

Late Backup

New dog park proposed in Southeast Austin

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By Sarah Coppola - American-Statesman Staff

Austin's parks department is eyeing 9.4 acres of city-owned land in Southeast Austin for a new dog park.

Neighborhood groups a few miles to the north rejected a plan two years ago to put an off-leash dog area in Mabel Davis District Park. Parks officials have been looking for another site since then.

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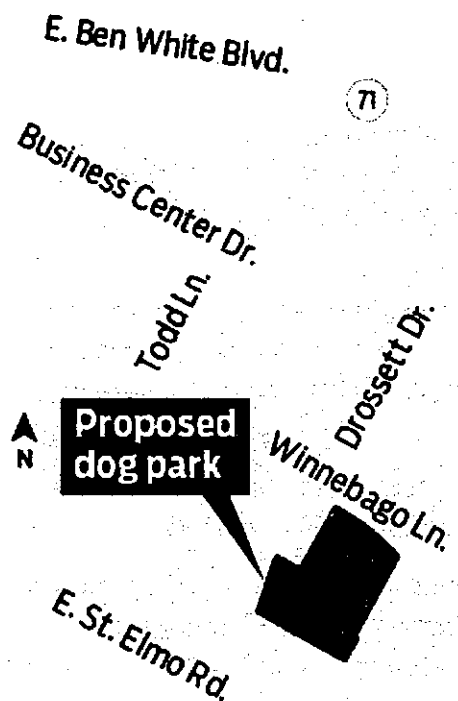
Austin has 12 city dog parks and off-leash trails, and there is a high demand for more.

The 9.4 acres at 4700 Winnebago Lane are in an area that city staffers describe as mostly industrial buildings and warehouses.

"The idea would be to create not a neighborhood park, but more of a regional draw," said Ricardo Soliz, a planning division manager in the parks department. "We would be looking to make this a unique dog park, with features you don't find in other off-leash areas, to draw people from all parts of the city."

Lopez, Steve (CMG-WestPalm)

The parks department is eyeing 9.4 acres of city-owned land in Southeast Austin for a possible dog



park.

STEVE LOPEZ/STAFF

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The site is owned by Austin Resource Recovery, the city's trash and recycling department, and it would have to be transferred to the parks department by a City Council vote.

The council discussed the idea last week but postponed a vote to let the city's parks board weigh in.

Dog parks have given the parks department a lot of heartburn over the past few years. The department's proposals to close the popular Norwood dog park on East Riverside Drive, create a new off-leash area at Mabel Davis and renovate but reduce the size of the off-leash area at Auditorium Shores were all bashed by the public. Only the Auditorium Shores plan was approved by the City Council late last year.

The 9.4-acre site is ideal because it sits a few miles from East Riverside Drive, where a boom of new apartment projects is bringing hundreds of new residents and their pets, Soliz said.

Council Member Chris Riley said he's concerned about putting a dog park in a relatively hidden spot that is difficult to access on foot, with few sidewalks nearby and only the one entrance, off of small Winnebago Lane.

"One reason why some of the dog parks we have are popular is that they are visible and convenient and readily accessible," Riley said. "I know a lot of folks enjoy walking to the (Norwood) park. Here it's unlikely you would see anyone walking there. It's in an area with no sidewalks ... I hope that we're not going to be seeing a pattern of sticking (dog parks) in industrial areas where everyone has to drive for miles to get there."

But Council Member Kathie Tovo said she is pleased that the parks department worked with residents near Mabel Davis park to find another Southeast Austin site that they could support.

"I see this as a success story," she said.

The dog park would take a year to design and build and would probably include parking, restrooms and a perimeter fence, Soliz said. Other amenities haven't been decided yet but might include benches, an agility course for dogs, separate spaces for large and small dogs and a dog-friendly drinking fountain.

The parks department would have to pay Austin Resource Recovery \$225,000 for the land and would spend \$300,000 to \$400,000 creating the park, Soliz said. The money would come from a 2006 voter-approved bond measure and fees that housing developers are required to pay the parks department, Soliz said.

Kensington Park, the neighborhood of a dozen homes just south of the 9.4 acres, has told parks officials it generally supports having a dog park there, if certain design elements are included.

"We'd like to see things like all dogs leashed as they are taken from vehicles to the park, a good fence around the park, waste cleaned up and reasonable park hours," said Lee Sloan, president of the neighborhood association. "We enjoy a rural way of life here and would like to see that preserved."