

County dog park to celebrate tenth anniversary Saturday

By Lydia Statz, Union staff writer | Posted: Friday, November 1, 2013 11:08 am

AZTALAN — Thousands of tails wagged, balls chased, rears sniffed and new friends made ... however you measure it, the Jefferson County Dog Park has been a great success during its 10 years of serving the canine community.

A ceremony this Saturday at 10 a.m., organized jointly by the Jefferson County Parks Department and Friends of the Jefferson County Dog Park, will commemorate a decade of the park's contributions to the area. A brief program will take place,

followed by a tree planting and refreshments.

Prior to the ceremony, the Friends of the Jefferson County Dog Park will host a lure coursing event. Lure coursing is a system where a dog is allowed to chase a mechanical dummy in a safe environment. Any breed can enjoy lure coursing. (Follow the directional signs for the event once at the dog park.)

After opening in 2003, the park, located just off State Highway 26 in the Town of Aztalan between Jefferson and Johnson Creek, has become one of the county's most-loved outdoor recreational areas, drawing visitors from well beyond the county's borders and playing an important role in the lives of both two- and four-legged animals.

"The name itself is a bit of a misnomer. We call it the dog park, but a very significant part of it is a people park," said Jefferson County Parks Department director Joe Nehmer. "People get to get out and get some exercise, get fresh air, socialize with other people with similar interests who have dogs. A lot of people who go out there would like to own a dog, but for a variety of reasons, it doesn't fit into their life at this time, so they kind of get their "dog fix" when they go out there."

Nearly every Sunday for the past few years, Paul Brady has made the trip to the park, not only to give Reilly, a lab-poodle mix, a chance to burn off some energy, but also to spend some time with his daughter, Melody, and her standard poodle, Morgan.

"It's been a real nice event to not only socialize the dogs, but also socialize the people," he said. "I love it both for family time and pet time."

Brady said the park served an integral purpose in helping to rehabilitate Reilly after her adoption from a rescue shelter.

"She did not know how to be a dog when we first got her. She had to learn how to play and run and socialize with both people and animals, so the park was beautiful for that," he said.

Nehmer said the park always has had the support of a large group of local citizens, beginning with a core group of six residents who worked tirelessly to raise enough funding to build the park more than a decade ago. Today,

a sign at the park still recognizes the efforts of Christine Cluver, Margaret Majors, Mark Dziejwior, Marcia Miller, Joan Fisher and Jodi Wolfram.

A few years ago, the Friends group formed, with the goal to help organize continuing events at the park and fundraising for park development and maintenance.

“We’ve definitely seen usership grow as people discover the park, through hearing from other members, as they drive by, and even from people outside the county,” said Kim Bucholz, Parks Department program assistant who helps head the group. “We just want to see the dog park continue to grow and be maintained.”

Saturday’s celebration will help celebrate the park’s contribution to the community over its first decade of operation. The dog exercise area was opened on Nov. 8, 2003, after facing an uphill battle once the Parks Department determined there was a need for such a facility.

“We would get calls from Milwaukee people and Madison people that were used to dog parks that would say, ‘Where is your dog park? We want to meet our friends from the opposite city?’ And we would say there wasn’t one,” Nehmer said.

The county began serious discussions to create a county dog park in 1998, initially garnering little support from local elected officials.

“So then we started to work with dog advocates in the area. And after a couple runs at the Finance Committee, there was support,” said Nehmer.

When Nehmer introduced a proposal to fund the dog park as part of the 2003 county budget, more than 30 residents showed up to the budget hearing to voice their support for the measure. The county finance panel, still skeptical of the measure, only voted to support the proposal because of a \$3,000 fundraising pledge offered by a group of private citizens and the roomful of citizens that advocated for the park. A citizens committee of supporters vowed to shoot higher and raise the entire \$10,000 needed to develop the park. They managed to overshoot their goal through a series of newspaper articles soliciting donations and other logistical work advocating for the park’s development.

One of the committee’s main organizers, Terri Tinsley, would receive a larger honor; however, sadly, she never would see the park she worked to bring to the area. On the very day the committee was slated to present its donations and work to the Jefferson County Board of Supervisors, Tinsley was killed in a traffic crash on U.S. Highway 12 between Fort Atkinson and Cambridge.

Her husband, Perry, donated the memorial money from his wife’s passing to the county for use at the dog park as a way to honor his wife’s life and legacy. In 2009, when the dog park was expanded by more than 40 acres, Nehmer said, it was an easy decision to name the fenced-in exercise areas for Tinsley, creating the “Terry Tinsley Dog Exercise Areas.” The expansion included two additional off-leash exercise areas, after park-goers completed a 2006 survey indicating changes they would like to see implemented at the park.

Now, the 109-acre park provides room for more than three miles of trails, “state-of-the-art pit toilets” and 42 additional acres of running space for large and small dogs. The expansion, which created four separate fenced-in areas, also allowed for a unique opportunity to close off a single section for educational events. Since then,

many events have taken place in one of the park's small-dog exercise areas without interrupting attendees in the park's other areas.

Today, the park remains the most heavily used recreation space in the county park system, and it consistently is regarded as one of the best dog parks in the state and even nation. In 2010, Dog Fancy magazine ranked the park in the Top 40 on its list of the nation's best dog parks, and the number one park in Wisconsin.

"It's amazing. I was spoiled by it because that was my first real experience with a dog park, and I thought, 'Well, that must be what they are,'" said Brady. "As I travel around the country, I notice them now. And a lot of them are glorified basketball courts. They're very small and fenced in, so we are truly blessed with that park out there."

"That's what we hear, that it's a great dog park, and that's how we want to maintain it," said Bucholz.

The Friends of the Jefferson County Dog Park regularly raises funds for the park, including selling a calendar with pictures of dogs at the park for \$10, with all proceeds going directly to the park. The calendars will be on sale Saturday.

Nehmer said he believes the park is a "destination park" that draws dog lovers from all around the area to the county.

"We typically have people from a 10-county area there every day. From Kenosha to Milwaukee, up to Ozaukee County, to Dodge County and down to Rock County and back," said Nehmer. "So pretty much all of southeastern Wisconsin is there on a daily basis."

Nehmer said the change and growth he's seen at the park within the last decade has built the park into a local — as well as regional — gem.

"It's funny the change in attitudes over 10 years. There was a lot of questioning and a lot of people saying, 'This is crazy talk.' And anybody who's familiar with it today doesn't think it's crazy; they think that the success is pretty remarkable," he said.

"When we first started out, there was one small dog area and one large dog area, and combined, they took up about 23 acres," he continued. "Now there's two small dog areas and two large dog areas and combined, they comprise about 60 acres, so it's about triple the size. When we first started the dog park business, we had about 300 annual tagholders, and now we're pushing 1,700. So it's grown a lot, in size and enjoyment, popularity and use."

Fees paid by tagholders go toward maintenance, operation and future expansions of the park. The number of permits sold has increased each year, from approximately 300 in 2003, to 1,003 in 2009 to 1,645 through Sept. 30 of this year.

Annual permit tags for county residents can be purchased for \$20 for the first dog, and \$10 for each additional dog. Nonresidents can purchase annual permits for \$25, and \$10 for each additional dog. Daily permits may be purchased for \$5, while senior citizens pay \$10 to use the park for the entire year.

In addition to the fees, Nehmer said, the department receives daily donations from users looking to support their favorite park. In 2012 alone, the park took in over \$8,500 in donations to augment the \$25,000 in revenue the sale of permit tags brought in. In 2013 thus far, permit sales have garnered just under \$27,500 in revenue, and the department has received almost \$4,500 in donations.

For more information on the Jefferson County Dog Park, contact the Jefferson County Parks Department at (920) 674-7260 or visit jeffersoncountywi.gov.

DNR, We Energies ink deal on bike path land

By Lydia Statz, Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, October 31, 2013 10:31 am

WATERTOWN — The state Department of Natural Resources and We Energies have struck a deal for the lease agreement involving a strip of property slated for a new bicycle path, clearing the way for the trail's development.

The inter-urban trail, proposed in August, would link downtown Watertown with Oconomowoc as part of a larger system that would allow cyclists continuous access from Madison all the way to Milwaukee's lakeshore. Spearheaded by Jefferson County Supervisor Augie Tietz, the path would follow an 11-mile tract between the two cities currently owned by We Energies.

Previous meetings between the two parties made it clear that all sides favored a recreational use for the land; however, some concerns were voiced about the cost of repairs to electrical lines running through the area after the trail had been constructed.

Negotiations between the DNR and power company hit a snag when the state agency attempted to seek a license giving it use of the land, however. The DNR requested a 25-year agreement for the land, but We Energies said its policy is to offer municipalities a five-year renewable lease for recreational purposes.

After almost four years of negotiations, Jefferson County Parks Department director Joe Nehmer said, the two parties were able to come to an agreement this month on a 15-year lease, allowing the rest of the project to move forward.

"This is great news for Jefferson County," Nehmer wrote in a letter to the DNR earlier this month. "We commend the hard work and compromise of both parties to reach an agreement that will benefit so many Wisconsin residents."

"Waiting to hear about this agreement kind of put the stopper on the project for a while, so now that we know we have the use of that right-of-way, it kind of gives us the go-ahead to start applying for grants and developing the rest of the trail," said Nehmer.

Nehmer has said he hopes to be able to fund the cost of the developing the entire trail, from Waterloo west to the county line, through available state grants. However, most grant awards would not consider the project for funding before the entire project area was available "as a package."

Even if grant funding for the project is approved, it is likely that construction on the trail would not begin for several years until planned construction in the area had been completed.

The Parks Department, working jointly with the Glacial Heritage Area group, also is developing a trail to run between Waterloo and Watertown, though some uncertainty remains about the exact route that trail will take. Some county parks committee members would prefer to see the trail developed along a railroad corridor owned

by the Wisconsin & Southern railroad company, while others would like to see the route developed along scenic Island Road.

That trail, a key link allowing bikers to ride continuously from Madison to the shore of Lake Michigan, will likely develop in stages from each city toward the center of the county, allowing the route to change as it develops.