



Public open space can facilitate social interaction

Benefits of planning for dogs' use of public open space

- Enables public open space to be used for multiple purposes simultaneously and harmoniously
- Provides an opportunity for people to meet and interact
- Encourages people and dogs to exercise
- Can help Council's achieve improved outcomes in responsible pet ownership

Planners have not traditionally focussed on planning for dog owners, but it is becoming increasingly common. Councils that ignore the needs of dog owners may also miss out on the many benefits that inclusive planning affords.

Virginia Jackson is not a traditional town planner, being the first in the world to concentrate specifically on planning for pet owners. This includes planning for dogs and their owners to use public open space. Her guidelines, first developed in 1995 in association with the University of Queensland's Animal Behaviour and Welfare Group, have been implemented by Councils around the world. At that time, dogs were being increasingly excluded from public places. Jackson was convinced there had to be a better way of providing for dogs and their owners whilst reducing risk and nuisance.

However, she very quickly noticed the common incidence around the world of dog owners meeting and getting to know one another in the park. It works like this: when the same people meet at the same park at the same time on a regular basis they get to know one another – some will even structure their day around going to the park at the “right” time.

“I’ve seen countless examples of friendships being formed, people holding functions in the park, walking groups being created, people moving in with one another and people helping each other out.” Virginia Jackson, Town Planner



“One of the more interesting things is that dogs can break down social barriers – dog owners come together regardless of age, gender, race and social economic status. The dog is the common denominator. And even better, it requires no membership, no formal meetings and no exchange of money. It can be done anytime and take place pretty much anywhere.”

These are all examples of positive social capital.

However, encouraging dog owners to meet and talk to one another might also contribute to higher levels of responsible pet ownership – mainly through peer group pressure amongst dog owners in the park. One Council

in Melbourne has taken this a step further by tapping into local dog owner networks in their off leash parks as a vehicle for delivering the responsible pet ownership message.

“Providing dog owner facilities is such a straightforward way of building social capital and improving responsible pet ownership.” Virginia Jackson

Tips

- Look to the edition of Virginia Jackson’s “Public Open Space and Dogs Planning Guidelines” published on www.petnet.com.au and implement the designs most suitable to your area/s

She hopes more Councils will start to investigate the opportunities that exist in their area.

Web Links

Public Open Space and Dogs Planning Guidelines
- www.petnet.com.au