

**GW**

# Gambit Weekly



## UNLEASHED

CITY PARK GOES TO THE DOGS WITH A NEW AREA DESIGNED FOR UNCOLLARED CANINES AND THEIR HUMANS.

BY SAMMY MACK

**07**

**Commentary**

8/29 Commission — it's not just about NOLA

**09**

**Lead News**

Population count and crime rate are a numbers game.

**19**

**Cover Story**

Gambit readers send us their favorite pet shots

**50**

**Words**

Ned Sublette at Tennessee Williams Festival



This architectural rendering by Torre Design Consortium Ltd. is of the entrance to the NOLA City Bark dog park in City Park.

**O**n a bright Sunday afternoon at City Park, Chris Melancon sits on a folding chair in the middle of a patch of grass between I-610, Popp Fountain and Magnolia Drive. She drove to this spot from Gonzalez to meet friends from Slidell. They gather here to catch up and hold a play date for their combined pack of adopted dogs of all sizes and unknown breeds. "I come down here a lot," Melancon says. "It's nice to have them here," she adds with a nod to the dogs. Several large, tan dogs lounge in the grass, occasionally nosing half-heartedly at some invisible curiosity in the weeds. Their leashes are tied to a stake that Melancon has pushed into the ground.

# a Breed apart

BY  
SAMMY MACK

Organizers of NOLA City Bark, the area's first dog park, envision a unique space for canines as well as humans.

The littlest one, Gateway — so named for the black-and-white "cow" markings that resemble a Gateway PC box — hides under a chair, escaping the midday sun. They would all probably enjoy a little shade — humans, too — but the cooler areas under the nearby trees are still suction-cup muddy from recent showers.

It's hard to imagine now, but this 4.6-acre wedge of land is the future site of NOLA City Bark, the first official dog park in the New Orleans area. And if organizers have their way, it will be one of the top-rated dog-friendly spots in the country.

"It's gonna be a real New Orleans dog park, very New Orleans ambience," says Jackie Shreves, president of NOLA City Bark and one of the driving forces behind the new park. She envisions a dedicated space where dogs can roam free and socialize while owners do likewise. "This is a safe area for people and dogs," Shreves says. "It will offer a lot of amenities."

Amenities will include fountains, pavilions, size-specific dog runs and a wading pool.

PLANS FOR A DOG PARK HAVE BEEN around since early 2005 and called for the Louisiana SPCA to run it. Since Hurricane Katrina, however, the SPCA has been stretched thin, and the plans for the dog park were postponed indefinitely — until Shreves started

scratching around.

"I asked Bob [Becker, CEO of City Park], 'Is that still a viable option?'" recalls Shreves.

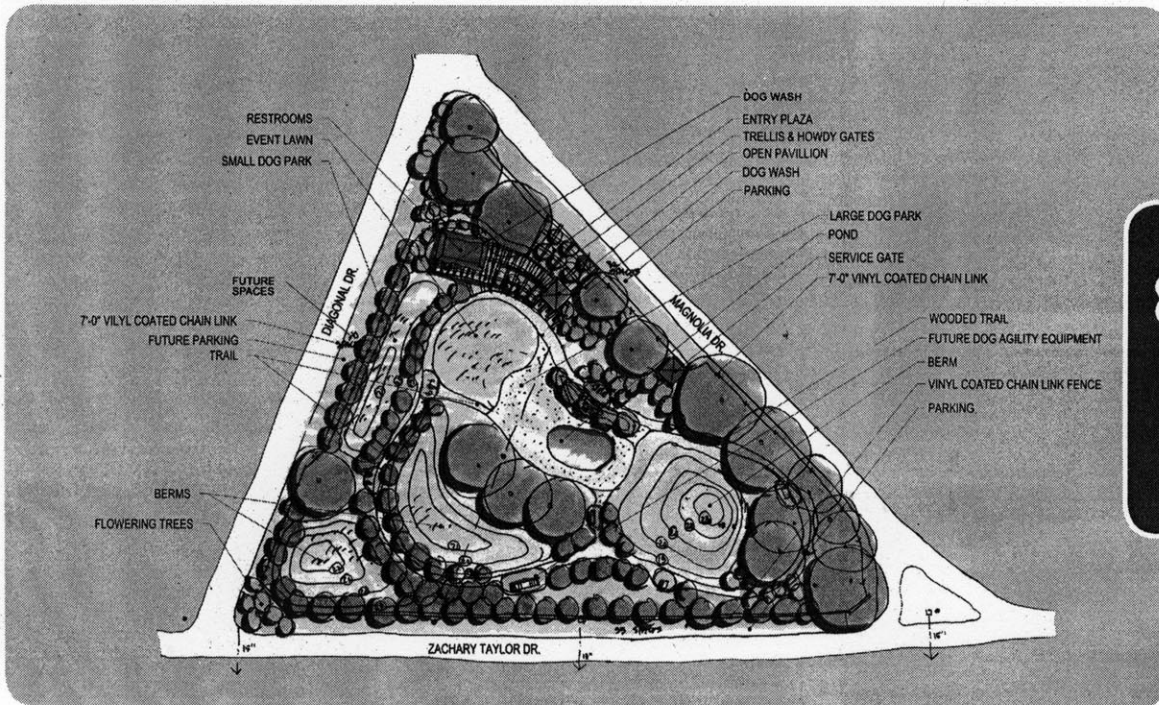
When Becker answered affirmatively, Shreves sent out an email and held the first NOLA City Bark meeting in August 2007. The attendees at that gathering became the core members and board of the organization. "About 15 people showed up, and they're still here," says Shreves.

Since then, NOLA City Bark has steadily built momentum. Building should commence this summer. So far, Shreves and the board members have researched 30 dog parks across the country for best-practice models, raised \$100,000 towards their goal

CONTINUED ON P. 25



CONTINUED FROM P. 23



The master plan for NOLA City Bark, designed by noted local park designer Ace Torre, will encompass 4.6 acres.

Along with City Bark, the Master Plan calls for new tennis courts, new soccer fields, and renovations to the golf course and Storyland — to name a few projects. City Park has already committed \$25,000 toward construction of the dog park.

of \$500,000 (largely through word-of-mouth fundraising), hired a design firm and changed city ordinances to bring the proposed park to fruition.

"You're required to be off leash" in the new park, says Shreves. "The no-leash part throws people off." Then she explains, "That's the best way dogs can socialize. They tend to be more protective of their owners and territorial on leash."

Until recently, New Orleans ordinances required leashes on all public lands. To be sure, many dog owners go off-leash in areas such as the Mississippi River levee or in Cabrini Park without major problems, but NOLA City Bark members want to make sure that dog owners in the new park will not be cited. Working with Councilwoman Shelley Midura, whose district includes City Park, they won Council approval of an exception to the local animal cleanup and leash laws this February. The amended ordinances now defer to City Bark rules.

"Dogs are pack animals by nature," says veterinarian Dr. Gary Levy, whose practice at the Lakeview Veterinary Hospital is just a few blocks west of Marconi Drive. Levy is one of the vets who had a chance to look over the City Bark plans and regulations. He pronounced himself "very impressed" with the group's work.

City Bark will operate on a permit system.

Owners will register for a nominal annual fee (the price is yet to be determined, but talk has put it near \$25) after verifying their pets' vaccination records, releasing the park of liability and reading the park's rules. The fees will go toward maintenance, and owners will get a swipe card to gain entry.

City Bark is being designed by New Orleans' animal architecture veteran Ace Torre and his team at Torre Design Consortium. As president of the firm, Torre has overseen the design of more than 35 zoos and aquariums around the world, including local Audubon projects and the tony new habitat for Mike the Tiger at LSU.

"Most of our exhibits have keepers, and the public never gets in," says Torre of the difference between large animal enclosures and a dog park. What's similar, he says, is how the animals are introduced to the environment to socialize.

"We'll have a howdy gate," says Torre. It's a small space between the two sets of fences where dogs can be in a supervised setting as they are first introduced. If they get along famously, it's a good measure of how easily they can be integrated into the park at large. If the animals don't gel, at least you don't have to run around the whole 4.6 acres trying to break up a skirmish.

One of Torre's goals is to strike a balance between providing for dogs and providing for their owners. "The biggest amenity is shade," he says. There are plans for covered areas, seating, fountains, big dog and small dog sections, and even a place to bathe the dogs if they roll around a little too much. "There's a dog wash like

it responds to public demand," Hopper says, adding that "hordes of dog lovers" brought the topic of a dog park up at planning meetings. He plans to be among them with his Weimaraner, Chloe, in fact. "Secondly, it's just going to be cool. The committee that's been formed to do it is very gung ho. With any successful project, if you peel back the layers, you find a core group that has that passion; this group has that."

"It's a great way to promote socialization of people," Becker adds. "I know it sounds corny, but it could be a great healing place, too."

Becker is not the only one who feels that way. The design committee has considered dedicating the park to the animals that lost their lives during Hurricane Katrina and the ensuing flood.

**"It's a great way to promote socialization of people."**  
— Bob Becker, City Park CEO

CITY BARK MAY BE THE FIRST park of its breed in New Orleans, but there is a successful precedent for dog parks elsewhere in Louisiana. The Baton Rouge Recreation and Park Commission (BREC) opened its first dog park at Forest Park in 2005.

"We did Forest Park as a guinea pig," says Ted Jack, director of planning and engineering for BREC. Like the planned City Bark, BREC's dog park is an off-leash site with amenities for pets and their human counterparts. Not sure what to expect in the beginning, Jack found the public response a pleasant surprise. "They've been really well received," Jack says. Three more dog parks are in the works for the Baton Rouge area.

"It's a real social happening," says Jack. He recalls visiting the first dog park not long after Katrina and overhearing two dog owners chat as their dogs made introductions for them. "They were both from New Orleans, didn't know each other ... and they were there talking, rehashing their stories," he says.

And while Jack says the response has been overwhelmingly positive, he has gotten a backhanded complement or two: "We've gotten complaints from people because they're having to drive too far." The new parks can't open fast enough.

Shreves is banking on similar outcomes for NOLA City Bark. "This is a regional dog park," she says, stressing that it is intended to bring people in from

you bring your car to a carwash," says Torre.

The site has several key advantages. Parking is reasonable, Marconi Drive and Zachary Taylor Drive provide easy access, an existing shelter can be renovated and incorporated into the park plan, and the plumbing is in place for bathroom facilities and water features.

"It's in a part of the park we've been wanting to attract more people to," says park CEO Becker. Before Katrina, City Park averaged 11 million visits a year. Today, that number is closer to five or six million annual visits. With Popp Fountain still closed, the City Bark triangle is one of the park's sleeper sections. "I think it'll bring more people and activity," says Becker.

"The dog park is part of our Master Plan," says John Hopper, director of development for City Park. The plan he refers to is the massive, \$115 million development project City Park officials hope to complete by 2018, coinciding with the city's 300th anniversary.



Designer Ace Torre and project chair Jackie Shreves review plans for NOLA City Bark.

PHOTO BY  
CHERYL GERBER

outside Orleans Parish.

"We are hoping to become the pilot for the metropolitan area," she says. "We want to get it right."

Without even breaking ground, the park is already gaining attention as a potential model for future development. Ana Zorrilla, CEO of the LA/SPCA, has been working with Shreves and watching her progress with great interest. While the LA/SPCA was unable to run the dog park in City Park, it does have plans to devote part of its 10.6-acre new home in Algiers to an institutional and neighborhood dog park. Watching City Bark take shape will give the LA/SPCA a fast learning curve, says Zorrilla.

While Shreves hasn't set a firm membership goal, she believes City Bark could easily include several hundred locals as members. "I think we've had inquiries from at least that many," she says.

On April 6, the LA/SPCA will host its annual Dog Day Afternoon at Audubon Park. Last year, the one-day event brought 700 dog lovers together. If that's any indication of support for a public dog park, Shreves should have no problem getting at least that many members in City Bark.

For now, in the absence of an official New Orleans dog park, people have taken to creating their own dog spots "under the radar," says Zorrilla, noting that dog owners have even cleaned and policed several dog spots around town. "You see people wanting to be responsible," she adds.

On a busy weekend at Cabrini Park, a small grassy rectangle on the corner of Burgundy and Barracks streets in the French Quarter, more than a dozen dogs at a time frolic off leash. A blue plastic children's swimming pool sits in one corner of the lot where it serves as a watering trough and doggie bathing tub. Several plastic shopping bags tacked to a pole are a gentle reminder to clean up after the animals.

"This is the only park that's fenced," says Julia Trawick, owner of Walkin' the Dog Pet Services and a frequent visitor at Cabrini. "I board a lot of dogs, and I don't take them to the levee —

especially when I have charges." She says the openness, combined with the industrial activity, is just too risky to let dogs off leash.

"This city really needs a dog park," Trawick adds, keeping a watchful eye on her client of the day, a pit bull named Bruiser. As she talks, a Chihuahua wearing a skull-and-crossbones T-shirt and sporting a swagger befitting a Clydesdale saunters over. Bruiser sniffs a little at the animal, barks and heads straight back to Trawick's chair.

"Bruiser was a rescue," Trawick says. "He was a stray, and everybody in the neighborhood knew him." She says she's glad the new dog park doesn't have restrictions against breeds like Bruiser's.

"The park is a great idea," agrees Lisette Oser, a friend of Trawick's who sometimes joins her at Cabrini. The friends have both contributed to the community-driven upkeep of Cabrini — they even brought mulch once to fill in the muddy holes pocking the green — and they've made friends with some of the other regulars.

The potential of that social capital turned loose at City Park has not been lost on dog park organizers. "City Park, every time I go through it, it looks better," says Shreves. "We had a master plan that we hoped would be started by 2018," she adds, only half joking in reference to the pre-storm City Bark plans. "I probably would not have been willing to spearhead this before."

She attributes her newfound dedication to City Bark to what she and many other locals have learned about community building in the past two years: "We know it's gotta be us." Beyond that, she says, "This is a happy project. We're not fixing what Katrina broke — we're doing something new." **GW**

To learn more about NOLA City Bark, visit [www.nolacitybark.org](http://www.nolacitybark.org).