

CITY OF BELLEVUE  
CITY COUNCIL

Summary Minutes of Study Session

June 15, 2009  
6:00 p.m.

Council Conference Room  
Bellevue, Washington

PRESENT: Mayor Degginger, Deputy Mayor Balducci, and Councilmembers Bonincontri, Chelminiak, Davidson, and Lee

ABSENT: Councilmember Noble

1. Executive Session

Deputy Mayor Balducci opened the meeting at 6:00 p.m. and declared recess to Executive Session for approximately one hour to discuss one item of pending litigation and one item of property acquisition.

The Study Session resumed at 7:09 p.m., with Mayor Degginger presiding.

2. Study Session

(a) Off-Leash Study Report and Recommendations

City Manager Steve Sarkozy recalled previous discussion regarding the Off-Leash Study Report, and the Council's interest in further review of the topic.

Parks and Community Services Director Patrick Foran introduced Faith Roland, Vice Chair of the Parks and Community Services Board.

Ms. Roland reported on the Board's discussion and recommendations regarding the Off-Leash Study. The Board voted 4-3 to endorse the study's recommendations, and no concerns were raised regarding the recommended level of service, geographic distribution, or location criteria. However, the Board had concerns regarding the proposed use of Neighborhood Enhancement Program (NEP) funds, the one-year trial period, and the identification of Robinswood Park as a preferred location over Eastgate Park.

Mr. Foran recalled that this issue was brought to the attention of staff and the Council through two separate efforts within the community. One group of residents recently began advocating for an off-leash area in Downtown Park, and other residents have been working to preserve the meadow as part of the Eastgate Park Master Plan process.

Glenn Kost, Planning Manager, said the City's records indicate there have been 12 requests for off-leash areas through the Neighborhood Enhancement Program since 2001. The City currently allows dogs on leashes in all parks except for the beach parks during swim season, Bellevue Botanical Garden, and synthetic sports fields.

Mr. Kost reviewed the list of off-leash facilities in the area including Marymoor Park, Robinswood Park, Medina Park, Luther Burbank Park on Mercer Island, and the informal meadow at the Eastgate properties. Off-leash areas can be fenced, or unfenced and shared with other park uses. Staff recommends fenced off-leash areas for Bellevue parks.

Mr. Kost said the study recommends one off-leash area per 30,000 population, or four facilities within Bellevue. Nearby facilities range in size from one-half acre to 40 acres. The study recommends a minimum one-acre size for most areas in the community, and a smaller area of at least 5,000 square feet in Downtown Park or another location. Staff recommends retaining and expanding the Robinswood Park off-leash area to serve East Bellevue. Additional candidate sites identified in the study are McCormick Park, Wilburton Park or Highland/Glendale site, and Lakemont Park.

Mr. Kost noted the Parks Board's recommendation against using NEP funds for off-leash areas because it is an uncertain funding source. The Board further questioned the appropriateness of requiring off-leash projects to compete with other popular projects such as playgrounds and sidewalks. Mr. Kost said staff suggested the use of NEP funds because the program involves neighborhood-based decision making, and neighborhood off-leash facilities could be provided within the \$150,000 threshold for NEP projects. Alternatives for Council consideration include not identifying a funding mechanism at this time, excluding off-leash areas from NEP funding, identifying alternate funding, and/or funding as part of Eastgate Park Phase I development.

The Parks Board objected to the one-year trial period because it was seen as an additional obstacle to obtaining and continuing funding for off-leash areas. Mr. Kost said the City of Seattle and other jurisdictions have successfully used trial periods for off-leash areas. However, Bellevue could choose to not implement a trial period.

Mr. Kost said the Parks Board did not support the Robinswood Park location because it undermines the ongoing Eastgate Master Plan process. The Board concluded that appropriate uses at Eastgate Park should be decided through that process, and not as part of the Off-Leash Study. The Board opined that Eastgate Park is an appropriate location for an off-leash area, and that a three- to five-acre facility should be included in the Master Plan. The Robinswood facility is viewed as unacceptable because it is small, muddy, lacks variety, and therefore attracts poorly behaved dogs.

Mr. Kost said the Parks Board objects to the McCormick Park location as an unacceptable alternative to Downtown Park. It also ignores the potential light-rail conflict. Staff recommends McCormick Park for its accessibility, nearby parking, low cost, and low user conflict. Staff feels that Downtown Park is not an appropriate site for a number of reasons. It was entered into an

international design competition, and included a design principle specifying a passive-oriented green space free of buildings and special interest facilities. Downtown Park receives the most frequent requests for special interest facilities, and the City has resisted modifications to the original design philosophy. Staff recommends exploring other downtown alternatives for off-leash areas. Mr. Kost said staff is not in favor of shared use off-leash areas because they displace other park uses and raise operational and safety issues.

Responding to Mayor Degginger, Mr. Kost said off-leash dogs are not allowed at Cougar Mountain Wildlife Park.

Responding to Councilmember Lee, Mr. Kost said a primary complaint within the parks system is conflicts between off-leash dogs and other park users. Experience has shown that in situations in which shared use areas are designated for specific hours and/or times of the year, the off-leash use eventually takes over the park.

Responding to Councilmember Lee, Ms. Roland clarified that all members of the Parks Board support the development of off-leash areas. However, there was some disagreement regarding specific recommendations of the Off-Leash Study, as previously described and as detailed in the meeting packet materials.

Mayor Degginger thanked staff for addressing this issue so quickly and thoroughly.

Councilmember Chelminiak said the key issue for him is shared use versus fenced corral facilities. He is troubled by the concept that if you have a dog and are allowed to have it off of its leash, it must be penned in. He recalled that Eastgate Park was purchased by the City knowing of the meadow's ongoing use as an off-leash dog area, which functions well as a shared use area. Mr. Chelminiak feels a shared use area would work at Robinswood Park as well. He encourages using natural features to identify the boundaries of shared use areas. He feels the City has an obligation to find a facility similar to the Eastgate meadow, or to provide for the use at Eastgate Park. He supports both sports fields and an off-leash area at Eastgate Park.

Councilmember Chelminiak is open to considering a shared use, unfenced area in Downtown Park with specific hours for off-leash use. He noted that the areas are not just for dogs but to facilitate socialization between people and create a sense of community.

Councilmember Bonincontri commended staff for doing a good job of conducting a system-wide assessment. She is open to considering off-leash areas at both Robinswood and Eastgate, depending on the type and size of the facilities. She agrees with Councilmember Chelminiak that Downtown Park is a better location than McCormick Park. She does not see the need for a one-year trial period.

Deputy Mayor Balducci reviewed the principles that she would apply in considering this issue. Parks are for everyone and all uses, and clearly the City should have a plan for dealing with off-leash dog uses. She feels that this plan should acknowledge current uses, including the longtime use of the Eastgate meadow by dogs and their owners. Ms. Balducci said decisions regarding

off-leash areas should be based on community needs and demands and not necessarily on a numerical formula that provides areas based only on population. For example, the City knows that residents want to be able to walk to an off-leash area in the Downtown. Ms. Balducci noted that it is important for the City to enforce park rules regarding dogs.

Ms. Balducci agrees that the City's plan should identify multiple sites and provide citywide geographic distribution. She encourages providing a wider variety of experiences, including locations with a more natural setting and open space.

Deputy Mayor Balducci noted that the Eastgate Master Plan process is considering a number of options, including retention of the off-leash area. The Council's acquisition of the Eastgate property included the objective of providing sports fields at this location. If an off-leash area cannot be accommodated at Eastgate Park along with the sports fields, she supports the concept of a large open space at Robinswood Park with a natural setting that better matches the environment of the existing Eastgate meadow.

Ms. Balducci is in favor of a trial shared use area in the Downtown Park with specific hours for off-leash use. She does not think McCormick Park is an appropriate location, however. Funding for the Eastgate facility or replacement, and for the Downtown Park, should be identified through the regular budget process. She is not opposed to designating NEP funding as an allowed source.

At 8:03 p.m., Mayor Degginger declared recess to the Regular Session. He suggested continuing the discussion regarding the Off-Leash Study at the end of the Regular Session Agenda.

Myrna L. Basich  
City Clerk

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