are not really a specific breed.
- Marina asked that we not judge a dog by its breed.
- Cassidy stated that we need to be proactive at the park. “If you see something, say something,” and added that creating more rules and regulations is not necessarily the solution.
- Toni asked can rules be enforced? What should we do if there is a young child in the park? If she calls the police, could they do anything about it?
 - Chief Kasten said that the PD is very interested in helping and working with the group. They do get a lot of calls and there are 13 parks to police, but they will respond when asked and that they do have the ability to “trespass” someone if they consistently refuse to follow the rules at the dog park. Tad added that it has happened in the past. He notes that parks are always “entry by following rules and regulations.”
 - John stated that he has heard little from the board about changing the rules and suggested that his idea about one dog/one owner be put up for referendum.
 - Dan suggested that both parties be asked to leave the park (to calm down) when there is a scuffle between dogs. Marina stated that this is something that happens on regularly.
 - Tad called to attention the time and thanked people who took time from their jobs to attend.

Motion was made to adjourn by Addi and seconded by Toni. The meeting adjourned at 1:40 pm

Respectfully submitted: Fran Robinson