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Halifax service dogs christen their new park

Halifax News Net

By Kate Watson – The Weekly News

The piece of land next to Centennial Pool in downtown Halifax has truly gone to the dogs.

Canada's first service dog exercise facility held its grand opening last month and the park was christened by three overjoyed pooches.

Helen McFadyen, chairwoman of the advisory committee for persons with disabilities for HRM, was the first to arrive with her guide dog, a black Labrador named Opal. The pair headed to a bench in the shade of a large tree situated in the centre of the pie-shaped park.

McFadyen said that city staff began scouting for a suitable location for the park after the idea was suggested two years ago.

"This piece of land was basically unwanted and unusable for other things," she said. "They just had to add some new fencing, level the turf and put up some signage. It was a relatively inexpensive project."

The next arrivals were Cosby and his owner, Charlie Macdonald. Cosby, a five-year-old lab-golden retriever mix, waited attentively to have his harness removed and then proceeded to sniff out his surroundings.

"These dogs have a pretty stressful job," said Macdonald. "It's important that it's not all work for them."

The real value of the park was obvious upon the arrival of the third dog. Iron, a special skills dog who provides assistance to his owner, Kimberlee Dowe, for her medical condition, was obviously ready to run when released from his duties. The other dogs joined in and were soon tearing madly about in the summer sun, chasing squeaky toys, and each other.

It's estimated there are about 80 service dogs working in HRM, including seeing eye dogs, dogs who help the hearing impaired and dogs who work with people with autism and other disabilities.

The city has also received requests from citizens who would like to see a fenced off-leash dog park that is open to the public, but HRM staff say that a project like that runs contrary to the "parks are for people" premise and raises issues of liability.

"I hope the companion dog community understands the need for this facility and respects that it is only for service dogs," said McFadyen. "It's a well-deserved treat for animals who work so hard."

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Pups enjoy the new service dog exercise facility on the corner of Cogswell Street and Rainnie Drive, next to Centennial Pool in downtown Halifax. Charlie Macdonald and Cosby (left), take a break with Helen McFadyen and Opal.

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