

# **Dog Off-Leash Area (DOLA)**

## **Guidelines**



Park Planning Division

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## 1.0 Introduction

The City of Austin is consistently ranked among the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the nation, with a population on track to reach 1.2 million people by 2040. As the human population grows, it can be assumed that the dog population will grow close behind. This document seeks to address issues arising from this growth and provide a set of uniform citywide guidelines, by which the Dog Off-Leash Area program will be regulated and continue its success in Austin parks.

This document is meant to promote and guide the development of Dog Off-Leash Areas (DOLAs). As the only public spaces in the city where dogs are legally permitted off-leash, DOLAs provide exercise and socialization opportunities to supplement the on-leash opportunities in Austin parks. With these guidelines, Austin Parks and Recreation (APR) strives to accommodate the needs of dogs and their owners in an equitable manner, while not compromising the needs of other park users or the natural resources of the parks.

DOLAs provide dog owners with a variety of benefits. Beyond the opportunity to exercise and socialize their dogs in a dedicated area, DOLAs give dog owners a place to gather and connect with each other. These interactions can help build a sense of community and improve the quality of life for regular DOLA users.

Well-socialized and exercised dogs benefit the entire city with less barking, less on-leash aggression, less territorial behavior, and friendlier behavior towards people and other dogs. Additionally, dog owners often use parks at hours many others do not, seven days a week, and in all types of weather. The increased presence provided by dog owners during non-peak park hours can act as a deterrent for criminal activity.

When possible, every effort will be made to bring existing DOLAs up to the criteria defined in these guidelines, so they can continue to successfully serve their intended purpose. Existing DOLAs that do not meet these criteria will not necessarily be closed and will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis.

APR is the steward of all City-owned parkland and makes decisions regarding its use based on impact and sustainability. If any site shows signs of degradation, the site may be subject to temporary closure for restoration purposes or could be decommissioned and reprogrammed by APR. Every effort will be made to identify a replacement location if a DOLA is decommissioned.

The guidelines outlined on the following pages will be carried out by the Department, APR partners, and park development partners to ensure the highest level of consideration will be given to the design and management of DOLAs.

### Main Goals of the DOLA Guidelines

1. Provide safe off-leash exercise opportunities for dogs and their owners.
2. Create a system of DOLAs that balances the needs of various park user groups and natural resource management goals.
3. Geographically distribute DOLAs throughout the city with consideration given to equity, access, and sustainability.
4. Establish DOLAs at District Parks and Metro Parks. DOLAs proposed in existing developed parks classified as Neighborhood or smaller will only be considered at the discretion of the APR Director and may be subject to review by the Parks and Recreation Board and City Council.
5. Encourage design, maintenance, and use practices that minimize the negative impacts of DOLAs on the environment and public health.
6. Decrease conflicts between dogs and people.
7. Outline DOLA rules and etiquette that maintain public and animal safety.
8. Promote the development of community partnerships to support the stewardship of DOLAs.

The following site guidelines have been developed to ensure DOLA sites are located and designed according to a standard that considers the safety, suitability, and environmental sustainability of each site.

## 2.0 DOLA Site Criteria

### 2.1 DOLA Definition

1. Dog Off-Leash Area: DOLAs are the only public places in the City of Austin where dogs may legally be unrestrained. Dogs must be leashed or otherwise restrained on public property at all times outside these designated areas. Those in violation of these rules may be ticketed and fined up to \$500 per citation. For more information, see [Title 3](#) of the City of Austin Code of Ordinances.

### 2.2 DOLA Categories

1. Fenced DOLA: Fenced DOLAs are facilities where handlers are provided with the opportunity to exercise their dogs off-leash within an enclosed environment. At parks with fenced DOLAs, handlers must keep their dogs on-leash until fully inside the fenced area to protect other park users.
2. Unfenced DOLA: Unfenced DOLAs are designated areas within the existing parkland or open space infrastructure where handlers can exercise their dogs off-leash without violating city ordinances and park rules. The boundaries of unfenced DOLAs shall be marked with signage.

### 2.3 Site Guidelines for all DOLAs

1. DOLAs should comply with all City of Austin codes and regulations. All new DOLAs should be subject to APR review and may be subject to additional requirements based on site conditions or context.
2. DOLAs should be sufficiently distant from residences so that noise and activity levels are no more disruptive to neighbors than typical park uses. Some noise is expected and will not be used as a reason to prohibit the establishment or continuation of a DOLA. When reviewing DOLA locations, APR will consider neighboring land uses and environmental conditions, including topography and landscape screening. DOLAs will not be considered in School Parks.
3. No Pet Zones: Specific areas may be designated as "No Pet Zones," meaning that no dogs except for service animals may enter at any time, leashed or unleashed, to protect sensitive areas and avoid conflict with other park users. Some of these zones are specified in Building Criteria Manual [14-1-13](#). Examples include, but are not limited to:
  - a. City preserves, historic sites, scenic points, and gardens.
  - b. Designated athletic fields and sports courts.
  - c. Children's playgrounds/areas, school campuses, splash pads, and swimming pools.

APR recommends DOLAs be located a minimum of 50 feet from the areas listed above and barriers be installed to further separate No Pet Zones from DOLAs.

4. DOLAs should be established:
  - a. Outside of any water quality or detention features.
  - b. Outside the Critical Water Quality Zone of classified waterways per Land Development Code [25-8-92](#).
  - c. A minimum of 50 feet from unclassified waterways.
  - d. Outside the established buffer of any Critical Environmental Features per Land Development Code [25-8-1](#) and [25-8-281](#).
  - e. A minimum of 150 feet from any Critical Environmental Features without established buffers.

Specific buffer requirements can be reduced in consultation with the Austin Watershed Protection.

5. The minimum size for DOLAs is 10,000 square feet unless otherwise approved by APR in writing.
6. Future DOLAs should be fenced unless otherwise approved by APR in writing.
7. DOLA boundaries should be clearly marked in the field with barriers and/or signage.
8. Parking should be provided or identified to meet the intended capacity of each DOLA. On-street parking will be considered only if it does not conflict with nearby residential use. Bike racks should be provided to support alternative transportation.

9. DOLAs should be developed on well-drained areas to avoid ponding. Design should include grading or appropriate infrastructure to ensure proper drainage.
10. Design should provide adequate erosion control measures and protection of natural features (creeks, lakes, aquifers, trees, plants, etc.).
11. DOLAs must include pet waste stations, and trash and recycling receptacles. Quantities to be determined by APR.
12. Site should include adequate barriers to protect dogs from vehicles, steep cliffs, and other hazards, as well as to prevent conflicts with other park users. Site review by City of Austin staff will determine whether hard or soft barriers are required.
13. Signage guidelines:
  - a. Informational Kiosk or Sign (per APR standards) to include the following:
    - DOLA name and address
    - Hours of operation
    - Map of DOLA indicating boundaries, trails, streams, and Critical Environmental Features (CEFs) identified by the City of Austin
    - DOLA rules and regulations
    - Emergency contact numbers
    - DOLA carrying capacity
    - APR logo
    - Relevant website information (e.g., other DOLA locations)
    - Scoop the Poop information
    - Relevant health and safety information
    - DOLA partner information, if applicable, including volunteer events
  - b. Trail markers designating off-leash areas on trails.
  - c. Signage at boundaries of DOLA.
  - d. Signage marking Critical Environmental Features (CEFs) in the field, as needed.
  - e. Signage designating large dog area and small dog area, if applicable.

#### 2.4 Site Guidelines for Fenced DOLAs

1. Double entry gates are required to minimize escapes and ensure safety.
2. Emergency exit/maintenance access gates are required.
3. Sufficient ground cover must be provided and should allow for adequate drainage and erosion control.
4. Separate enclosures for large and small dogs are encouraged.

#### 2.5 Site Guidelines for Unfenced DOLAs

1. Signage should be used to mark the boundaries of the DOLA.

2. Proximity, barriers and additional pathways should be considered in areas adjacent to other recreational uses.

#### 2.6 Optional features that could be included in DOLAs

1. Drinking fountain for dogs and people
2. Water features: splash pool/pad
3. Benches
4. Pathways
5. Dog playscapes
6. Shade
7. Lighting
8. Agility course
9. Training ground
10. Swimming facility
11. Restrooms

### 3.0 DOLA Rules and Etiquette

#### 3.1 DOLA Rules

1. Rules for all categories of DOLA
  - a. Handlers are legally and financially responsible for dogs in their care, their actions, and any resulting injuries or damages.
  - b. All dogs must be restrained by a leash no longer than six feet in length when entering or leaving a DOLA. See Austin City Code [3-2-1](#), [3-4-1](#).
  - c. Handlers must be in full control of their off-leash dogs through voice and sight while within the DOLA.
    - Voice and sight control means the dogs must always be within the handler's sight and under verbal command. If a dog cannot immediately obey its handler's verbal command, the dog must remain on-leash.
    - Dogs are not allowed to charge, chase, or display aggression towards other people or dogs, or chase or harass wildlife.
    - Dogs displaying inappropriate behavior must be leashed immediately and removed from the situation. Inappropriate behavior may include unwanted jumping, snarling, excessive barking, pestering, or mounting other dogs.
  - d. The following dogs are not permitted in a DOLA:
    - Dogs with a history of aggressive behavior. See Austin City Code [3-4-7](#).
    - Dogs that have not been spayed or neutered.
    - Dogs without current rabies vaccination, including dogs too young

(under four months old) to be vaccinated. See Austin City Code [3-3-2](#).

- e. Handlers must remain in the DOLA with their dog. Any dog left unattended within a DOLA shall be deemed “at-large” and may be impounded. See Austin City Code [3-1-14](#). Those who see unattended dogs or other rule violations should call Animal Control at 311.
- f. A handler must have no more than three dogs off-leash at any time. Professional dog walkers or trainers must obtain a permit for Commercial Use of Dedicated Parkland.
- g. Handlers shall always be in possession of one leash for each dog.
- h. For the safety of dogs and their handlers, dogs should wear flat buckle collars. No metal training or sharp spiked collars are allowed in DOLAs.
- i. Handlers must clean up after their dog. Deposit pet waste in the containers on site. See Austin City Code [3-4-6](#).
- j. Do not let dogs defecate in or near water, dry creek beds, or on streambanks.
- k. Holes dug by dogs must be filled by the handler prior to leaving the DOLA.
- l. Children under twelve (12) must be accompanied by an adult in DOLAs. Do not allow children to approach dogs without the handler's permission.
- m. Handlers in a DOLA must comply with all posted rules and regulations. Dogs must be leashed immediately upon request by any police officer or City staff. Failure to comply with a reasonable request for compliance by any enforcement agent may result in police action, including citation or fine. See Austin City Code [3-7-2](#); [3-7-3](#).

### 3.2 Additional rules for fenced DOLAs

- a. Dogs must remain on-leash until they are fully inside the fenced area.
- b. Where a double gate is provided, close the first gate entirely before opening the second gate. This provides a safe enclosure during the transition from on-leash to off-leash.
- c. Leave bicycles outside the fenced area.
- d. APR strongly discourages children under six (6) being inside the fenced area.
- e. Be respectful of the dog size recommendations for separated areas.

### 3.3 Additional rules

- a. No dogs except service animals are permitted, leashed or unleashed, in any preserve, children’s playground/area, school campuses, splash pad, swimming pool, athletic field, or sports court.
- b. Handlers are not permitted to “park” used waste bags on trails to pick up later, even on looped trails.
- c. Handlers must keep their dogs on-leash in trailhead and parking areas. This includes the space between their vehicle and the beginning of the



designated DOLA trail or site.

### 3.4 DOLA Etiquette

Tips to make the DOLA safe and enjoyable for all.

1. Bring pet waste bags from home. Please help by picking up extra. Even responsible dog handlers get distracted.
2. Bring ample water for your dog and some to share. Do not allow your dog to drink from park fountains, unless the fountain includes a dog bowl.
3. Please consider that food, treats, and toys can cause conflicts. Bring them into the DOLA at your own risk.
4. Always keep your dog in sight. Do not congregate and chat with other handlers without watching your dog.
5. Move about the DOLA so your dog keeps an eye on you, as this encourages non-linear movement and exercise.
6. Moderate your DOLA use during peak hours to avoid potential conflicts and minimize the impact of heavy use on our parks.
7. Keep off wet grass. During and after a rainfall, topsoil is 20 times more vulnerable to compaction.
8. Keep dogs away from the entrances of fenced DOLAs and do not enter if there are a large number of dogs near the entrances.
9. Call 911 to report all emergencies and any criminal activity, including property damage. Police, fire, and animal control will provide appropriate responses to these calls.
10. Call 311 about DOLA rule violations and maintenance issues, such as broken gates, empty pet waste bag dispensers, or full trash cans.

City of Austin law enforcement officers have the authority to enforce restraint and pet waste laws. **Violators are subject to fines up to \$500 according to Austin City Code 3- 7-2.**

- **Dial 311 for non-emergencies**
- **Dial 911 for emergencies**

## 4.0 DOLA Management

### 4.1 APR Responsibilities

1. Enforce DOLA Guidelines and applicable Austin City Codes.
2. Provide, maintain, and repair basic amenities, fencing, signs, barriers, ground cover material, and surrounding landscape.
3. Post DOLA map, rules, and other educational materials in the information kiosk, if available, and on the City webpage, including references to applicable

Austin City Code.

4. Provide pet waste stations, bags, and signage regarding pet waste removal.
5. Provide and regularly empty trash and recycling receptacles.
6. Participate in evaluations of DOLAs to determine general compliance and sustainability. See Section 4.4.
7. Work with partners to address issues with DOLA use, design, location, and/or infrastructure when feasible.
8. Evaluate DOLA practices on an ongoing basis and update guidelines as needed.

#### 4.2 Community PARKnerships

APR is committed to growing partnerships that align with its overall mission, vision, and values, and that provide benefit to the public and the parks system. The APR Community PARKnerships program seeks to leverage the time, talent, and resources of community stakeholder groups and individuals.

Community PARKnership groups build an active, consistent volunteer presence in their park. Partners seek an opportunity to launch stewardship initiatives, such as regular volunteer days, specific/individual space activations, park improvements, and/or ecological restoration investment on APR property. Additional information on ways to get involved can be found at:

<https://www.austintexas.gov/departments/community-parknerships>

DOLA partners may:

- a. Act as stewards of their DOLA and uphold DOLA standards.
- b. Assist APR in the maintenance of the DOLA:
  - Assist in establishing priorities for repairs and improvements.
  - Schedule cleanup events.
- c. Communicate with APR regarding the management of the DOLA. If problems occur with the operation of the DOLA, the APR District Manager must be informed and involved in the resolution of the problem.
- d. Recruit, train, and organize volunteers.
- e. Organize fundraising activities to support improvements based on DOLA needs and/or community desires in close coordination with APR staff.
- f. Encourage training and educational activities for group members and DOLA users, such as participation in the Bark Ranger program, off-leash dog/owner training, and Scoop the Poop training.

#### 4.3 Complaints

Complaints and concerns arising inside the boundaries of the DOLA should be brought to the attention of the APR District Manager. Report maintenance issues to 311. In case of emergencies call 911.

#### 4.4 DOLA Evaluations

DOLA evaluations may be conducted periodically or as issues arise, with a representative from APR and the DOLA partner, if applicable. In addition to a DOLA Site Criteria review, the evaluation should consider any complaints and/or concerns raised by the community. Staff may use a DOLA Site Review Form to document the review.

## 5.0 Sample DOLA Site Review Form

DOLA Name:

Date of Site Review:

Reviewer(s):

Others in attendance:

The following checklist should serve as a general guideline during your site review. Include comments as appropriate.

- Speak with park users: Ask for likes/dislikes about the DOLA
- Describe the types of activities people and dogs are engaged in at the DOLA
- Kiosk or message center/Signage
- Accessibility and Parking
- Barriers
- Play areas: condition, small dog area
- Trails: condition
- Pet waste
- Water: type, availability, condition
- Shade
- Natural hazards (e.g., erosion, poison ivy)
- Describe the types of activities people and dogs are engaged in at the DOLA
- Primary issue/concern(s) and recommendation(s)

## 6.0 Definitions

**APR:** Austin Parks and Recreation.

**APR District Manager:** The Parks Grounds Manager responsible for organizing and managing programs in groundskeeping, minor construction, and minor repairs on City of Austin parkland and recreational facilities within their district. APR currently splits its Operations and Maintenance force into two districts: North and South. Call APR's main number (512) 974-6700 to be connected with the appropriate District Manager.

**Austin City Code:** Refers to the municipal Code of Ordinances for the City of Austin, found here: [https://library.municode.com/tx/austin/codes/code\\_of\\_ordinances](https://library.municode.com/tx/austin/codes/code_of_ordinances)

**Barriers:** Physical barriers may be natural or manmade but must visually or physically separate the DOLA from adjacent uses. **Soft barriers** include signs, field markers, paths, and landscaping. **Hard barriers** include fences, walls, boulders, bollards, berms, dense evergreen plant material or brush. The adjacent uses and hazards will determine what type of barrier APR deems appropriate.

**Bark Ranger Program:** APR educational program designed to promote the responsible use and enjoyment of City of Austin parks by citizens and their pets. Core environmental concepts are introduced, including Leave No Trace principles, outdoor safety for pets, and park stewardship for pet owners.  
<https://www.austintexas.gov/page/bark-rangers>

**Building Criteria Manual:** One of the technical criteria manuals created to interpret and specify the requirements established in the Land Development Code (see below).

**Code of Ordinances:** A compilation of all a City's laws and some of its regulations.

**Critical Environmental Features (CEFs):** Natural features of critical importance to the protection of environmental resources, including bluffs, canyon rim rocks, caves, sinkholes, springs, and wetlands (as defined in the Land Development Code 25-8-1).

**Commercial Use of Dedicated Parkland:** Those wishing to use City of Austin parkland for commercial uses must obtain a permit. Additional information can be found at: <https://www.austintexas.gov/departments/commercial-use-dedicated-parkland>

**Community PARKnership Group:** A community-based partnership group that builds an active, consistent volunteer presence in their park. Partners seek an opportunity to launch stewardship initiatives, such as regular volunteer days, specific/individual space activations, park improvements, and/or ecological restoration investment on APR property. Additional information on ways to get

involved can be found at: <https://www.austintexas.gov/department/community-parknerships>

**DOLA (Dog Off-Leash Area):** A designated public area where restraint of a dog is not required (as defined by Austin City Code [3-4-4](#)). The ONLY public spaces in the city of Austin where dogs are legally permitted off-leash.

**DOLA Partner:** A Community PARKnership group committed to the stewardship of a specific DOLA.

**DOLA Trail:** A trail within or passing through a Dog Off-Leash Area that promotes continual linear movement for the dog with the handler.

**Environmental Criteria Manual:** A set of guidelines and technical design criteria created to address the issues of water quality management, landscaping, preservation of trees and natural areas, the underground storage of hazardous materials, and construction activity in City of Austin parks, found here: [https://library.municode.com/tx/austin/codes/environmental\\_criteria\\_manual](https://library.municode.com/tx/austin/codes/environmental_criteria_manual)

**Ground Cover:** Various types of natural and manmade material, such as grass, synthetic turf, wood chips, mulch, crushed or pea gravel, used to prevent erosion.

**Informational Kiosk:** Structure that provides information on, but not limited to, DOLA rules and etiquette, safety tips, and DOLA partner information, such as volunteer events relevant to the site. Kiosks may be maintained by a DOLA partner. APR reserves the right to remove items posted on informational kiosks.

**Land Development Code:** Part of the City's Code of Ordinances (Title 25 and 30), this code outlines the rules and processes that guide how land is used and developed in the City of Austin. It regulates new development, redevelopment, zoning, subdivisions, parking, transportation, outdoor signs, site plans, drainage, watershed protection, open space, and more.

- Title 25:  
[https://library.municode.com/tx/austin/codes/code\\_of\\_ordinances?nodeId=TIT25LADE](https://library.municode.com/tx/austin/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=TIT25LADE)
- Title 30:  
[https://library.municode.com/tx/austin/codes/code\\_of\\_ordinances?nodeId=TIT30AUTRCOSURE](https://library.municode.com/tx/austin/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=TIT30AUTRCOSURE)

**No Pet Zones:** Areas defined in the DOLA Guidelines where the entry of pets, except service animals, is prohibited. Some of these zones are specified in Building Criteria Manual [14-1-13](#). Examples include, but are not limited to:

- City preserves, historic sites, scenic points, and gardens
- Designated athletic fields and sports courts
- Children's playgrounds/areas, school campuses, splash pads, and

swimming pools

**Pet Waste Station:** Dispenser with free plastic bags to be used for proper disposal of pet waste in the appropriate receptacle.

**School Parks:** often known as a Joint-Use Site, an outdoor space at a school that is available to the public during non-school hours through an interlocal agreement between City of Austin (COA) and Austin Independent School District (AISD). These outdoor spaces are special purpose parks with recreational amenities responding first to the student population, then to the neighborhood.

## **Appendix 1: Simplified DOLA Rules for Signage**

### **Rules for All DOLAs**

- Dogs must have a current rabies vaccination and be spayed or neutered.
- Handlers are legally and financially responsible for dogs in their care, their actions, and any resulting injuries or damages.
- Always keep dogs in sight and under full voice control.
- Aggressive dogs are not allowed. Misbehaving dogs must be leashed and removed. Misbehavior may include unwanted jumping, charging, chasing, snarling, excessive barking, pestering, or mounting other dogs.
- Unattended dogs may be impounded.
- Handlers must not have more than 3 dogs off leash at any time.
- Professional dog walkers or trainers must obtain a permit for Commercial Use of Dedicated Parkland.
- Always have a leash for each dog. Leashes cannot be longer than 6 feet. Do not use prong collars or choke collars.
- Scoop the Poop!
  - Clean up and throw away pet waste in appropriate containers.
  - Handlers are not permitted to leave behind waste to pick up later.
  - Pet waste left on the ground pollutes our water and makes people and pets sick.
- City of Austin law enforcement officers have the authority to enforce pet restraint and pet waste laws. Violators are subject to fines up to \$500 according to Austin City Code 3-7-2.

### **Additional Rules for Fenced DOLAs**

- Children younger than 12 years old are not allowed without adult supervision. Children younger than 6 years old are strongly discouraged.
- Keep dogs leashed until fully inside the gates.
- [Any Applicable rules for separate Large and Small Dog enclosures]

### **Additional Rules for Unfenced DOLAs**

- Supervise young children.
- Keep dogs leashed until inside the off-leash area boundaries.
- Scoop the Poop!
  - Do not let dogs defecate in or near water, streambanks, or dry creek beds.