

Don't Let Maggie Daley Park Go to the Dogs

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It was a warm, fragrant May day when I signed the lease for our 47th-floor apartment in a Lakeshore East high-rise. Paperwork done, I strolled through the secret garden of Lake Shore East Park, down a corridor of pink rosebushes and through a little tunnel of tamarack trees. The knee-high fountains bubbled over their rock beds.

I sat on a bench and looked all around. Skyscrapers circled the park; a giant picket fence created a shared backyard for the several thousand residents of this new neighborhood immediately east of Michigan Avenue and north of Randolph Street. I imagined bringing coffee and conversation to this very bench throughout the summer, relaxing with my husband while children ran across the broad sloped lawn and 20-somethings played Frisbee.

That was the first and last morning I truly enjoyed the park.

Neighborhood dogs claimed that little park long before we arrived.

There's an official dog park at Lake Shore East Park. It's fenced and well-used. Owners bring their dogs there and let them off leash safely inside the perimeter of the dog park — precisely as it should be.

But right outside the dog park, in the shade of the trees that ring the dog park, owners unleash their dogs and let them dash back and forth across the big lawn. Off-leash dogs run through the gated playground, where dogs are banned, according to the signs. Dog owners cluster in conversation on the sidewalks while their dogs monopolize the sidewalks, forcing stroller-pushing parents to cut a wide detour. People bring their blankets to the lawn and never unroll them when they realize they will be face-to-haunch with dogs doing their business in the pine trees a few feet away.

Dogs have a place. Their owners believe it's the entire park.

These are the same dog owners who want to infest the new Maggie Daley Park that is opening in stages to the south of Randolph.

Critics have charged that the Chicago Park District's newly announced dog-free policy for Maggie Daley Park is a direct result of the abuse that existing parks in the vicinity have endured.

One critic said that neighborhood dogs have made the Cancer Survivors' Garden (at the far eastern end of

Randolph Street, on the south side of the street) into a dog toilet. It's true. Summer after summer, petunias are set out in lovely formation, only to be killed by dog spray. They're replaced, sprayed on and die, again and again.

Walk in any direction, through or from Lake Shore East Park, and you must dodge owners standing at attention while their dogs defecate or urinate against trees, buildings, walls, plants, gardens . . . really anything that is available, even for a moment, such as a delivery truck.

The Aqua, at 225 N. Columbus Drive, is an architectural treasure, a vertical reflecting pool that overlooks Lake Shore East Park. But along the sidewalk on the northern side of the Aqua, you must skip over wet patches splotching its walls and sidewalk. Before and after working hours, the sidewalk is more wet than dry. If you are not familiar with this short sidewalk, just know that it's the route to the elevator or stairs that take you to Lake Shore East Park — and its dog park. It's a five-minute walk.

Dog dominance is hardly limited to the outdoors. In our building, the notices posted in the elevators make for juicy reading. One day, there was a reminder to dog owners that dogs were not allowed in the building's indoor swimming pool.

A few months later, in the midst of a cold snap,

another bulletin appeared: Dog owners were sternly warned not to curb their pets in the potted trees in the lobby.

For real? I asked one of the doormen. People have been lifting their dogs into the 4-foot-high pots that contain two-story trees so the dogs could do their business, sparing their owners the inconvenience of putting actual shoes and coats on to go outdoors? Sure, he said. We watch them on the security cameras.

Dogs do what dogs do. They're dogs. They can't help it.

Owners can. Maybe it is they, not the dogs, who should be licensed.

Joanne Cleaver is a communication consultant based in Chicago.