

Dogs on Town Open Space

Dog owners recently asked the Cape Elizabeth Conservation Commission to review its management policies at Winnick Woods regarding use by dog owners. The dog owners want to proactively address potential negative impacts of increased use of Winnick Woods following changes at Robinson Woods.

Work with User groups

The Conservation Commission welcomes the initiative taken by dog owners. When the Conservation Commission encounters challenges with greenbelt trail use by a specific user group, the practice is to engage the user group. Concerns about greenbelt trail impacts and the needs of the user groups are jointly reviewed. The result is ongoing communication and thoughtful management of greenbelt trails. Using this model, the Conservation Commission has built working relationships with the mountain-biking and horseback riding greenbelt users. Greenbelt trail improvements have been made by both groups in cooperation with the Conservation Commission, resulting in a better trail system for all users. More importantly, the relationship built with user groups provides feedback and a method for addressing issues as they arise.

Assessment of Dog use on the greenbelt

In preparation for the discussion with dog owners, staff walked the main Winnick Woods trail loop. As a control, staff also walked the outer trail loop at Gull Crest. A summary of conditions was prepared and shared with the dog owners. Generally, the summary of conditions found that dog owners on greenbelt trails had both beneficial and negative elements.

Along the first 1/3 mile of trail, pet waste can be found an average of every 50' for both trails. A pet waste station is available at Gull Crest, but not at Winnick Woods. In Winnick Woods, there are many instances of dogs leaving the trail to romp in the woods. This is not common at Gull Crest. Staff observed about 1/2 of dog owners at Winnick Woods leaving the trail carrying a baggie. During the survey, staff experienced dogs jumping, and lunging in a menacing way. Many dog owners were also careful to avoid conflicts with other greenbelt trail users.

The trails at Winnick Woods are well packed down, to the extent that it is being used for biking. Trails at Gull Crest are less packed, and trails are heavily used not just by dog walkers, but also for cross country skiing, snow shoeing and snowmobiling.

Going forward

The Conservation Commission discussed installation of a pet waste station at Winnick Woods. They agreed to install a pet waste station, which has been generously donated Maine Veterinary Referral Center of Scarborough, along with a month's supply of bags.

The Commission also agreed to install signage encouraging dog owners to pick up after their pets. The dog owners stakeholder group provided several samples of signs, some of which have been since installed at Winnick Woods and Gull Crest.

The Commission will educate the public about best practices, both responsible pet waste disposal and courtesy to fellow trail users.

What Trail Users Should Know

All pet waste should be collected and deposited in a waste container. Pet waste left "in the open" does not harmlessly degrade. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) classifies pet waste as "toxic." The U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) confirms that pet waste can spread parasites, including hookworm, ringworm, tapeworm and salmonella. Even after pet waste degrades, parasite eggs can linger for years. Very small amounts of pet waste includes millions of fecal coliform bacteria. This can seep into groundwater and spread salmonella and giardia. Pet waste is a major contributor to stormwater pollution. Pet waste left in the open is carried by rainwater into storm drains, and then streams, rivers and lakes. To protect the health of the public, and their pets, pet waste should ALWAYS be left in a waste container.

Pet owners should always have their pet under control when using the greenbelt. The Cape Elizabeth greenbelt is a multi-user trail system. All users should be respectful and courteous of each other. When enjoying greenbelt trails, assume other trail users do not want a dog to jump on them or to approach them in a menacing way. If your dog becomes excited when encountering other trail users, restrain your dog until the user has passed by.

Ongoing management

The Conservation Commission is the steward of the greenbelt system and will continue to monitor use of greenbelt trails consistent with the Open Space Management Ordinance and policies adopted by the Town Council. The commission will continue to work with stakeholder groups, but will also take necessary steps to curb abuse of the greenbelt trail system.