

INTRODUCTION

STUDY BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Since the first municipal dog park was founded in 1979 in Berkeley, California, dog parks have become an increasingly desired public amenity in communities throughout the United States. To many, dogs are considered beloved family members and collectively, American communities have shifted their views; dog parks are no longer seen as specialty auxiliary facilities, but rather public spaces necessary for dog socialization and exercise.

While the exact number of dogs in the United States is unknown, the American Veterinary Medical Association reported in 2016 that there are an estimated 77 million dogs in the United States, with this figure increasing annually¹. The development of new dog parks in the United States has risen over 40 percent in the last decade². According to Fairfax County's dog license data, in 2019 there were a total of 81,007 dogs registered in the County. Fairfax County, like many jurisdictions across the United States, has seen an increase in its dog population. The number of licensed dogs in the County increased by approximately 10% between 2009 and 2019.

Fairfax County is a large and populous county; it contains almost 400 square miles and is home to more than one million people. As of the 2010 Census, Fairfax County was the most populous jurisdiction in the Washington D.C. metropolitan region³. As of 2019, it is estimated that 19.3% of households in the County own a dog⁴. Fairfax County is also a diverse and growing county; as the County continues to grow, so will its dog population.

Over the years, the public has shared numerous inquiries and ideas pertaining to both existing and future dog parks with FCPA. At present, there are 13 public dog parks in Fairfax County, 11 of which are owned and operated by the Fairfax County Park Authority (FCPA). While these parks meet the County's 2020 need⁵ (as calculated by total population) for dog parks, the public's interest in dog parks continues to grow.

In addition, the County is comprised of a complex combination of both suburban and urban land uses and lifestyles. This variation in geography has influenced the size, design, and operation of existing dog parks, and will continue to have implications for future dog parks in the County.

Moreover, the planning, operations, and maintenance standards for public dog parks in the County have evolved significantly since the first dog park was constructed in 2000. To capture these changes, as well as to ensure FCPA's procedures are aligned with current best practices, updates to guidance surrounding how dog parks are planned, designed, and maintained both now and in the future are needed.

¹ www.washingtonpost.com/science/2019/01/31/how-many-americans-have-pets-an-investigation-into-fuzzy-statistics/

² www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-28/not-everyone-loves-your-new-dog-park-this-is-why

³ Fairfax County Comprehensive Plan, Policy Plan, Preface and Introduction p.1

⁴ According to 2019 Fairfax County dog license data tabulations conducted by Park Authority staff.

⁵ Established by the 2016 FCPA Needs Assessment,

<https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/sites/parks/files/assets/documents/plandev/parkscout/needs-assessment-plan-050616.pdf>

INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the County's ever-growing population distributed across a mix of suburban and urban land uses, the many voices and interests conveyed by the public, and need for updated standards and guidance, the 2019-2020 dog park study was undertaken by FCPA to achieve the following:

- Evaluate countywide dog park need and update dog park planning and siting processes
- Review and revise site placement guidelines and design standards
- Recommend potential design and operational improvements to existing dog parks
- Review and develop operations and maintenance best practices
- Evaluate dog park volunteering opportunities and identify appropriate responsibilities
- Research membership, sponsoring, and fundraising opportunities
- Analyze rules, enforcement, and etiquette

Note: Components of this report drew inspiration from a variety of other similar dog park studies that were conducted in other jurisdictions across the U.S., including the following: City of Raleigh (Dog Park Study 2019), Ann Arbor (Recommendations and Guidelines for Dog Park Site Selection, Design, Operations and Maintenance 2013/2014) Montgomery County (Dog Park Site Suitability Study 2019), and the City of Seattle (People, Dogs & Parks Plan 2017).

REPORT ORGANIZATION

The 2020 Dog Park Study is organized around six themes, shown below. The themes, which are underpinned by the study scope, guided research, and analysis, are also reflected in study recommendations. A report section is dedicated to each theme and the sections are color-coded for ease of use. The six themes are:

| | |
|--|---|
|  PLANNING |  VOLUNTEERING |
|  DESIGN |  FUNDING SOURCES, PARTNERSHIPS AND DONATION |
|  OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE |  RULES AND ENFORCEMENT |

Each themed section is organized into three key parts:

KEY TAKEAWAYS

The *Key Takeaways* part of each section provides an overview of the primary recommendations with a brief description of the analysis that informed the specific recommendation.

ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

The *Analysis & Findings* part of each section presents the information collected and analyzed for each themed section. Data sources used include public input, benchmarking, Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis, and research, including a review of historical documentation, industry literature, and regulatory and policy guidance documents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The *Recommendations* part of each section builds upon the analysis and findings determined for each theme by providing suggestions that address the key questions or areas identified for potential improvement. Following the themed sections, the report concludes with implementation strategies, followed by appendices.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

The report includes an *Implementation Strategies* section that provides action items that support and sustain the implementation of the theme's recommendations. These strategies are centered around coordination and communication and span all six research themes.

APPENDICES

The report includes four appendices that provide more detailed information to support the report. These appendices are referenced in several of the themed sections and should be used as supplemental material in conjunction with the report. Appendices include:

- APPENDIX 1 – DOG PARK STANDARDS & GUIDELINES
- APPENDIX 2 – FULL SURVEY RESULTS
- APPENDIX 3 – INVENTORY OF FCPA'S EXISTING DOG PARKS
- APPENDIX 4 – DEFINITIONS

STUDY SCOPE

At the beginning of the study, 20 questions were proposed to be addressed through research and analysis. These questions formed the study scope, which was heavily informed by public inquiries received by FCPA over the past few years, as well as by existing conditions and current dog park operations practices. The study questions were organized into six key themes: planning, design, operations and maintenance, volunteering, funding sources/partnerships/donation opportunities, and rules and enforcement. These themes also form the organizational structure of this report. The themes and study questions are presented below:

STUDY SCOPE QUESTIONS

| THEMES | STUDY SCOPE QUESTIONS |
|--|---|
| Planning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How many dog parks should Fairfax County have? How far should citizens be expected to travel to visit a dog park? Where should they be located? |
| Design | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the most important design features and amenities for dog parks? What are the optimal design guidelines and criteria for new dog parks? What improvements can be made to existing dog parks? |
| Operations & Maintenance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the most important features or amenities to upkeep in dog parks? What should the optimal maintenance procedures and standards be for dog parks? What maintenance issues vary depending on dog park features, design and intensity of use? What factors of dog park operation warrant oversight and at what frequency? Should FCPA provide off-leash unfenced areas for dogs in other public parks? |
| Volunteering | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Should FCPA encourage citizens to get involved with volunteer teams to care for dog parks? What duties are appropriate for dog park volunteers to perform? |
| Funding Sources, Partnerships and Donation Opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Should FCPA establish a dog park membership program? Should the County provide a portion of revenues from dog license fees to support FCPA dog parks? Should revenue-generating programs be provided/permitted in dog parks? What opportunities exist for successful partnerships for dog parks? What types of donations would be feasible for dog parks? |
| Rules & Enforcement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Should current rules for the age of children permitted in dog parks be revised? Should current regulations for dog park hours, closures for routine maintenance or other events be revised? |

STUDY APPROACH & METHODOLOGY

With the dog park study scope established, FCPA formed a cross-agency project team. This cross-agency team brought diverse perspectives and expertise from a variety of FCPA functional areas, which were critical to addressing the wide range of subjects included in the study scope. The team was comprised of representatives from functional areas such as planning and development, operations and maintenance, park services, and the Fairfax County Park Foundation, among others.

The approach to the dog park study was two-fold: first, the project team conducted research and analysis and employed data-driven methods; second, the project team engaged the public to gain insights, ideas, and a deeper understanding of the public's needs, priorities, and preferences when it comes to dog parks. Combined, these methods formed the basis for the recommendations in this report.

RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The project team conducted extensive research on industry best practices and employed benchmarking to peer jurisdictions. The team also inventoried and analyzed existing and planned dog parks, and conducted data analysis, using tools such as GIS and examining datasets such as Fairfax County dog license data. Past and present policies and procedures were also analyzed. The appendices of this report contain a variety of outputs prepared as a part of the research conducted for this study (such as recommended design guidelines), as well as a complete inventory of FCPA's existing dog parks.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Public input played a critical role in the dog park study. The community provided feedback during two key stages in the project: the project initiation phase (Fall/Winter 2019) and the draft report stage (Spring 2021).

PROJECT INITIATION (FALL/WINTER 2019)

In the project initiation stage, the public was invited to provide feedback to FCPA on the County's dog parks through two primary methods: through a 30-day online survey and through submission of comments to FCPA via the project website. Over 4,600 responses and 2,500 unique comments were received through the survey. Eleven electronic comments were received via the project website.

Dog Park Study Survey Summary

The public was invited to participate and provide responses to the survey during a 30-day period, from November 15, 2019, to December 15, 2019. The survey was hosted on FCPA's dog park study webpage using PublicInput.com, a public engagement platform and survey software tool. Information from the survey helped FCPA to better understand current dog park use, concerns, and future needs. Over

4,600 responses to the survey were received. An overview of the survey and results is provided in the section below, and the complete survey results are provided in Appendix 2.

Dog Park Study Project Initiation Comments

During the Fall/Winter 2019 timeframe, the public was also invited to share their comments with FCPA, both electronically via the survey as well as through FCPA's project website. As described above, the survey was available for a 30-day period, from November 15, 2019, to December 15, 2019. The window for comments through FCPA's project website was open from November 2019, to February 2020. Over 2,500 unique comments through the public survey and eleven electronic comments submitted via the project website were received and evaluated. These comments supplemented the quantitative portions of the survey by providing FCPA with qualitative insight and additional detail on the public's preferences. The ideas and insights garnered from these comments were incorporated into the various sections of this report and helped to inform the recommendations.

DRAFT REPORT (SPRING 2021)

Following the survey and public comment period for the project initiation stage, the Park Authority compiled all public input received, analyzed the survey results, and prepared a draft report of the dog park study. A draft of the report was published on the dog park study webpage and made available to the public on March 3, 2021.

Draft Dog Park Study Report Public Comments

The draft report was made available on the dog park study webpage, where the public could review the report and share their comments. The draft report comment period was open from March 3, 2021, to April 23, 2021, and approximately 120 comments were received. FCPA reviewed and considered all comments received as revisions were made to the draft report. This feedback was critical and helped to inform key revisions to the report.

Draft Report Public Meeting

On March 23, 2021, the Park Authority hosted a virtual public meeting through the Public Input platform to share the study's findings and recommendations and to create an open forum for the public to ask questions and share feedback on the draft report. The public shared a variety of comments, questions, and feedback with the Park Authority during the meeting. Over 60 people were in attendance.

SURVEY OVERVIEW AND RESULTS

This section shares a selection of key insights, obtained from the dog park study survey, on how existing dog parks are utilized and experienced in Fairfax County.

Note that other responses obtained from the survey have been incorporated throughout this report as relates to a specific topic. For example, the interest expressed by respondents in volunteering at dog parks is included in the Analysis and Findings portion of the Volunteering section. In addition, as described in the public engagement summary above, there were several opportunities throughout the survey where the public was invited to provide comments and share opinions. These comments have helped to inform the recommendations provided throughout this report.

Survey Overview

The public survey was available from November 15, 2019, to December 15, 2019. Survey outreach was conducted through three primary channels:

- Postcards inviting participation in the dog park survey were sent to 10,000 Fairfax County dog owners who were selected from the Fairfax County registered dog license database. The sample was selected at random and was stratified by zip code to ensure the sample accurately reflected the geographic distribution of dog license holders in the County.
- An email inviting survey participation was sent to over 250 residents who had previously attended dog-related events hosted by FCPA and had indicated their interest in receiving dog-park related updates.
- The survey was posted to FCPA's dog park study project website and was publicized through a public information release from the FCPA Public Information Office.

Media coverage by news outlets such as WTOP and Greater Alexandria Patch helped to further spread awareness about the survey, following the information release. The public survey was also shared and circulated by citizens through several other digital platforms such as Nextdoor and Facebook. In fact, when asked how respondents learned about the survey, "other" was the channel most cited by respondents, as shown in Figure 1. And, as Figure 2 illustrates, Nextdoor and Facebook were the most popular platforms cited among these respondents. Over 4,600 individual responses to the survey were received.

The survey solicited input from dog owners and dog walkers as well as those who do not own dogs but were interested in dog park issues. Most survey respondents were dog owners (90%), and a variety of age groups from ages 18 and older participated. See Figures 3 and 4 for a complete breakdown of respondents.

How Did You Find Out About this Survey?

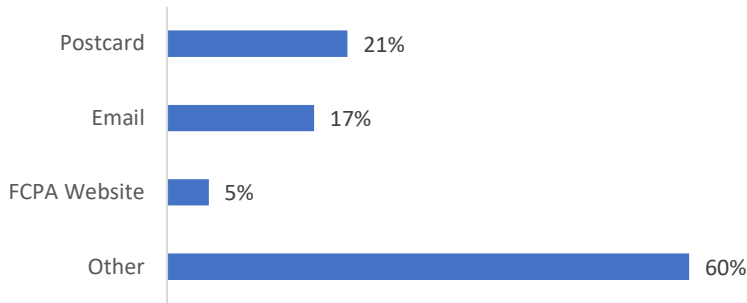


Figure 1: How Did Respondents Find Out About the Survey
 Note: Percentages add up to more than 100% since multiple selections were allowed.

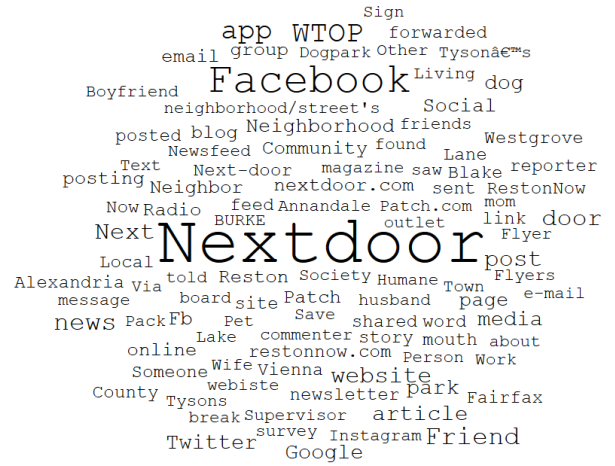


Figure 2: Survey Discovery Word Cloud
 Responses shared by those who selected "Other" to the question: "How did you find out about this survey?"

Which of the following best describes you?

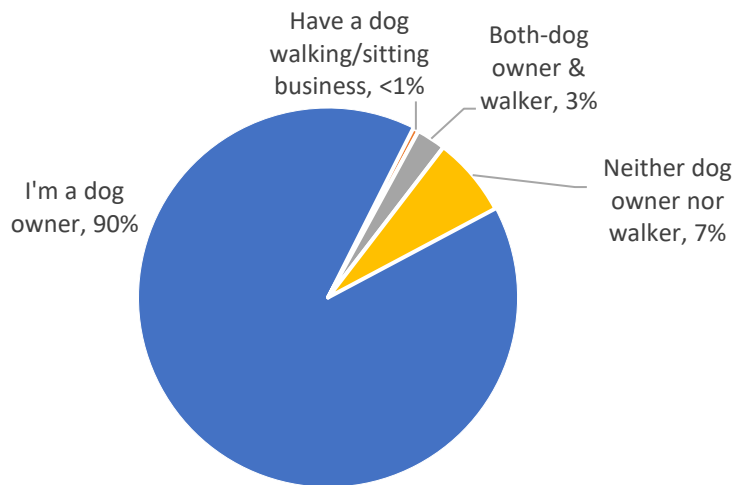


Figure 3: Survey Respondent Type

What is your age?

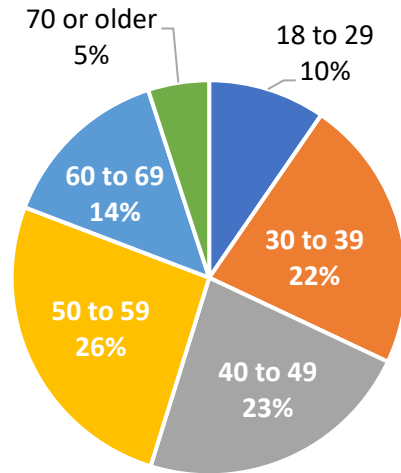


Figure 4: Survey Respondent Age

Survey Results

Dog owners and dog walkers surveyed were asked to indicate how important they felt dog parks were compared to other FCPA facilities using the range of answer choices shown in Figure 5. Almost half (45%) indicated that dog parks were either the sole FCPA facility they used or that dog parks were the most important FCPA facility they used. More than half (56%) of those who had visited an FCPA dog park within the last year (i.e., recent dog park visitors⁶) felt similarly. Overall, this demonstrates how well-loved dog parks are among dog owners and walkers in Fairfax County. It also demonstrates how for many, dog parks are considered a primary FCPA facility, and may be one of the only facilities in the entire park system that these visitors utilize.

Compared to other services provided by the Park Authority, how important are dog parks to you?

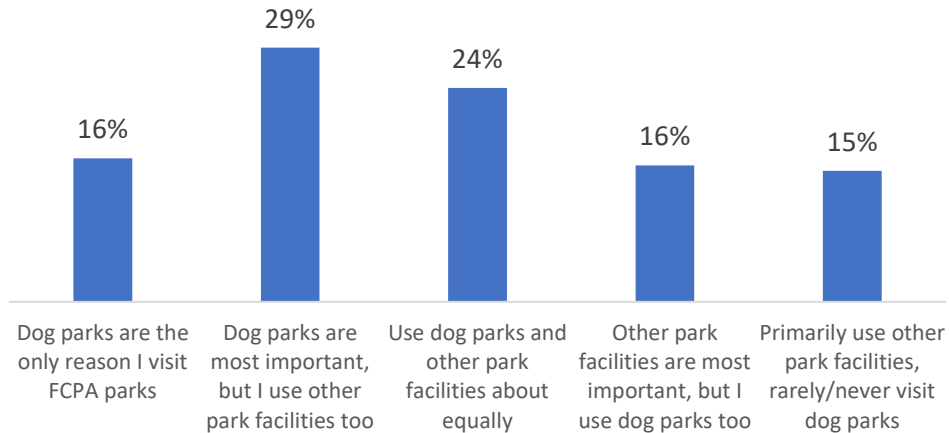


Figure 5: Compared to other services provided by the Park Authority, how important are dog parks to you?

45%

of all dog owners and walkers

Shared that dog parks are the “only reason” or are the “most important” facility provided by FCPA.

56%

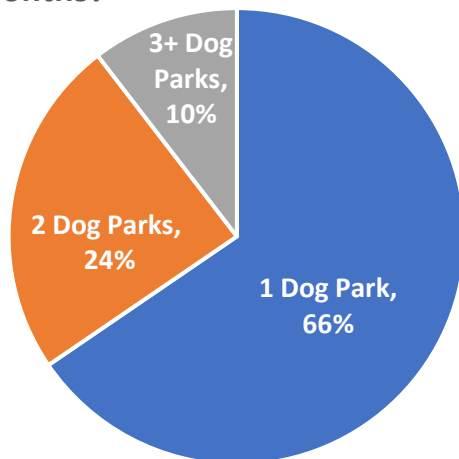
of recent FCPA dog park visitors

Shared that dog parks are the “only reason” or are the “most important” facility provided by FCPA.

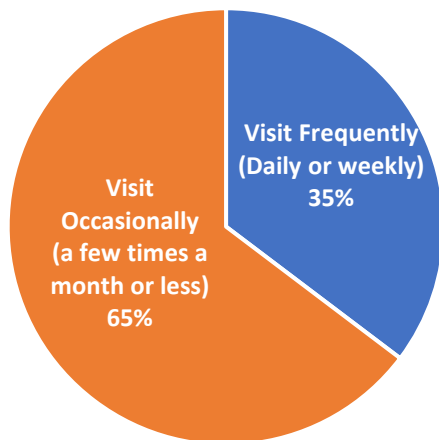
⁶ “Recent dog park visitors” refers to respondents who identified as dog owners, dog walkers/have a dog walking business, or both, and had visited an FCPA dog park within the last year.

As shown in Figure 6, the majority of recent dog park visitors indicated that within the last year, they frequented one FCPA dog park. When asked how often they visit their favorite dog park, nearly two-thirds (65%) of recent dog park visitors reported that they typically visit a few times per month or less (Figure 7).

How Many FCPA Dog Parks Have You Visited in the Past 12 Months?



How Often Do You Visit This Dog Park?



Note: Results based on respondents who had indicated they had visited one or more FCPA dog parks in the past 12 months. This was a follow up question to “Of the FCPA dog parks you have visited in the past 12 months, which one do you visit most often?”

When asked how important different features of a dog park were to dog owners and dog walkers when deciding to take their dog to a new dog park, respondents indicated the following elements were of greatest importance:

- Room for their dog to run
- Trash cans
- Pet waste bag stations
- Shade
- Water (drinking fountain for dogs and visitors)
- Parking

How important are each of these features when deciding whether to take your dog to a new dog park?

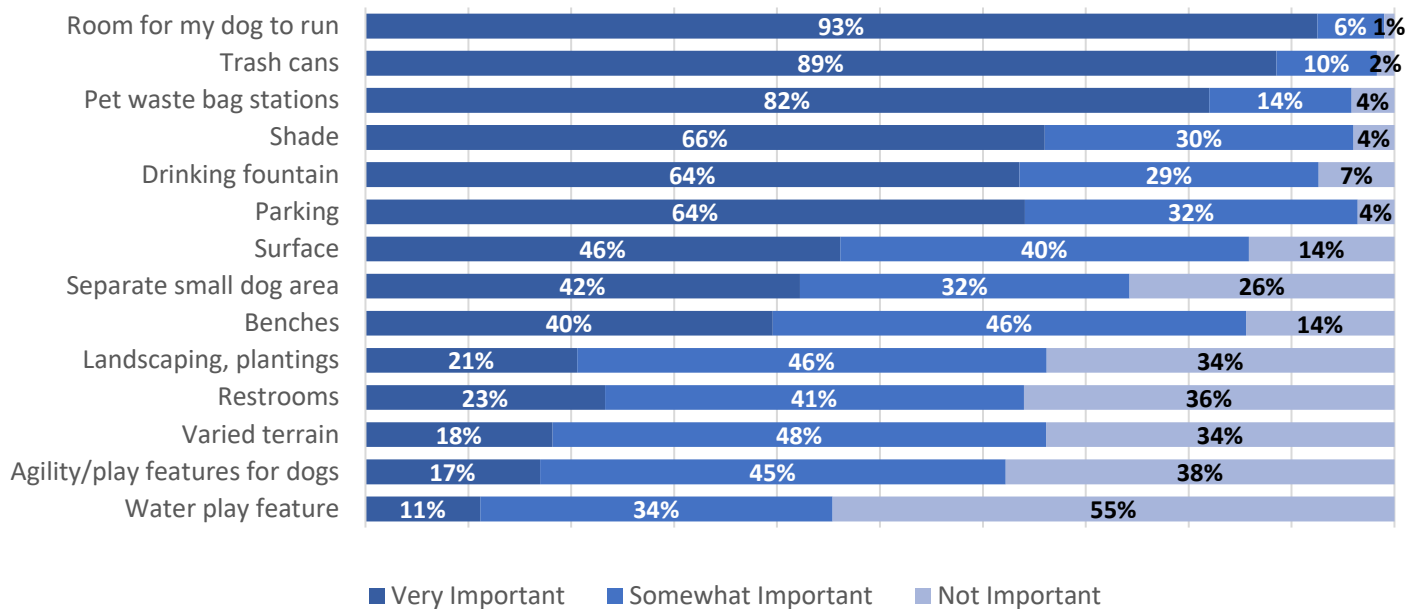


Figure 8: How important are each of these features when deciding whether to take your dog to a new dog park?
 Note: Percentages for some features in the above chart may not add to 100% due to rounding error.

Survey responses also indicated that cleanliness and surface condition play an important role in the satisfaction of a dog park visitor’s experience. Surface conditions, inattentive owners, and lack of water fountains are among the chief concerns for visitors at their favorite dog park.

Dog Park Satisfaction - Key Driver Analysis

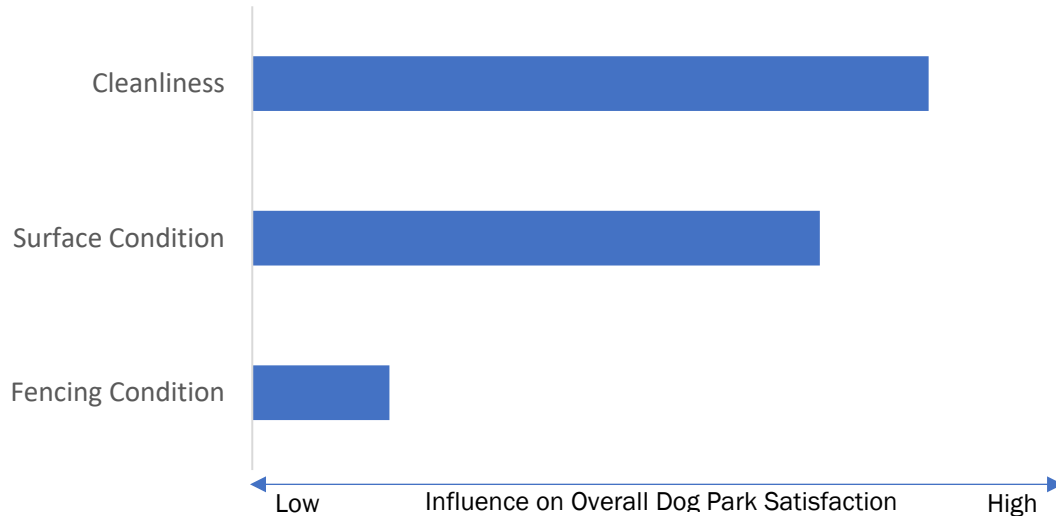


Figure 9: Dog Park Satisfaction – Key Driver Analysis

Are There Issues At This Dog Park That Concern You?

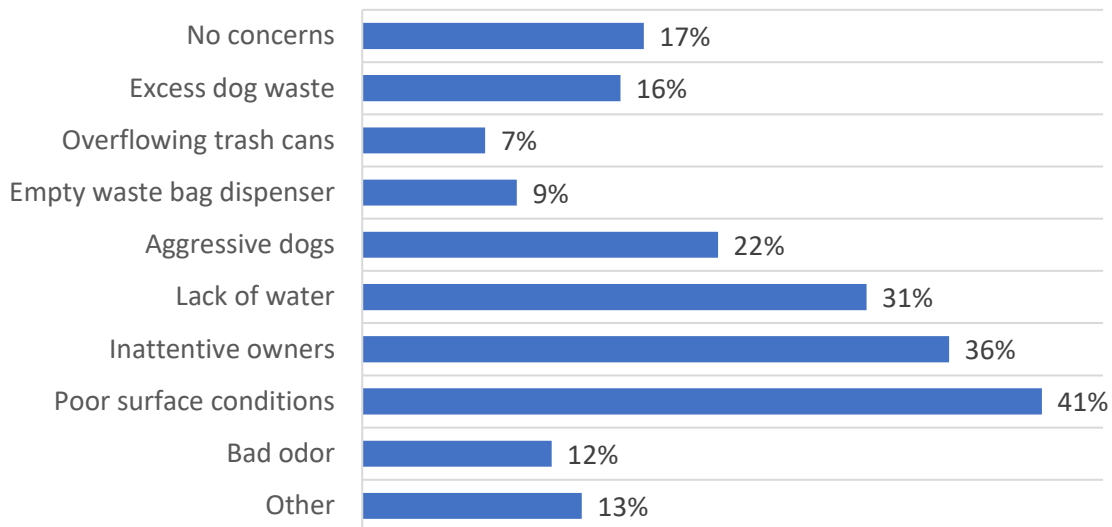


Figure 10: Are There Issues At This Dog Park That Concern You? Note: For the above figure, the results correspond to concerns that dog park users identified at their most frequently visited FCPA dog park. Percentages add to more than 100 since multiple selections were allowed.