

CLOSE WINDOW

The ChronicleHerald.ca

Published: 2009-09-08

Off-leash park for service dogs now open

By JEFFREY SIMPSON Staff Reporter

When Helen McFadyen got her first Seeing Eye dog a few years ago, she realized quickly there was a need in Halifax for places to exercise the animals.

Her five-year-old black Lab, Opal, is extremely well trained and disciplined, but like other dogs she needs a chance to run free, play and sniff around a bit.

"That's a huge thing, that part of a dog's life," Ms. McFadyen, 53, said Monday. "They need the downtime because working dogs, especially guide dogs, have a pretty stressful job.

"They have to do stuff that's opposed to their natural instinct."

So as the chairwoman of Halifax's advisory committee for people with disabilities, she started to push three years ago for an enclosed place where people could take their working dogs without worrying about them running away or getting into trouble.

"I thought, wouldn't it be great if there was a place where I could go and my guide dog could run freely," she said.

Now there is.

The municipality's first off-leash park specifically designated for working dogs opened earlier this summer across from the Centennial Pool on Cogswell Street in Halifax.

Ms. McFadyen said she got the idea from American cities such as New York, which has several urban dog parks.

"There was no such thing that ever caught on here in Canada," she said.

The small, fenced area has a double gate, benches and a dispenser for doggy-do bags.

"That's enough," Ms. McFadyen said.

She believes there are 75 to 80 working dogs in the municipality whose owners could benefit from the new park. Many of them live in apartments, so they don't have a backyard where the dogs can run.

Ms. McFadyen, a divinity student at the Atlantic School of Theology, lives in residence.

"If I were to let Opal off leash, she'd probably decide she wants to go swimming in the Northwest Arm," she said. "And I don't think I want her smelling like that."

She said the park cost about \$25,000 to build and caused some envy among other dog owners in the city who have been lobbying for off-leash areas. She said she has no problem sharing the space with non-working dogs, as long as they're behaving.

"There are people who have really wacko dogs out there," she said. "My dog's been attacked. We've been jumped on by pet dogs."

(jsimpson@herald.ca)

CLOSE WINDOW

© 2008 The Halifax Herald Limited