

My name is Denise Dahn and I am director of the Seattle Nature Alliance. We advocate for the preservation of natural parklands for passive use, wildlife habitat, and scenic beauty.

We were asked to speak about a nature-related concern. In a nutshell, Parks has started a process for Seattle's Off-Leash Areas. The result of this process will be a Plan. That Plan will be presented to the Park Board, the Mayor, and possibly the City Council. As part of this process, Parks held a series of focus groups. They have stated that information gathered during the focus groups—along with other various data— will be the “foundation for writing the Plan.”

I attended one of the focus groups, and I left the meeting with a deep concern. Because of that concern, the Seattle Nature Alliance submitted a letter to Parks, requesting that the *process* for the plan be put on hold until some critical problems could be resolved.

Tonight I will talk a bit about those problems. For more details, our letter is posted on our website.

But first, I'd like to tell you a little about the Seattle Nature Alliance and our position on off-leash recreation, so you'll understand where we're coming from. This can be a sensitive, emotional issue. People love their pets. And, people also love wild nature. All of these non-human living beings depend upon our goodwill for their survival. They all need our protection.

Our organization advocates for wild nature. We do this because if we don't actively protect it, it will not last, especially not with the overwhelming growth our region is facing. We do this because wild nature is not just about the welfare of animals, it's about people, too. We all need nature for health and happiness. In Seattle, we have possibly the best remnant wild nature of any major city in the world. It is one of our biggest assets, the deepest-rooted part of our heritage, connecting us to thousands of years of Northwest native plants, animals, and people. Preserving nature is about the future—giving the next generations an urban lifestyle rich with the benefits of living close with wild nature.

Our Alliance supports off-leash recreation—in appropriate places. Appropriate places are defined in Council Resolution 29628. This is the original agreement Seattle made when we accepted off-leash into the parks system in 1997.

Those are:

- Avoid interference with other established uses
- Avoid directly abutting residences.
- Assure the availability of close parking.
- Avoid locating near children's play areas.
- Locate where there are minimal impacts upon the total visual character of a park.
- Locate where there is low potential for spillover into areas not designated for off-leash use.
- Avoid sensitive environmental areas such as wildlife habitats and steep slopes.
- Develop clearly marked boundaries and signs explaining the rules
- Fence sites completely where there are no natural barriers

We support those.

But, we oppose off-leash in inappropriate places, and that takes me directly into the problems we have with Parks' process for their upcoming plan.

Our letter to parks described a number of issues. The process was not inclusive—in that many stakeholders were not involved in a meaningful way; it was not impartial—meaning that off-leash advocates have an out-sized voice; and it was misleading—meaning that much of the information presented in the focus groups was vague and biased.

There is more detail about those points in our letter, and you can get that on our website.

Tonight, I want to focus on just one main concern.

At my focus group, we were presented with six Options for Off-Leash Areas, including several new types of off-leash areas, alternatives that have never been used in Seattle, but

that occur in some other cities. We were asked to vote on which of these Options might be acceptable in Seattle, and our votes were tallied up on a flip chart pad.

Three of the options were:

- unfenced off leash areas in Regional Parks, where dogs could run free at certain times of the day. (As an example, Lincoln Park is West Seattle's most popular Regional Park.)

The other two Options were:

- off leash on nature trails,
- and off leash on beaches.

We were asked to vote, and “nature trails” and “beaches” received unanimous “yes” votes from all the dog-owners in our group.

This is the crux of our concern. Parks tells us that the focus groups will be used as a foundation for writing the Plan. And, our focus group got a lot of votes for off leash in Regional Parks and on nature trails and beaches. The straight line connecting those two things underlines the problem.

We wonder, will the Plan recommend these new alternatives, or won't it? Will the “voting” be considered proof of “community support”? Will the examples of new forms of off-leash from other cities be used as evidence they would be appropriate in Seattle? We have no way of knowing. We have no idea *how* the information will be used, how it will be weighted, whose votes will count for what, or what any of the vague and often misleading questions and information in the focus group will be used to justify. We do not know.

But, we do know this:

Once the Plan is released, the public will only have 2 and a half weeks to comment. There will only be ONE Park Board meeting to give public testimony. That's two and a half weeks to review the Plan, research the facts, analyze the reasoning, prepare a response, and make arrangements to attend a single public meeting where you only get two minutes or less to speak. And, community organizations or other stakeholders—like

this one—will have to scramble to get a meeting together with their members in time to prepare a response.

In contrast, off leash advocates have had months or longer to prepare their case—they've been involved from the beginning. When this plan comes out, the off-leash advocates will be ready with their testimony. But, the public will be blind-sided. Most people we talked to—even major stakeholders—didn't know any of this was taking place.

And, that is the main thing we've requested from Parks. People need more time *after* the Plan comes out, and *before* the final decision is made to provide their input. In fairness, it should be months, not weeks. In addition to that, we've identified several problems with the information presented in the focus groups which was misleading in favor of off leash access in nature. We've also objected to the fact that no other important stakeholders like Audubon, forest stewards, or Seal Sitters were involved in developing the focus group information. You can read more about those specifics in our actual letter which is posted on our website.

In summary, we have asked Parks to put a hold on this process, to re-start it with inclusion, accuracy, and impartiality, and to give the public more time for their response.

Whatever this plan ends up containing, IF it contains increased off-leash access to natural areas, habitats, or places of scenic beauty, then we will have a lot more to say. A LOT more.

Right now, I'd like to close with a question for Parks.

We agree that off-leash recreation is a legitimate mode of recreation, and we support off-leash in appropriate locations. But, off-leash recreation is indisputably high-impact recreation. And, Seattle natural parklands have traditionally been reserved for low-impact recreation.

My question is this:

At what point did high-impact recreation—*any* form of high-impact recreation—become even an *option* for natural places?

Thank you.