

\$350,000 Dog park planned

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middletown

While excited about the idea, one county commissioner said the price of the project is way too much.

A big, impressive bow WOW of a dog park is planned for Core Creek County Park in Middletown and should get a paws up from area canines.

But while the three Bucks County commissioners support the concept, one is alarmed by the estimated cost, set at \$350,000 by county Parks and Recreation director Bill Mitchell.

"That's way too much money," said Commissioner Diane Marseglia. "I hope in the future we can have talks about scaling it back. I am completely confused about that cost estimate because the last price I thought I heard was about \$100,000 and I thought that was too much. It is a great idea, though. I think it might be the only thing all three of us have agreed on."

Marseglia, a Democrat, is referring to the frequent disagreements between her and the other two commissioners, Republicans James Cawley and Charley Martin.

The 2.6-acre dog park is planned for an area of Core Creek near the Tollgate Road entrance and next to the 24-hour fishing spot on Lake Luxembourg. Mitchell said the commissioners might vote to go out to bid on the project by mid-September and the dog park might be finished by the end of the year.

Mitchell said those who want to use the dog park must register and pay a yearly membership fee (amount not yet determined), and users will then be issued cards to gain access to the dog park. That process will also ensure that all dogs have their proper shots and licenses, he said.

The plan includes a 2-acre fenced-in area for larger dogs (more than 25 pounds) and a 0.6-acre area for smaller dogs (25 pounds or less). Other features are two watering stations, where pet owners can get water for themselves and their dogs, two pavilions to provide shade and cover from rain and several other smaller shade structures. There also is a 23-space gravel parking lot and other amenities.

By comparison, Falls built a dog park in its community park for about \$50,000. However, it's not nearly as big and includes few of the features planned for Core Creek. The Falls dog park is essentially two fenced-in areas for large dogs and small dogs and a few benches. There are no watering stations, pavilions or covered shade structures, and Falls put in no additional parking to accommodate the dog park.

Price estimates for dog parks planned in Bensalem, Lower Southampton and Morrisville range from \$12,000 to \$75,000. All figure to be much more similar to the Falls dog park in terms of "bare bones" design simplicity than the one planned for Core Creek.

Dog parks are becoming more popular because they allow canines to run free and get more exercise without bothering people who don't want to be approached by loose dogs.

"They seem to be popping up everywhere in various municipalities," said Martin. "We have a petition with several hundred names on it asking us to put one in Core Creek. It seems to be something that is quite popular and I'm sure ours will be well used."

Martin and Cawley said they aren't as concerned about the price estimate as Marseglia.

"If we're going to build one, we might as well build a nice complete facility," said Martin. "If it gets to the point where we think it's getting too costly, we can talk about scaling it back. We might have some money coming in from our tipping fees from the landfills (in Falls and Tullytown) that can be used for recreational projects like this. There also might be plans to do some private fundraising to help pay for it."

County Finance Director Brian Hessenthaler said a funding source for the dog park hasn't been finalized. It might be a combination of leftover money from a 2002 bond issue and trash tipping fees, he said. As host county for the two landfills, Bucks gets \$1.9 million to \$2.1 million a year from Waste Management. Some of that goes to the general fund and some for recreation projects, Hessenthaler said.

Mitchell said the yearly fees to use the dog park might also help offset some of the construction cost but would more likely just be applied to maintenance costs once the park is up and running.

Mitchell's initial price estimate to build the dog park is just that, an estimate, Cawley pointed out. In the current down economy, contractors eager for work are often submitting lower than expected bids on projects, he said.

"I haven't seen the plan for the dog park yet, so I want to take a closer look to see what we'd be getting for that money," said Cawley. "Before I get terribly concerned about the dollar amount, I want to see what we're getting for our dollars and also get some hard bids to see if it will really be as expensive as what has been projected."

As a county facility, the dog park figures to attract a lot of pets and their owners from a fairly wide area, said Mitchell. The park needed to be big enough to allow enough animals in while giving each one enough room, he said. Piping water in also adds considerably to the expense, Mitchell added.

Newtown Township resident Patrick Flanigan, who has helped collect about 1,000 signatures on petitions in support of the Core Creek dog park, is looking forward to bringing his three dogs there.

"When I was young, you could take a dog to an open field and let it run, but with all the development, those open fields are less and less," said Flanigan. "People like to let their dogs off the leash so these dog parks are becoming more popular."

Dog park users would be required to sign a waiver to protect the county against lawsuits in case someone is bitten or injured, Mitchell said.

Flanigan also said he would be willing to help raise private funds to help pay for the dog park.

"I think it would be wonderful," said Middletown resident Jeannie Fissinger. She and her father, John, were walking their dogs, Nicolas and Blossom, on a recent day at Core Creek.

"There would have to be rules on requiring dogs to have their shots and cleaning up after them, but a dog park would be better for the dogs and better for the people who are afraid of them," Fissinger said.

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