

Off-Leash Recreational Areas
Executive Summary
February 24, 2006

City of Montgomery staff presented the concept of developing a dog park or “off-leash recreational area” to the Montgomery City Council during the 2006 budget planning process. The OLRA project was included for funding in the 2006 Budget within the Capital Improvement Program with additional direction from Montgomery City Council that city staff complete additional research and fact finding regarding the design, construction, operations and maintenance and community interest in the development of this recreational amenity.

An off-leash recreational area is an enclosed area that is specifically designed for people and their dogs to interact, play and socialize. Its design invites dogs to be off-leash while under the supervision of their owners. While off-leash areas vary in size and in the amenities provided, there are some very specific design features found in successfully operated and well-maintained facilities that include good accessibility and parking facilities, established and posted hours of operation, physical separation of the OLRA from other park uses along with a site that allows a suitable surface of turf, mulch or other material that can be provided and maintained at a reasonable cost.

Staff began its research and quickly discovered there was a City of Montgomery resident familiar with area off-leash recreational areas who volunteered her time and expertise with the research efforts. Staff soon was contacted by other residents and former residents that agreed to assist with researching and reviewing information on a local and national level. As a result of these initial discussions, the ad hoc Dog Park Advisory Group began its efforts to research off-leash recreational facilities.

The ad hoc group reviewed information, visited and inspected other OLRA facilities and made contact with people that participated in the design, construction and maintenance to identify what made their facilities successful. In completing this research, there were many valuable design ideas that were included in the line item budget such as additional screening and buffering, separate areas for large or active dogs from smaller or less active dogs, source of drinking water for OLRA visitors, conveniently located waste collection bags and disposal containers and aesthetically pleasing perimeter fencing . What was especially interesting was the fact that the most successful OLRAs were not just built or designed as a facility for dogs as the name “Dog Park” would imply. It was found that a successful OLRA included features important to dog owners and were operated with very specific objectives and guidelines for both immediate as well as continued success that require registration prior to use, acknowledgement of operating guidelines by all OLRA visitors, city regulations and ordinances that support the established rules for use, and community involvement and input from the time that ideas and plans are first developed for an OLRA and continuing through the construction and operations phases.

The ad hoc group then began to review existing City of Montgomery parks to determine if there were any locations that had the necessary features and potential to be developed into a successful off-leash recreational area. After a thorough review, it was agreed that a location in Pioneer Park was a suitable study location for an OLRA.

Once Pioneer Park was identified as the site to be studied, the ad hoc group then began to focus its efforts on the design and the site-specific features that either exist on site or that could be incorporated into that location. Liability and environmental issues were researched and specific construction, operational and design criteria recommendations were developed including requiring users to sign a waiver of liability prior to use, revisions of city regulations including establishment of penalties for non-compliant usage of the OLRA, clearly established requirements regarding the removal of dog waste and a site plan that recognizes the importance providing and maintaining a suitable surface that will not erode or wear away and a comprehensive plan that addresses and minimizes or eliminates possible adverse impacts to surrounding properties or other park users regarding noise, air or water pollution.

The City of Montgomery also reached out to all residents and businesses in the community through the monthly newsletter, the "Montgomery Bulletin" and the City's website with a community survey asking specific questions regarding the dog park or off-leash concept, the proposed location in Pioneer Park, the level of interest or support for this type of recreational facility, the types and amenities that would be important for users and the anticipated usage of the facility. Survey responses indicated that a majority of households responding to the survey were in support of the concept and the study site in Pioneer Park.

Equally as important to selecting the site location was to establish construction and operations and maintenance budgets. It was determined that the location selected could be designed and built with the necessary safety and operating features, user amenities and the additional screening and buffering that would allow the site to be incorporated into the park without displacing any existing designated recreation areas for a projected construction cost of \$44,356.00

The ad hoc group then researched and compiled process and operation guidelines determined to be important for the successful operation and maintenance of the study location in Pioneer Park. Recommendations include limiting use and incorporating design features and user friendly amenities that provide dogs, dog owners and other stake holders not just an OLRA site, but a well thought out plan that provides for the OLRA to successfully integrate into Pioneer Park and its widely varied uses. Projections indicate that the OLRA would self-fund its projected annual operations and maintenance costs of \$3,850 through the collection of projected annual registration fees of \$10,000 or higher.

One of the final components that the ad hoc group researched and developed was how to enlist the financial support for the construction of the facility through fund raising efforts. The concept of fund raising was reviewed with other local government agencies that had previously built an OLRA. The responses were encouraging as other agencies reported success at raising funds for construction and so city staff then reviewed and established fund raising information and packets that will be utilized if the OLRA is approved. Contacts have been received from interested donors on both local and national levels that have expressed their interest in

financially participating and partnering on the construction of an OLRA in the City of Montgomery.

The research that has been completed has been compiled into a comprehensive report and site plan. The report includes specific recommendations that were developed based on the extensive review of other off-leash recreational areas. This fast growing trend in parks and recreation development has been successful on a local and national level. Based on the research completed, City of Montgomery staff recommends that the Parks and Recreation Commission and City Council consider this trend, examine the research and ideas presented in the full report and make a policy determination as to whether this type of park development is warranted for our community.