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New off-leash park to give service dogs a place to run

Halifax News Net

By Jon Tattrie – The Weekly News

Guide-dog users in Halifax are celebrating what might be Canada's first service-dog-only off-leash park with the opening of a new run downtown. "HRM has responded to a request for a designated exercise area for service dogs that is safe for the dogs and accessible to their handlers," said Blair Blakney of HRM. "Preliminary research leads us to believe that this may be one of the first dog runs in North America designed and designated specifically for use by service dogs."

The small park, on the corner of Rainnie Drive and Cogswell Street adjacent to Centennial Pool, is scheduled to open this week.

Shelley Adams, who works on Almon Street at the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, commutes from Dartmouth daily with her guide dog Buena. They're both excited. Buena rarely gets to run off her leash, and the location, near a bus stop, will make the park a convenient spot for a lunchtime break.

"When she gets to a fun area, or someone's yard where she can run around, she just does her Lab loops, goes nuts, and then she's done. She doesn't need a lot of time to play before she gets tired," Adams said of her five-year-old black Lab. "She loves working and she loves her time off."

"I think it's great that it's only for service dogs," Adams added. "Chances are, you're not going to have a lot of dogs there at once, but if there was another dog there, that's nice, too, because dogs like to play with each other and don't always have the opportunity."

Helen McFadyen, chairwoman of HRM's Advisory Committee for Persons with Disabilities, has been working on the park for two years. HRM has a \$200,000 fund for improving accessibility and this year, some of it was steered toward fixing up the unused park space.

McFadyen estimates there are 80 service dogs in HRM, including guide dogs for the blind, "hearing" dogs for the deaf (which alert to bells, knocking, and alarms), seizure-alert dogs for people with epilepsy, and "special skills" dogs trained to perform specific tasks for people according to their disability or medical condition.

Like McFadyen and her guide dog Opal, many people with service dogs live in apartments and don't have yards.

"We wanted the possibility of having our dogs off-leash. It doesn't need to be a large area, just an area they could be off-leash and run like nuts to blow the stink off," she said, adding she expects most users will make sure their dogs use the washroom before hitting the run.

"It is important that hard-working service dogs get a chance to exercise and have some off-leash down time, like any other dog. The creation of this small exercise facility will provide a safe place for me to take my guide dog without the worry of losing track of her, like I might in a big park," McFadyen said.

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Shelley Adams and her guide dog Buena are looking forward to Halifax's new off-leash park.

07/08/09








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