

A PLANNER'S BEST FRIEND?

By Michael Stumpf, AICP, CECD

Luke entered my life about three years ago. He is not my first dog, but he is the first to share a place in my work as well as my home and family. It turns out that my "intern", as I refer to him, has a good deal to teach me about planning and creating vibrant, healthy, and desirable communities.

Greetings

It is late October and we are in the City of Marquette, Michigan. I am here to work on the City's economic development plan, and will spend the week meeting with businesses and stakeholders to gather their observations and opinions. But for the moment we are out walking the streets of downtown. A few minutes ago I spoke with an elderly gentleman going into a bank. He is a lifelong resident of the community and gave me a long history of the businesses that once lined Washington Street, how bad things got to be, and how pleased he is to see the changes that have been occurring over the past several years. One street over a young woman coming out of the food co-op tells me about the wonderful trail system, what a catalyst the co-op has been for improving the quality of restaurants, and how much she would like to see more support for local businesses and entrepreneurs.

Twice a day during our stay we will spend an hour walking through the area. In the process I will have conversations with perhaps twenty people who might rarely be identified to participate in a focus group or show up at a public workshop. I will gather some great information from them. But I am not the reason they stop to talk. They want to meet Luke.



A dog enjoys a moment with its family in downtown Hood River, Oregon.

People are drawn to dogs. But now the reaction is an emotional one, and one that would not have been all that common a generation ago. Many people who would walk right past another human will stop to pet a dog, opening up the opportunity for a conversation.

The New American Dog

I am fortunate to have my own consulting practice and have the ability to bring my dogs to work with me, whether in the office or on the road. Luke accompanies me when I travel to work on projects across the continent. He has already been to 36 states and this year made his first trip into Canada. A purebred mutt, Luke has the intelligence of his border collie mother and the gregariousness of his Labrador retriever father; a perfect combination for a professional planner-dog.

More and more people are bringing their dogs to work. About one in five workplaces are dog-friendly, up from 17 percent just five years ago. An es-

timated three percent of pet parents are taking their dogs to work. Since 1999 there has been an annual Take Your Dog to Work Day to help more reluctant workplaces explore the idea. (In 2013 it will be held on Friday, June 21, in case you want to run that one past your boss.)

Why is there this interest? A look at the numbers only partially explains it. In 2012 there were 78.2 million dogs in 46.3 million U.S. households, according to the American Pet Products Association. In other words, 39 percent of U.S. households have at least one dog, and the percentage of households with dogs has continued to rise even through the recession. But what is more important is the way in which we relate to our dogs. The animal that was once relegated to the doghouse and fed scraps is now embraced as a member of the family. (In fact, there are 4 million more dogs than there are children 18 and younger in the U.S.) They sleep in bed with us, eat a grain-free or even organic food, and are referred to as our children and granddogs. We will

spend \$52 billion on our pets this year.

As planners we have probably already noticed the growing number of pet bakeries, spas, and hotels cropping up in our communities. While this trend will continue on its own, we can – and should – do more to accommodate dogs in our built environment. There is much to be gained.

A Bowl of Water and a Bite to Eat

Luke and I tend to seek out opportunities to go hiking whether traveling for work or pleasure. It was a warm day in July when we pulled into Sisters, Oregon around lunchtime. We spent the morning in dense pine forests outside of town, hiking along roaring streams to some of the waterfalls for which the Cascade Range is named. I am hungry now and while I crave a meal as special as the place, I am resigned to stopping at a drive-up window. It is too warm to leave Luke in the car.

But on this particular trip I will not be disappointed. Passing through the downtown I spy a family with two golden retrievers sitting at an outdoor table. We soon joined them at a place called Ali's Deli. Seeing me standing with Luke in the doorway trying to read the menu, the owner beckons me in. "Just let me know what you want" she says, "and I will bring it out to you." We are soon seated at a table in the sunlight enjoying a wonderful sandwich piled ridiculously high with meat. It is certainly more than I can eat. Luke's tail wags in anticipation.

I will learn that Ali's is not the only dog-friendly establishment in town. Several downtown merchants invite dogs into their stores and sell treats or other merchandise for dogs. There are water bowls outside of shop doors. The town even hosts dog-themed events during the summer months. Tourism is important to the local economy and people here un-

derstand an important fact; last year almost a quarter of owners took their dog with them when traveling by car for at least two nights. By making it clear that dogs are welcome, the businesses in downtown Sisters are making it easy for visitors to stop, dine, and browse their stores.

Before our trip is over I will have to contrast my experience in Sisters with another Oregon community. Also a tourist community, its businesses included a pet store and a dog bakery. Its businesses also put out water bowls and catered to the people walking dogs up and down the street. There was one small greenspace in the downtown, a city park, and at the entrance stood a red and white sign proclaiming "no dogs allowed". It seems that somebody has not gotten the message.

unique behavior, and the ways they influence their human companions.

One of the first words a puppy will learn is "walk". Research has shown that people with dogs walk more often than those who do not have dogs. A Michigan study found that about two-thirds of dog owners took their pets for regular walks. In California, dog owners were about 60 percent more likely to walk for leisure than people who owned a cat or no pet at all. Researchers at the University of Western Australia found that seven in every ten adult dog owners achieved 150 minutes of physical exercise per week, compared with only four in every ten non-owners. And finally, a study in the United Kingdom estimated that the average person will walk nearly 24,000 miles during their pet's lifetime.



Luke stops to visit another working dog in downtown Kearney, Nebraska.

Walking the Dog

Accommodating dogs can be a strategy to help in creating great places anywhere, not just in tourism-dependent communities. Dogs can help us to attain at least two of our goals – economic vitality and walkability. The secret is to tap into their

These studies made some other important observations. Anyone who has ever been walked by a dog will know that they walk at a faster pace, resulting in more aerobic exercise. The estimated time spent walking dogs varied depending on who was surveyed, but ranged as high as nearly nine hours per week among dedicated dog walkers. Dog owners

were more likely than non-owners to walk regardless of the type of urban environment in which they lived, and most people preferred to walk their dog within their own neighborhood. The obstacles to walking were much the same as for people without dogs, but access to public open space and dog-accessible environments are important considerations.

How Might We Respond?

As planners we have to ask how we can use this information to create better communities. To begin with, since dog owners are among the most prolific walkers we need to enable them to walk their dogs without barriers or hindrances that we are sometimes responsible for creating. More proactively, we can provide destinations in our downtown and neighborhood commercial districts, adding to the street life and reinforcing the notion of walking, instead of driving to neighborhood businesses.

Community dog parks are a great resource, but owners will not always have the time to take their dogs to one, which usually involves a trip by automobile. Since most walks occur in the neighborhood, it stands to reason that neighborhood parks and path systems should allow leashed

dogs as a measure to promote walking. The experience can be improved by providing bags and trash cans for litter removal. Most drinking fountain manufacturers offer models with dog accessible bowls – a nice touch for the comfort and safety of our walking companions.

Within traditional business districts it may be even more important to ensure that there is a grassy space for dogs who may be visiting or working with their humans, and the resources for their guardians to clean up after their pets. Ordinances should allow dogs to accompany their owners in outdoor seating areas. Businesses can reinforce the image of the district as a pet-friendly destination through simple actions like setting out a water bowl, providing a hitching post, or allowing dogs into their shops. More than likely some businesses in the district already have a dog of their own in the shop ready to greet customers.

At the district level, find ways to incorporate dogs into events and promotions, such as encouraging people to dress their pets and walk in the Fourth of July Parade, or hosting an adoption event at the farmer's market. New events might include a Dog Days celebration, dog talent

shows, or wiener dog races. These events reinforce the idea of the district as a destination for dogs.

Is this a strategy that can really make a difference? Consider an estimate of the potential impact. North Avenue is a neighborhood commercial district in the early 20th century suburb of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. The street features a number of good dining places, delis and coffee shops, and assorted other businesses. Surrounded by a dense neighborhood of single family homes, two-flats, and scattered larger buildings, there are more than 16,000 households within one mile of the district. It should be a very pedestrian-oriented corridor, but for a variety of reasons it is not.

Becoming dog-friendly is not going to solve all of the district's problems, but consider this; the neighborhood is generating 31,200 walking trips every week if each of its estimated 6,240 dogs are walked five times per week. If just ten percent of those walks had the district as a destination, that would add more than 160,000 pedestrians on the street during the course of a year, creating street life that might encourage others to visit. And those dog walkers themselves might become customers, stopping off at a coffee shop or bakery in the morning, or running an errand in the evening.

What do dogs offer? Healthy residents, walkable neighborhoods, and vibrant communities. Maybe it is time we let our communities go to the dogs. That's a bone to chew on.

Michael Stumpf is a principal with Place Dynamics LLC, providing economic development, market research, and planning services across the United States and Canada. Luke (Alpha Planner) and Lizzy (Planner I) are rescues. According to the American Humane Society, approximately 5 million to 7 million companion animals enter animal shelters nationwide every year, and approximately 3 million to 4 million are euthanized (60 percent of dogs and 70 percent of cats). To contact the author: michael.stumpf@placedynamics.com



Visitors to downtown Banff, Alberta are walking their dog.