

Miami Shores Dog Days, Part 1

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor
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The dream of Village Dog Park becomes reality

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The Village Dog Park in Miami Shores hadn't been open more than a month when mockingbirds moved in, fashioned a nest in one of several newly planted oaks, and started raising a family.

That's just a taste of the positivity taking hold there since the recent opening of the park. It has become a happy place to visit, where new friends are made and old ones meet to chat while their dogs romp together and explore. In this small community of nearly 11,000 residents, where the mood has darkened by the last few months of contentious social media smears of local public officials, the dog park is a needed ray of sunshine. Who knew it would also become a testament to how citizens can successfully work together with elected officials and village staff to get things done?

But getting there wasn't without opposition and setbacks.

Back in June 2005, the Miami Shores Village Council voted to instruct Village staff to conduct a study of available vacant land and underutilized park space as a site for a possible dog park, along with the feasibility, costs, and associated health and safety issues. The study concluded that the best location would be the quarter-acre western portion of Constitution Park, a wedge-shaped grassy area just west of the village's recreation fields.

According to longtime village manager Tom Benton, the 2005 dog park initiative failed because of a successful community "anti-dog park" petition signed by neighbors and families who used Constitution Park for sports activities.

Shores resident Steven Shulman was part of the 2005 push in favor of creating a fenced-in dog area within Constitution Park. He tells the *BT* that the NIMBYs had the ear of then Mayor Herta Holly, telling her: "I don't want to have ten-foot high piles of dog crap near my house," says Shulman.

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“It was the fear of the unknown and unrealistic,” he says. “It was the best location for the dog park.”

Fast forward to the 2015 Miami Shores Council election. While campaigning through neighborhoods, Alice Burch, who received the majority of votes and became mayor, had noticed the many dogs in the Shores. As mayor in February 2016, she decided to visit the same vacant village-owned parcels and parks to scout out a choice spot for a dog park, even asking this columnist for feedback.

The mayor settled on Optimist Park (on the east side of NE 2nd Avenue at NE 94th Street) as an all-around best site selection and put it on the March 1, 2016, council agenda for discussion and possible action. Two nearby property owners spoke out against it, as did some council members, and the council voted instead to designate Optimist Park, along with Constitution Park and Bayshore Park dog-friendly (meaning, on-leash only).

Still stinging from the 12-year-old failed attempt to create a fenced-in dog area at Constitution Park, Steven Shulman, along with Shores resident Elizabeth Cowen, formed a citizens' dog park committee after the March council meeting to drum up renewed grassroots community support.

Cowen posted an online petition that garnered 204 signatures in favor of a park. She also collected 75 paper petition signatures. Informal meetings were held, which at first involved all eight volunteer committee members, including myself and special pro bono consultant Albert Ruder, former City of Miami Parks and Recreation director, who also shared his parks experience with then Mayor Burch.

Shulman recalls that the initial brainstorming involved choosing a location, sketching designs, and discussing what amenities would be needed. He was steadfast about the location: “We were laser-focused on Constitution Park because of its size, central location, not much traffic nearby, and it’s quiet,” Shulman recalls.

But his hopes were crushed again when, at a council meeting, then Councilman Mac Glinn, who has been recently elected mayor, was just as steadfast against the location.

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In a sit-down interview, Glinn tells the BT: “I was happy to support it if the neighbors supported it. But we couldn’t get neighbors to buy into turning a passive park into an active dog park.” And he didn’t want to see a replay of the 2005 situation. “I wanted to get a park...just not right next to somebody’s house.”

Armed with his background as senior vice president and account manager for the construction company Skanska, Glinn spearheaded the effort to find the right location for the dog park.

“I wanted to find something where we wouldn’t have residents’ opposition, preferably something already city-owned, preferably something that had a lot of the infrastructure already in place, already had electric and water nearby that we could tap into, something that had existing parking that we could utilize, and something that was suitable in size that could accommodate a small and a large dog park.”

He eventually found it in front of the Aquatic Center at 10020 Biscayne Blvd. “I think it’s ideal,” he adds.

In May 2016, the village council voted to approve site construction, being given a cost estimate of \$181,314 and approving up to \$200,000 for the park’s creation.

But Shulman wasn’t satisfied, and still held on to the disappointment of “losing” Constitution Park for a second time. “The one place Mac Glinn chose, I had discarded as one of the worst locations for various reasons: it’s a swamp, too small, it would interfere with traffic and parking -- a *horrible* location.”

Although he decided not to fight it anymore, Shulman complains, “Let’s just get this little eyesore, and worry about Constitution Park as soon as [the Aquatic Center location] becomes a problem, and put the park there instead.”

The committee’s advocacy at the April 2016 council visioning session helped raise dog park

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awareness, seeing it declared a Top 5 village priority, as well as bringing park discussion to the annual budget workshop.

Mayor Glinn describes the interaction with the citizens' dog park committee as a "collaborative process with a really active group that I engaged with when I was in the process of looking for the site, trying to help it along, working with them and the village manager to make sure we finally captured everything the residents wanted and be fiscally responsible about it."

By September 2016, initial site clearing and preparation began with the removal of plants and relocation of the Britto beach ball sculpture from the site to an area nearby.

"The goal was to have it open in January 2017," says Glinn, "but we ran into a number of permitting issues that slowed things down dramatically."

According to village manager Tom Benton, who was managing the construction project, the building department wanted a new site plan because the parcel's use was being changed by the improvement.

"The building official, upon viewing the area, thought it was large enough to require a site plan with detailed drawings," says Benton. T.Y. Linn International was hired to draw new plans, which had to be approved by various departments before construction could go forward.

Assistant public works director Chris Miranda, who led the construction crew, tells the *BT*: "The building department wanted official designs for the shade canopy and the concrete walkways. They wanted more details."

By March 2017, permits closed out and a certificate of occupancy was granted -- a mere 12 months after then Mayor Burch put it on the council agenda for discussion. The official park opening was April 14.

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Next month: Part 2 of the story.

Feedback: letters@biscaynetimes.com