



**POSITION STATEMENT  
ON A PROPOSAL TO BUILD A DOG PARK  
AT RIO VISTA NATURAL RESOURCE PARK**

**Jennifer Shopland and Nancy Riccio**

**with contributions from Lorna Shopland Werntz, Susan Husband, and Gary Bachman**

**Friends of Rio Vista**

**16 September 2022**

Most of the proposed improvements in the draft master plan for Rio Vista are completely in keeping with the park's needs as a natural resource park. The Tucson Parks and Recreation project manager and the SmithGroup consultants are to be commended for such a thoughtful response to community engagement and for their assessment of existing conditions and gaps. We do have suggestions for some adjustments to the master-plan recommendations, which we'll submit separately.

The one jarring note on the current master-plan map is the "potential dog park." From our perspective, a dog park at Rio Vista would not be in the best interests of any of the stakeholders, including those who say that they support the concept.

**Not only would the construction of a dog park at Rio Vista be inconsistent with Tucson Parks' stated mission, pose health and safety hazards, and increase the potential for liability and conflict, it would remain very costly to maintain for decades to come.**

Here are a few of the many arguments against a "potential dog park" at Rio Vista:

- **Incompatible use of a natural resource park:** The draft master plan states: "The role of the Tucson Parks and Recreation Department is to maintain, preserve, and restore[, ] when needed, the natural integrity of a resource park." A dog park of any size at Rio Vista would damage the integrity of the park ecosystem and therefore would not be aligned with Tucson Parks' stated management responsibilities.
- **Construction costs and the capital budget:** Of the proposed budget of approximately \$591,000, \$80,000 (14 percent) would be devoted to construction of the "potential dog park." (According to online sources, this is an overly conservative cost estimate.) But the actual Parks + Connections capital budget for improvements will be approximately \$300,000; therefore, the proposed dog park would consume at least 27 percent of the funds in hand. Taxpayers' dollars should be invested in upgrading current infrastructure and restoring the natural

area, not in new construction that runs counter to Tucson Parks' management responsibilities.

- **Maintenance costs and the annual budget:** Online reports and projections for dog parks across the country suggest that a single installation could cost tens of thousands of dollars in maintenance per year. At Rio Vista, maintenance of a dog park would compete with maintenance needs (e.g., irrigation repair, landscape and stormwater management) legitimately associated with protecting and enhancing a natural resource park. The maintenance crew assigned to Rio Vista now maintains at least 10 other city parks as well and is already stretched thin.
- **Not a solution to the problem of off-leash dogs in the park:** A dog park would not attract the users who let their dogs roam in the natural area. Those who now let their dogs run off leash on the grass will continue to do so. In conversations with the current westside "off-leashers," all have stated that they do NOT want an enclosed dog park at Rio Vista. As an example of the side-by-side effect: Anyone who has passed the Smiling Dog Ranch dog park near George Mehl Family Foothills Park probably has seen dogs running loose on the Mehl Park turf while others play nearby in the Smiling Dog enclosure. A dog park at Rio Vista would not deter current off-leash use and would, in fact, draw many more dogs and their guardians to ramble through the landscape.
- **Site size conducive to aggression and injury:** The proposed area for the "potential dog park" is approximately  $\frac{1}{3}$  acre. All guidelines state that  $\frac{1}{2}$  acre is the minimum area for safety; 1 acre or more is recommended. The Rio Vista community already has experienced dog-dog, dog-human, and human-human aggression, including physical violence, related to off-leash dogs, both on the west side and in the natural area. A dog park would increase the probability of dangerous incidents and the liability for the city, as well as the likelihood of medical bills and lawsuits for individuals.
- **Current opposition to a dog park at Rio Vista:** Our understanding is that 10–15 percent of respondents (approximately 30–45 individuals) to the Tucson Parks master-plan survey requested consideration of a dog park. But 70 individuals wrote in support of the Friends of Rio Vista position statement on the master plan (April 2022), which explicitly recommended against using city funds for a dog park at Rio Vista. Many more park stakeholders have expressed opposition to a dog park since then.
- **Previous community rejection of dog-park proposals at Rio Vista:** Concerned stakeholders have defeated at least two previous attempts to create a dog park here. Yet another attempt would polarize the community, would lead to conflictive and potentially expensive situations for Tucson Parks to manage, and could erode confidence in the department's commitment to preserve Rio Vista's natural integrity.
- **Increased traffic:** Tucson Boulevard is the only means of direct vehicular access to the built environment (and hence the proposed dog park) at Rio Vista. This road is not adequate to support the current level of traffic, let alone dog-park

traffic from all parts of the city. Heavy traffic and likely speeding (already a problem) would increase hazards for pedestrians, equestrians, wildlife, cyclists, and property owners.

- **Parking congestion:** The parking lot at the main entrance can barely handle the current level of visitation. Parking for dog-park users would overflow onto Tucson Boulevard. Cars parked in the right-of-way or on the sidewalk would result in hazards to pedestrians, equestrians, and wildlife (many species use Tucson Boulevard as a movement corridor and a crossing). Overflow parking would create, at the very least, a nuisance for homeowners and neighbors, including the horse properties on Tucson Boulevard.
- **Distance of proposed sites from parking:** To get to either of the two proposed locations for a dog park, dogs and their guardians would have to cross a large portion of the built environment, including the children's play area, on foot. For safety and health, any dog park should be directly accessible from the parking area.
- **Dust, feces, urine, trash:** The substrate in dog parks is notoriously difficult to maintain. Dust, excrement, and garbage associated with dog-park use would be concentrated in one area, but the associated damage would spread throughout the park. Anyone who has visited a Tucson dog park knows what one looks like after a few months, let alone years, of use. The concentration of physical pollutants could interfere with wildlife activity, especially movement toward the Rillito corridor.
- **Noise pollution:** Dog parks are noisy. Barking and voices raised in excitement would interfere with the experience of the majority of Rio Vista visitors, who come to be immersed in nature. Noise would also have a negative impact on neighbors, equestrians, and wildlife.
- **Risk of runaways:** People taking their dogs to dog parks often allow them to run off leash from the car to the enclosure. Especially given the considerable distance from the parking area to the enclosure, as well as the level of arousal of the dogs, this behavior would create the potential for dogs to run off and to harass wildlife, horses, leashed dogs, and humans.
- **Potential to lose the privilege of walking even leashed dogs in the park:** The Pima County Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation website says that most of their open-space and natural resource parks don't allow dogs on the property because of dangers to wildlife. Problems generated by a Rio Vista dog park could become so severe that the city could bar dogs from the natural resource park altogether, even on leash.
- **Mapping a "potential dog park" as a future liability:** Even if Parks + Connections funds aren't used to construct a dog park at Rio Vista but the "potential dog park" remains on the map, this default props the door open for further conflict in the future. Leaving the "potential" locations in the master plan just kicks the can down the road.

- **Alternatives readily available:** The large, double dog park at Brandi Fenton Memorial Park is within walking distance or an easy drive. It is accessible from roadways that are appropriately large for the level of traffic. Other city and county dog parks are available nearby.
- **Possibility of a future community dog park:** Many models exist for dog parks that are funded, built, and managed by a community. Community management fosters dog parks that are safe, clean, and well maintained. Rio Vista stakeholders who are in favor of a dog park can show their commitment to their dogs and to their fellow dog guardians by finding an area sufficiently large and with adequate access for a dog park and by working to create a safe space there.

A dog park at Rio Vista would sacrifice the irreplaceable for something that could be installed anywhere else with fewer costs, both tangible and intangible. We urge Tucson Parks to reconsider this item in the master plan and to remove both “potential dog park” locations from the map.

