

Dogs may be welcome soon at Mohegan Park in Norwich

City officials consider lifting ban

By Adam Benson

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A sign lets visitors to Mohegan Park know that dogs are not allowed at the park. Norwich officials are looking into lifting the ban. The decision would be up to the City Council.

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Norwich, Conn. —

Evelyn Asting takes her four dogs everywhere she goes.

“They even come camping with us, that’s how bad we are,” the Norwich resident said.

Everywhere, that is, except Mohegan Park, which is off-limits to canines of all kinds.

“We go there for short walks when we can, but I know I’d use the park a whole lot more if I could bring my dogs there,” Asting said. “I would love that.”

Officials are confident the city’s thousands of other dog owners feel the same way and are considering a move to allow dogs at the 320-acre park on a trial basis as early as September. Since doing so would require changing an existing ordinance, the final decision rests with the City Council.

But Mayor Peter Nystrom said momentum is building for the idea.

“If you look at many other communities, dogs aren’t prohibited from parks. I’m afraid we may be somewhat unique, in that we don’t allow dogs at all,” he said.

The Mohegan Park ban has been in effect for years, but as work on an updated Plan of Conservation and Development continues, community development experts and local leaders say relaxing the ordinance, or creating a revised set of standards governing where dogs are allowed on public property could improve the quality of life for thousands of residents.

In 2011-12, the city clerk’s office handed out 1,931 dog licenses — a figure expected to climb this year.

Jason Vincent, a senior economic development associate with Norwich Community Development Corp., is among the strongest advocates for changing the city’s rules.

Good business

Americans spend an estimated \$51 billion a year on their animals, and with no pet store in Norwich, opening up assets like Mohegan Park could help drive economic development by luring spin-off businesses into the city, Vincent said.

He'd also like to see downtown restaurants offer outside amenities so patrons can bring their dogs. At NCDC, employees keep dog treats at the front desk and recently have started leaving a water bowl in front of their Main Street address.

"If we create a responsible set of requirements and use the other dog owners to enforce those, maybe we can create a place that doesn't have all the maintenance issues that people fear," Vincent said.

Nystrom said any changes to the rules at Mohegan Park would be reviewed closely during a trial period and would include leash laws. He points to the success of the city's Estelle Cohn Memorial Dog Park on Asylum Street as an example of dog owners policing themselves and keeping the grounds clean.

There's also the possibility of converting a vacant field on Brook Street into a second dog park.

"We're dog advocates," Nystrom said.

Asting believes lifting the Mohegan Park ban would do much for the morale of city pet owners.

"I really support it," she said. "I'm a firm believer that dogs need to be taken care of properly. But it's all about etiquette."

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