

Clay Evans: When dogs are family members

By Clay Evans, For the Camera Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:

DailyCamera.com

Like millions of other social-media time-wasters, I find myself utterly, stupidly charmed by the cute, sweet, funny animal photos and videos that daily stream through our various feeds. And why not?

I like the fact that so many people respond, in almost parental fashion, to the charm and guilelessness of animals, unburdened as they are by the human vexations of politics, communication and mortal fears. We love our non-human family members and those of others because they seem to exist beyond all that depressing stuff.

Right there is where I would like to start on yet another column regarding the City of Boulder Department of Open Space's steady march toward taking away the privileges of dog people who love nothing more than to enjoy public lands with their non-human friends and family. Despite a lack of comprehensive data suggesting that dogs do much harm to open-space lands, as compared to other users, OSMP has sought to enact new blanket restrictions rather than deal with rule-breakers.

I've dived into these policy battles time and time again over the years, but this time I'll just tell you that on Tuesday, the City Council will conduct a first reading of revised rules for the "green tag" program that allows people to have their dogs off leash and under "voice and sight control" on selected open-space properties. There will be no public debate at that meeting, but the issue has been tentatively scheduled for a public hearing on April 1.

There are many reasons for dog folk to be concerned. The proposed rules are vague — for example, "chasing wildlife" could mean a flock of sparrows takes flight at your dogs approach, but we don't know for sure — and in the end, will make green-tags much more expensive. Perhaps worst of all, the new rules would make dog guardians the only "user group" subject to revocation of privileges. Violate a seasonal raptor closure while climbing or get a ticket while mountain biking, and you can be right back at it an hour later, but not if you get dinged for your dog. You can look into the details at bouldercolorado.gov/osmp/tag-program-evaluation.

But rather than hit the policy questions (again), I'd like to ponder why dog people care so much about their voice-and-sight privileges. The grumps and grouzers continually cite the bad behavior of the few — leaving bags of poop around, allowing their pets to intrude on people or mercilessly hassle wildlife — to argue that we need to drop the hammer on everyone.

But this community ought to celebrate the amazing connections people have with their dogs. In Boulder, most people have a live-and-let-live attitude and are content to let each person define who counts as family. Just like people with children, people who consider dogs family members truly want the best for them.

And guess what? Bouncing off the fence at a dog park is nothing like being able to take your buddy out for an hour-long hike. And there are plenty of well-behaved dogs who simply have more energy than others

(just like humans), and their people can't always keep up. I love seeing a dog sprinting up and down a trail, tongue joyously lolling. And as many dog people will tell you, walking a dog on a leash isn't necessarily a good walk for either humans or dogs.

But many people I know who appreciate their voice-and-sight privileges are themselves athletes. While you can run or bike with a dog on a leash, there's nothing quite like experiencing a good aerobic session with your pal nearby, able to stop and sniff if she likes, without you having to stop.

I know some close-the-door-behind-them types — most of them latecomers in the eyes of natives and long-time residents — think this is a reason to enact more restrictions, but many people move to and visit Boulder because of these privileges. OSMP and control-happy council members over the years have grouched that Boulder is the "only place" that allows dogs to be off leash (it's not), as if the community's most cherished value should be conformity. This is a tradition that goes back to the original open-space charter in 1967; even the original posters for the program featured a dog running happily off leash. And Boulder is nothing if not egalitarian: Why should privileged dogs belonging to all the carpet-bagging trust-funders — excuse me, progressive persons of wealth — who can afford vast acreage be the only canines who can run free?

To those without dogs I say, have a heart. Choose to believe that people who love their dogs see them as family members and ask yourself how you would feel if local government persistently sought to limit your privileges.

I'll leave you with this troubling fact: During the last election, at least one respectable City Council member said reducing human use of open space should be a top priority and that the time had come to examine "carrying capacity."

In other words, they may be coming for you next.

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