

MEMORANDUM

CITY OF GRAND RAPIDS

DATE: August 6, 2004

TO: Mayor Heartwell & City Commissioners

Cc: Kurt Kimball, City Manager
Victor Vasquez, Assistant City Manager
Jay Steffen, Director, Parks & Recreation

FROM: Lynn Heemstra, Administrator
Office of Children, Youth & Families

SUBJECT: Off Leash Dog Parks

On August 10, 2004, you will be presented with a resolution seeking City Commission authorization to designate a portion of Hillcrest Park for an off-leash dog area. While a group of concerned citizens has worked to find a suitable location for their dog park, I ask that you consider the following as you make your decision regarding park use.

Off-leash dog parks can be great places to take a dog, however, they pose significant risks to children. In fact, the literature on dog parks strongly states that a dog park is not a place for children and that precautions must be taken to minimize risk. Dog park rules vary per city. Generally children, aged 14 or under, are banned, or are allowed in only with adult supervision. There are many reasons for this:

- Not all dogs are child-friendly.
- If a child has a toy or food, an unleashed dog could knock down a child trying to get at it.
- A child could become a victim of dog bite.
- Children are more susceptible to contracting intestinal worms and other infections from playing in grass where dog urine and feces are present.
- Children can pick up fleas, ticks or lice from dogs.

I appreciate the committee's search for land that is underutilized as dog parks are not meant as places for child or family recreation. If the intent to convert park land to dog parks becomes a trend, I fear a cumulative net loss of child and family recreational and picnicking areas. A "cool" city is a "kid-friendly" city with plenty of safe, open parkland within which to play.

If you do decide to reallocate park land for a dog park, I ask that you consider the following:

1. That there be signs installed highlighting the dangers posed to children, and how to prevent dog bites and diseases.
2. That children under the age of 14 not be allowed to enter the dog park without proper adult supervision. The public needs to know the risks posed to them.
3. That dog parks are not located anywhere near playgrounds.
4. That dog parks enforce dog etiquette to minimize barking and aggressive fighting among dogs for the sake of residents who live nearby.

Useful tips for visits to an off-leash dog park including both children and canine safety can be found at www.fidocarolina.org.

Thank you for evaluating this decision in the light of what is in the best interests of our City's children and their families.