



Dogs in Bethlehem Town Parks: Community Survey Report



December 1, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Should dogs be allowed in our Town parks? In the winter of 2018, nearly 1,200 people weighed in by taking the Dogs in Bethlehem Town Parks: Community Survey. Friends of Bethlehem Parks and Recreation sought the community's opinion to help the group develop recommendations for updating Town park dog policies. Updated policies are a goal of Bethlehem's 2015 Parks and Recreation Comprehensive Master Plan.

Currently, animals are not allowed in most Town parks. Exceptions include Moh-He-Con-Nuck Nature Preserve, where leashed dogs are allowed, and the Town Dog Park, where on- and off-leash dogs are allowed by permit. Also, while dogs are not generally allowed in Henry Hudson Park, they are allowed on the public road that runs through the park, in accordance with Bethlehem Town Code.

The questions in the survey pertained to all Town parks except the Dog Park. We expect to explore issues around the Dog Park at a later time. Also, consideration is being given to on-leash access only.

A summary of findings follows. More detailed findings are available in the [Survey Results](#) section.

Most respondents favor allowing dogs in Town parks.

More than three-quarters of respondents said yes, dogs should be allowed in Bethlehem Town parks, with restrictions. About 23% of respondents said no. Less than 1% of respondents had no opinion.

There is strong support for allowing dogs in all Town parks.

More than three-quarters of those who specified the parks in which dogs should be allowed said all Town parks should be open to dogs. Henry Hudson Park, Elm Avenue Park and Moh-He-Con-Nuck Nature Preserve got top results among those who picked from the list of individual parks.

There is strong support for access on trails and in open areas, but access to playing fields drew more mixed responses.

The survey specified that some park areas are not open for consideration for access to dogs: in the pool complex; on playgrounds and fitness stations; on courts and playing fields during games; on the golf course in season. A goal of the survey was to determine if respondents who favored allowing dogs at all would prefer restricting access to certain other areas of the parks as well. All options listed refer to on-leash access only.

Those who favor allowing dogs in parks show strong support for allowing dogs on walking/hiking trails and grassy play areas (98% and 92%, respectively, of those who gave feedback on specific areas of the parks). Somewhat fewer would allow dogs at pavilions and off-season at the golf course, and slightly less than three-quarters would allow them on mountain bike trails.

About a quarter would ban dogs on playing fields even when not in use; fewer would prohibit them in spectator areas of playing fields / courts. The strongest opposition to access concerns tennis/basketball/volleyball courts even when not in use — more than 55% would prohibit dogs there.

Most dog owners favor allowing dogs in parks; nonowners are split.

Of the 735 respondents who identified as dog owners or guardians, about 89% favored allowing dogs in parks with restrictions. Among the 410 respondents who said they are not dog owners or guardians, opinions were evenly split.

Most dog owners have just one mid-sized dog.

About three-quarters of responding dog owners are responsible for just one dog; only 3% care for 3 or more dogs. Mid-sized dogs make up about 45% of the respondents' ownership, with large dogs and small dogs roughly comparable in number (about 29% and 23%, respectively).

Most dog owners use their own properties for outdoor activities; many take to the streets or other local parks.

Over 95% of responding dog owners take their dogs onto their own property for outdoor activities. More than three-quarters use town streets. More than a third take their dogs to the Albany County Helderberg-Hudson Rail Trail and/or parks in other communities. The Town Dog Park is used by only a quarter of respondents. Relatively few report taking their dogs to Moh-He-Con-Nuck Nature Preserve (where dogs are currently allowed).

Those who currently take their dogs to Town parks other than the Dog Park or Moh-He-Con-Nuck — about 6%, despite Parks and Recreation Department policy, which prohibits the practice — take their dogs out on their own properties at about the same rate (95%) as other dog owners but report even greater use of Town streets, the Dog Park and other properties.

Dog owners who said they use “other” places for outdoor activities with their dogs mentioned local golf courses and parks in Albany, Colonie and surrounding communities; Mohawk-Hudson Land Conservancy properties; Thacher and other state parks as well as Huyck Preserve; Bethlehem school properties, churches and “public spaces”; and private properties and businesses and farmer’s markets. Several commented on the need to go outside of Bethlehem for outdoor activities.

Most — but not all — dog owners would take their dogs to the parks if allowed.

Of dog owners who report obeying the current rules prohibiting dogs in Town parks — over 94% of responding owners — more than 78% would take their dogs to the parks if Bethlehem changed its policy. About 10% of those respondents would not take their dogs to a Town park even if allowed; 12% are unsure.

Looking at both dog owners and nonowners who responded, 57% would bring a dog to Town parks if allowed. Slightly less than a third would not take a dog to one of these parks even if allowed, and about 12% are unsure.

Elm Avenue and Henry Hudson parks would see the most dogs, if allowed.

Among dog owners/guardians who told us where they would take their dogs if allowed in Town parks, nearly 95% named Elm Avenue Park, followed by Henry Hudson Park at 70% — far outpacing neighborhood parks, which averaged only about 26%. Close to half would take their dogs to Colonial Acres Golf Course.

Among 76 current nonowners/nonguardians who said they might bring a dog if allowed, roughly the same percentage would go to Elm Avenue, Henry Hudson or Colonial Acres, as compared to current owners. But those who don’t currently own a dog would be much more likely to bring one to the neighborhood parks — nearly 40%.

Chief concerns relate to others’ rights; safety; sanitation; and health.

Of the 322 respondents who left additional comments, the majority were opposed — often strongly opposed — to allowing dogs in parks. Some not strictly opposed still noted serious concerns. Their comments (summarized here) related to:

- putting people’s needs, rights and comfort first (31%)
- concerns about waste, allergies and disease (26%)
- claims that too many dog owners do not and will not act responsibly or follow park rules regarding dogs (24%)
- concerns about safety (24%)
- a belief that the Town Dog Park or other available spaces are sufficient for use with dogs (11%)
- claims that restrictions and penalties will be unenforceable (2%)
- concerns that the Town will be liable for injury caused by dogs (2%)
- opinion that dogs in parks infringe on taxpayers’ rights / taxpayers have already paid for dogs at the Dog Park (1%).

Of those providing additional comments, only 7 (2%) included positive aspects of allowing dogs in parks. Their comments mentioned dogs enhancing their experience, while some wished to ensure dogs would be well-behaved and leashed. Another 114 left remarks that were not specifically in favor or opposed to allowing dogs; of these 101 simply reiterated that they don't own a dog.

METHODOLOGY

The Dogs in Bethlehem Town Parks: Community Survey was conducted online by Friends of Bethlehem Parks and Recreation December 23, 2017 – January 31, 2018. A total of 1,192 respondents took the survey. The majority of respondents (60.7%) live in ZIP code 12054. The next-best-represented ZIPs are 12077 (16.3%), 12158 (11%), and 12159 (8.9%). A total 35 others responded from other local ZIPs, with about half of those residing outside of Bethlehem.

The survey was open to the public and promoted via the Friends' email list, website, and Facebook page; the Parks and Recreation Department email list; the Town of Bethlehem website; local news outlets; and other social media. Respondents accessed the survey through a link on the Friends' website. Depending on a respondent's answers, certain questions may not have been presented to the respondent.

Respondents had the option to identify themselves by providing their email addresses, for which their addresses were entered into a drawing for a \$25 Shop Bethlehem gift card. While responses are aggregated and summarized in this report, individual responses will remain confidential.

A WORD OF THANKS TO THE COMMUNITY

The Friends Bethlehem Parks and Recreation board would like to thank everyone who participated in the Dogs in Bethlehem Town Parks: Community Survey for their time, input and ideas. We also thank those who helped us promote the survey.

The survey produced a wealth of information that will be of great value to the Town as it re-evaluates policies regarding dogs in our parks. Please follow our website and Facebook page for updates.

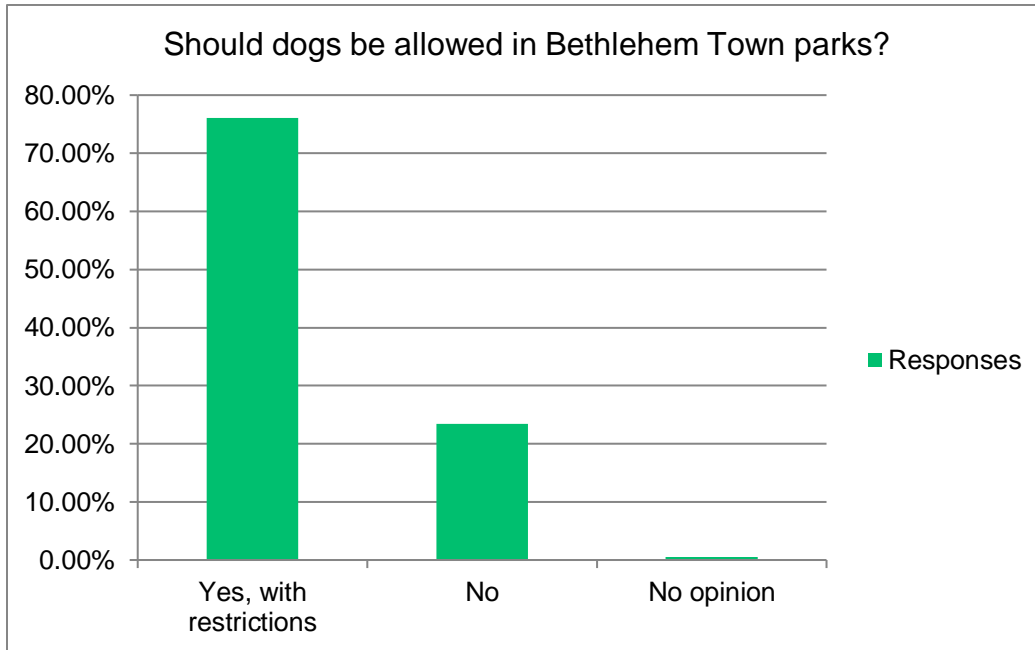
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SURVEY RESULTS

1 Should dogs be allowed in Bethlehem Town parks?

More than three-quarters of respondents (76.1%; N=1,192) think dogs should be allowed in Bethlehem Town parks, with restrictions. About 23% of respondents said no. Less than 1% of respondents had no opinion.

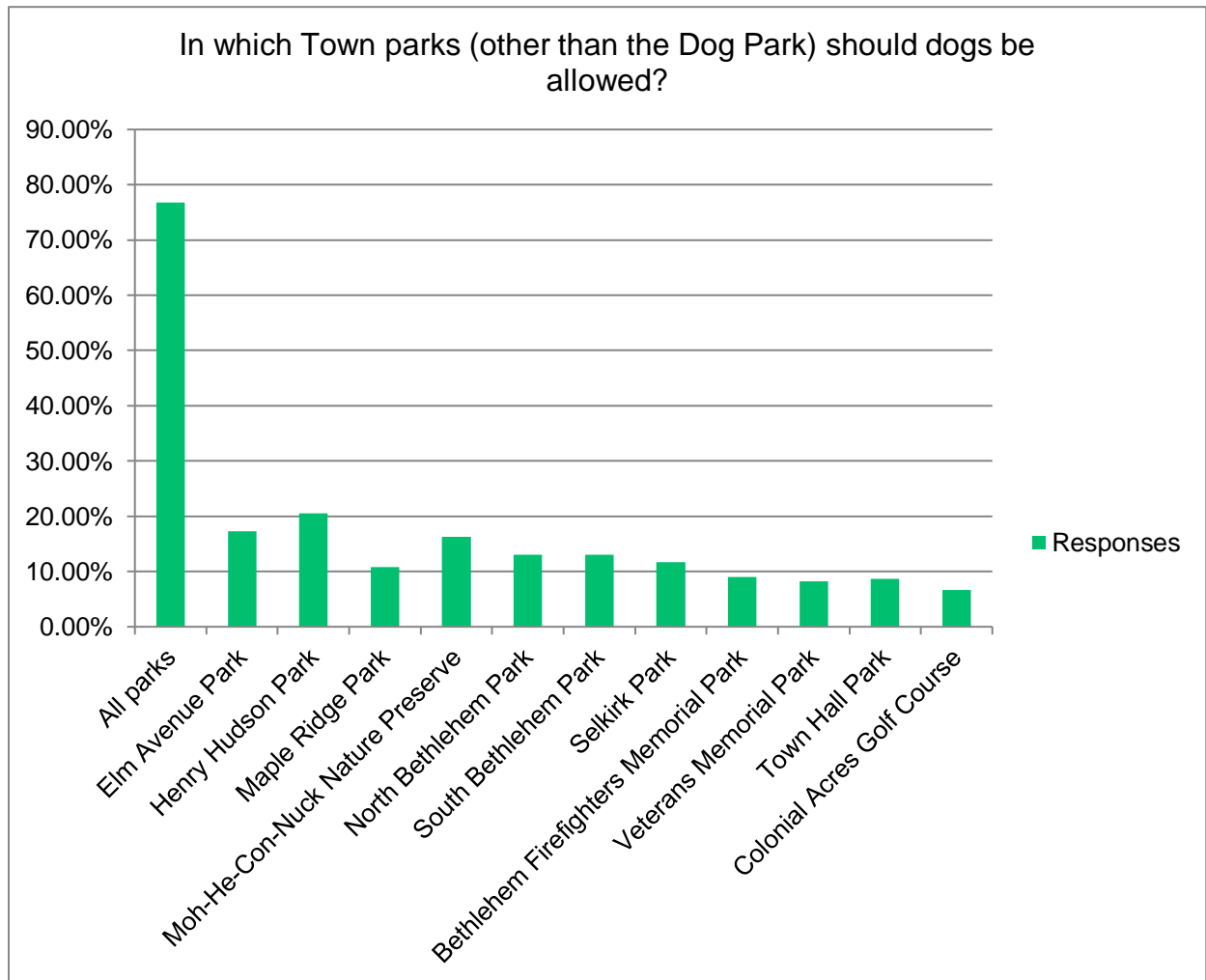


2 In which Town parks (other than the Dog Park) should dogs be allowed?

This question was presented only to those who favor allowing dogs in parks. Of those who specified the parks in which dogs should be allowed (N=862), more than three-quarters (76.8%) indicated “All parks.”

Henry Hudson Park, Elm Avenue Park and Moh-He-Con-Nuck Nature Preserve got top results among those who chose only from among individual parks (18.9%, 15.6% and 15.2%, respectively). Among this group of respondents, neighborhood parks showed markedly less interest (averaging 9.6%); fewer still favored access for dogs at Colonial Acres Golf Course (5.7%).

(Note: The survey allowed respondents to choose individual parks as well as “All parks.”)



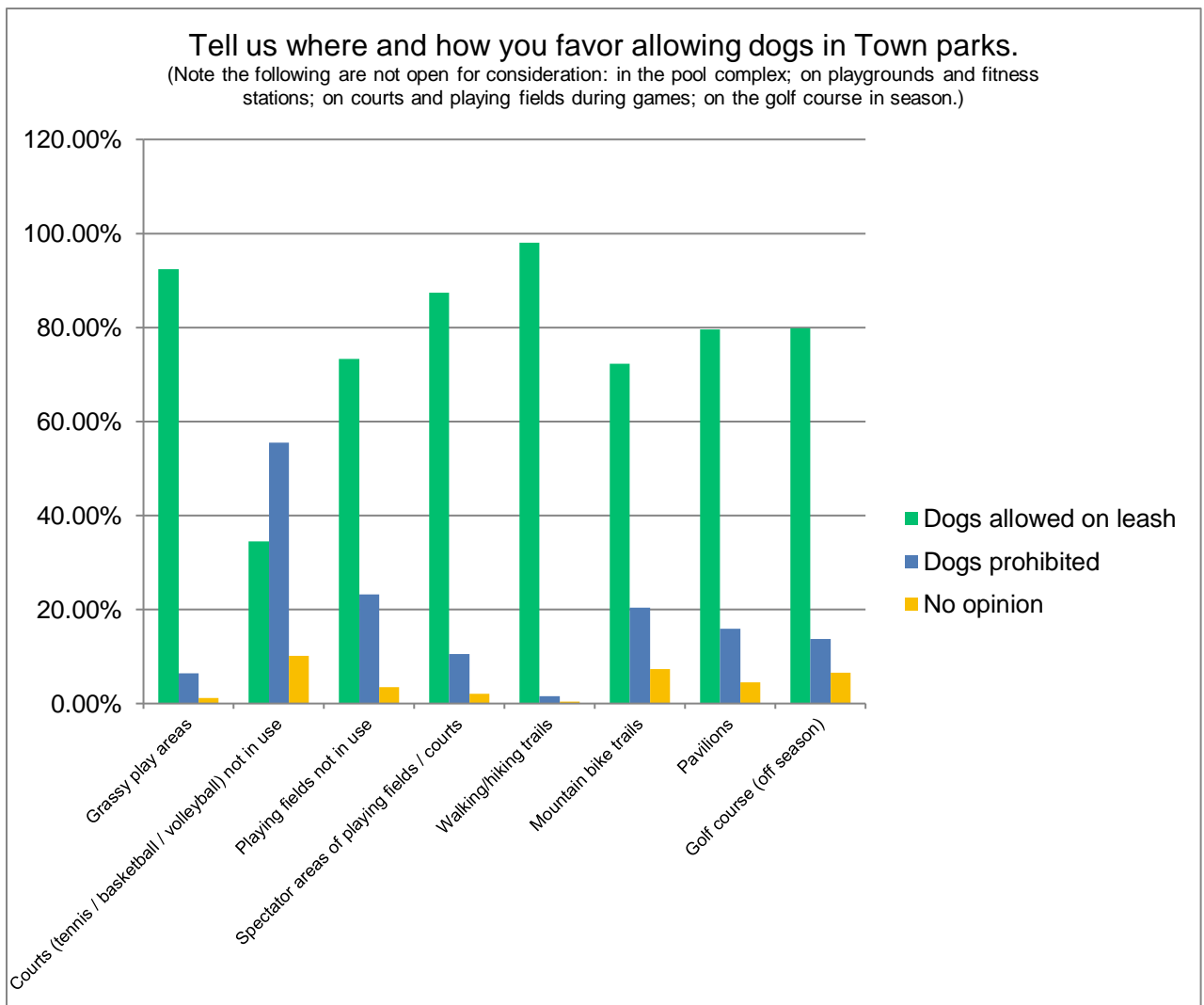
3 Tell us where and how you favor allowing dogs in Town parks. (Note the following are not open for consideration: in the pool complex; on playgrounds and fitness stations; on courts and playing fields during games; on the golf course in season.)

This question was presented only to those who favor allowing dogs in parks. Among those who answered the question (N=862), most all favored allowing dogs on leash on walking/hiking trails (98%) and grassy play areas (92.4%). Nearly 80% would allow dogs on leash at pavilions and off-season at the golf course, and slightly fewer would allow them on mountain bike trails (72.3%).

Of these respondents, a significant number would prohibit dogs on playing fields not in use (23.2%), while fewer would prohibit dogs on leash in spectator areas of playing fields / courts (10.6%). The strongest opposition to access concerns tennis/basketball/volleyball courts even when not in use — more than 55% would prohibit dogs there.

Of the 57 people who added “Other” comments, 24 said dogs should be allowed off-leash in selected areas, with several suggesting hiking trails and a handful suggesting the golf course or playing fields off-season. Two respondents suggested off-leash permission early morning or late evening.

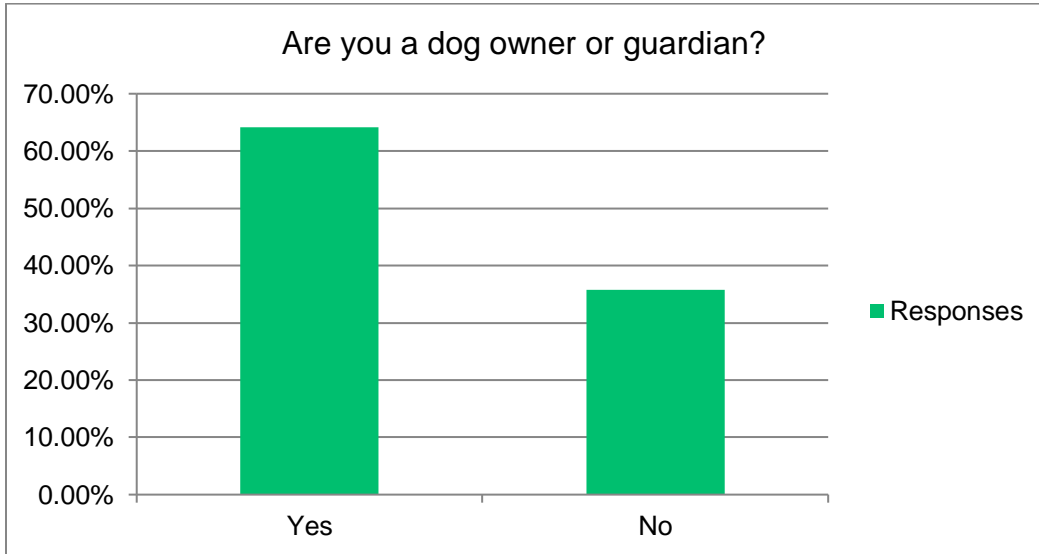
Several who commented reiterated a need for rules regarding leashing at all times and cleaning up waste. One respondent called for open access for service and therapy dogs while another cautioned against allowing “comfort” dogs in the pool area.



4 Are you a dog owner or guardian?

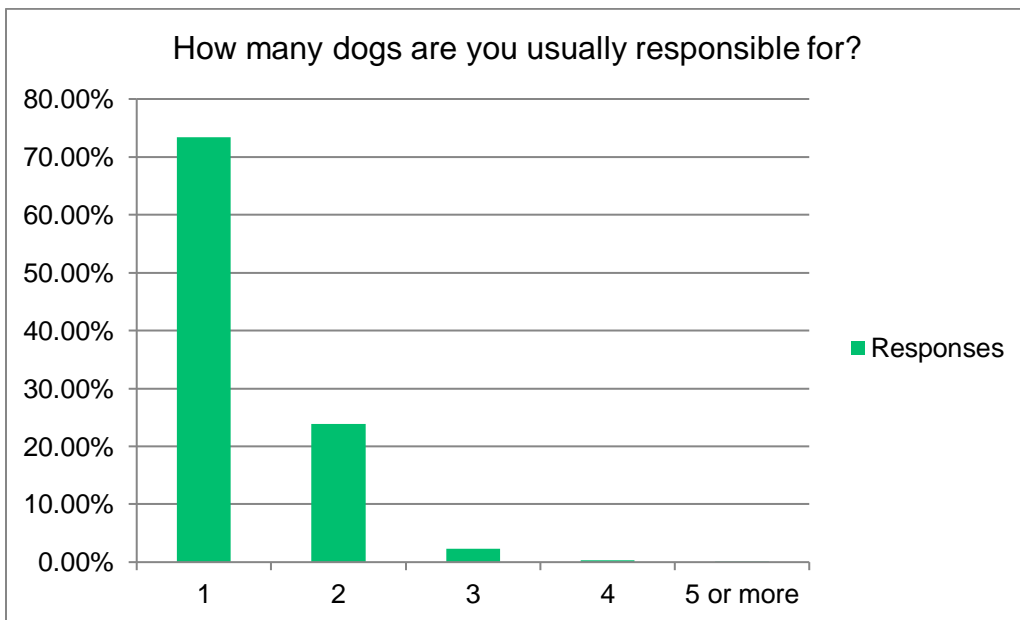
Of the 1,145 respondents to this question, 735 (64.2%) identified as dog owners or guardians. Among these, 656 (89.2%) favored allowing dogs in parks with restrictions.

Among the 410 respondents who are not dog owners or guardians, opinions were evenly split on allowing dogs in parks with restrictions (49.7% in favor vs. 50.2% opposed).



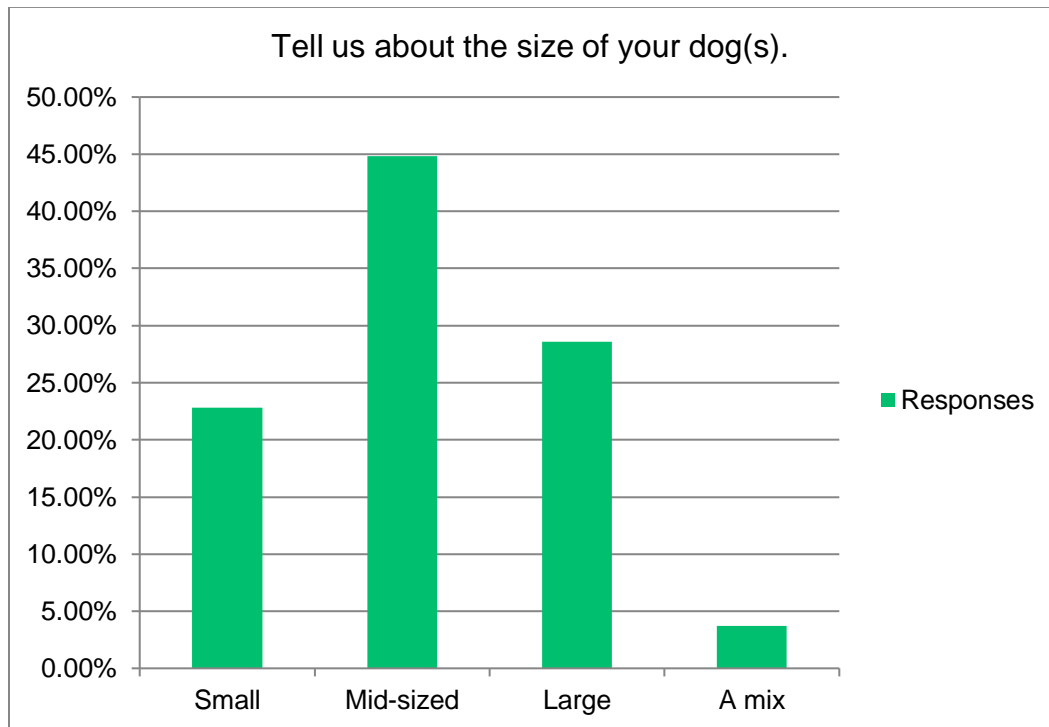
5 How many dogs are you usually responsible for?

Most dog owners who responded to this question (N=726) are responsible for just one dog (533, or 73.4%). Nearly 24% (173) are responsible for two dogs, while only 3% (20) care for 3 or more dogs.



6 Tell us about the size of your dog(s).

Dog owners (N=727) most often reported having mid-sized dogs (44.8%), with large dogs and small dogs roughly comparable in number (28.6% and 22.8%, respectively). About 4% of owners reported having dogs of mixed sizes.

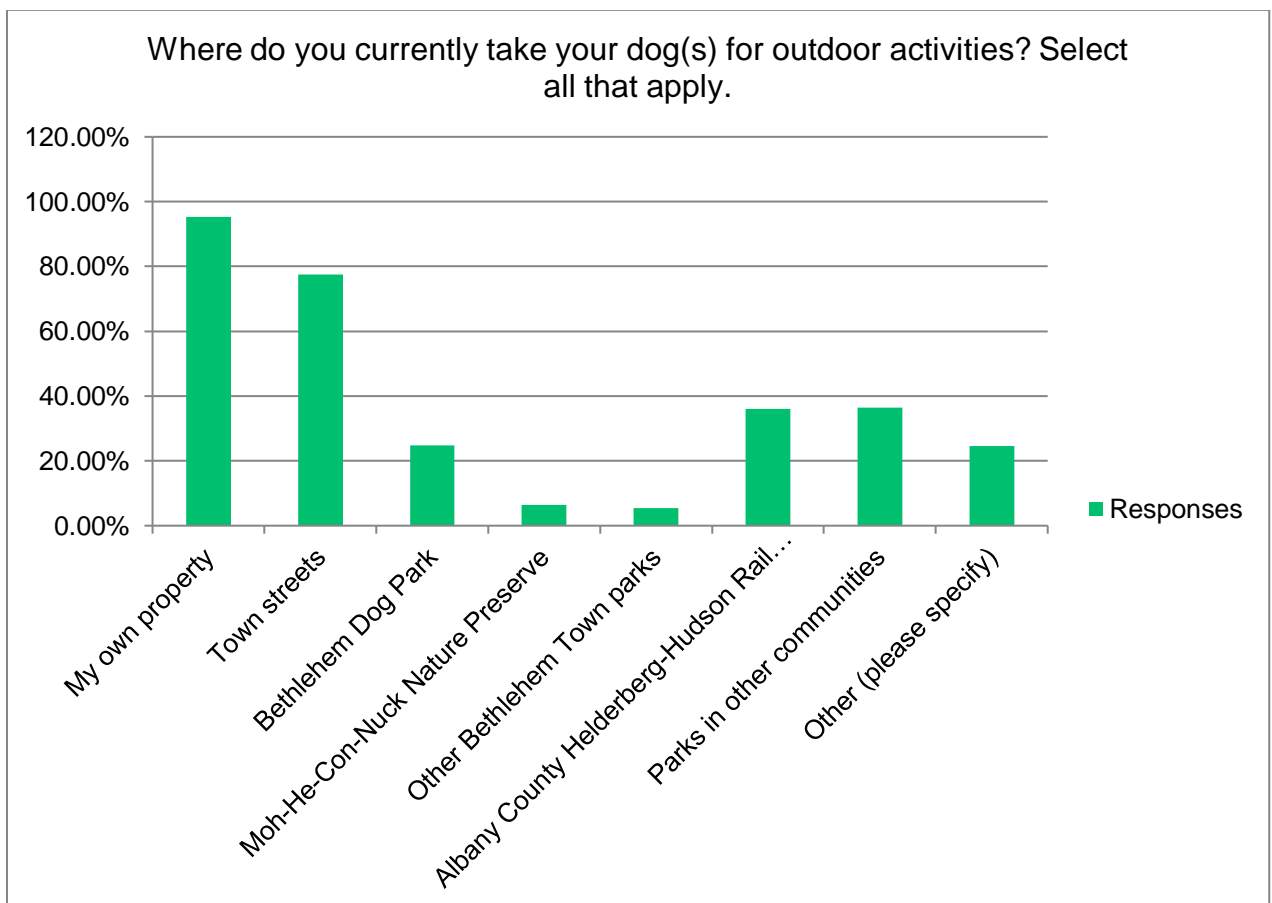


7 Where do you currently take your dog(s) for outdoor activities?

Most responding dog owners (95.3%, N=728) take their dogs onto their own property for outdoor activities. More than three-quarters (77.5%) use town streets. Significant numbers take their dogs to the Albany County Helderberg-Hudson Rail Trail (36%) and/or parks in other communities (36.4%). The Town Dog Park is used by only a quarter of respondents. Relatively few report taking their dogs to Moh-He-Con-Nuck Nature Preserve (6.5%).

Those who currently take their dogs to Town parks other than the Dog Park or Moh-He-Con-Nuck (5.5%) — despite Parks and Recreation Department policy, which prohibits the practice — take their dogs out on their own properties at about the same rate (95%) as other dog owners but report even greater use of other properties. About 88% use Town streets; 40% use the Dog Park; 27.5% use Moh-He-Con-Nuck Nature Preserve; and 55% or more use the Rail Trail or parks in other communities.

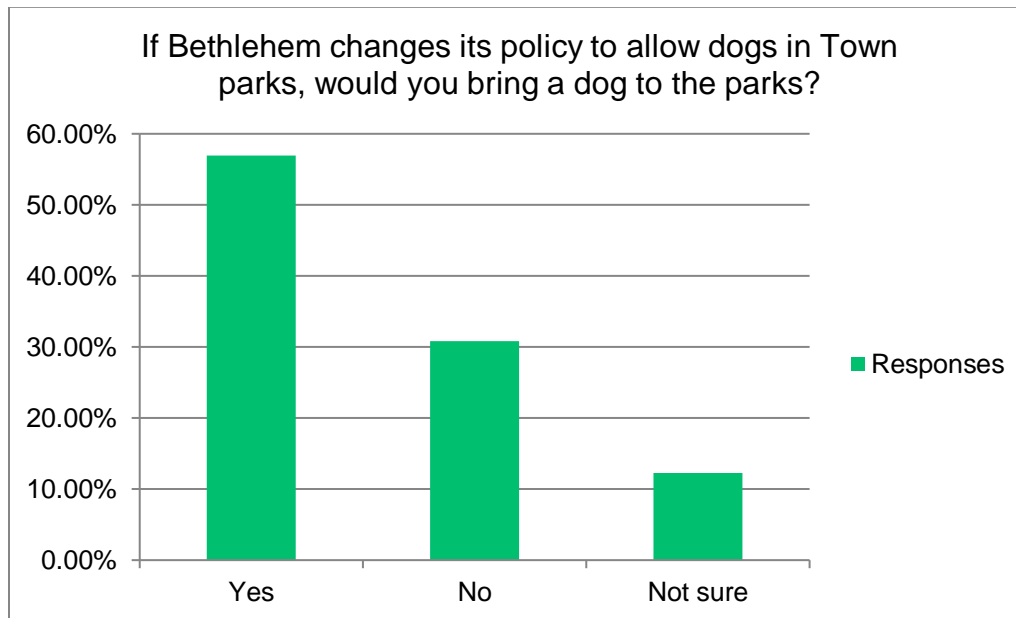
Of the 179 respondents who specified “Other” places for outdoor places for dogs, more than a third named local golf courses and parks in Albany, Colonie and surrounding communities; about two dozen mentioned Mohawk-Hudson Land Conservancy properties; around two dozen named Thacher and other state parks as well as Huyck Preserve; about another two dozen mentioned Bethlehem school properties, churches and “public spaces”; and a handful mentioned private properties and businesses and farmer’s markets. About a dozen reiterated use of the Rail Trail and Henry Hudson Park. Several commented on the need to go outside of Bethlehem for outdoor activities. Four respondents voiced concerns about aggressive dogs at the Town Dog Park, while one claimed a Dog Park patron has driven out several dogs that want to play.



8 If Bethlehem changes its policy to allow dogs in Town parks, would you bring a dog to the parks?

This question was presented to all surveytakers. Fifty-seven percent of respondents (N=1,134) would bring a dog to Bethlehem Town parks if allowed. About 31% of those would not take their dogs to one of these parks even if allowed, and 12.3% are unsure.

Of dog owners who report obeying the current rules prohibiting dogs in Town parks (94.5%), more than three-quarters (78.5%) would take their dogs to the parks if Bethlehem changed its policy. About 10% of those would not take their dogs to a Town park even if allowed, and 12% are unsure.

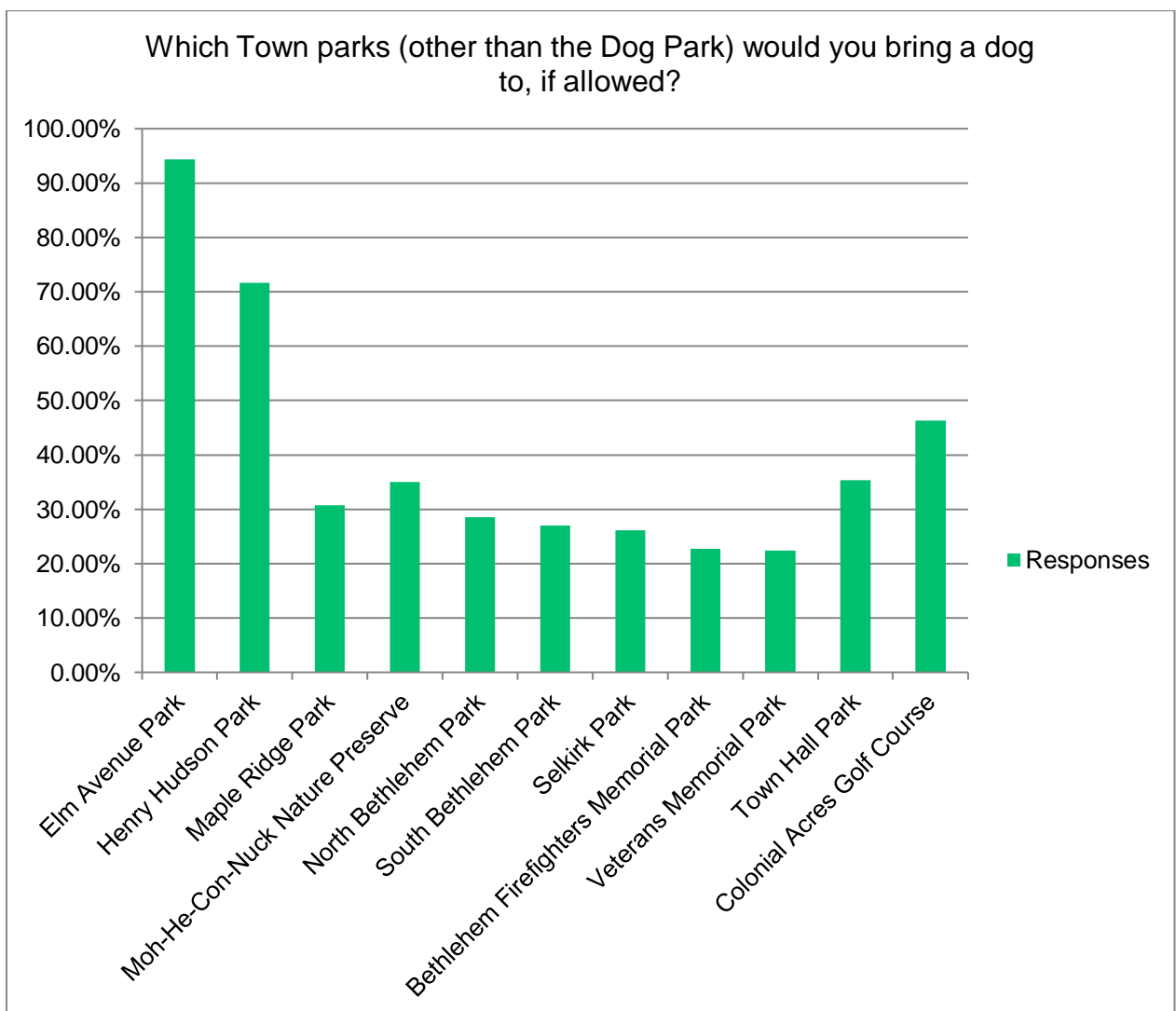


9 Which Town parks (other than the Dog Park) would you bring a dog to, if allowed?

A significant portion of survey respondents (551, or 46%) skipped this question, which led us to drill into responses from dog owners vs. nonowners.

Among 566 dog owners/guardians who responded to this question, 94.9% would bring a dog to Elm Avenue Park if allowed. Henry Hudson Park came next at 70%, far outpacing neighborhood parks (Maple Ridge, North Bethlehem, South Bethlehem, Selkirk, Bethlehem Firefighters Memorial, Veterans Memorial, and Town Hall Park), which averaged about 26%. About 46% would take their dogs to Colonial Acres Golf Course.

Among 76 nonowners/nonguardians who responded to this question, 90.8% would bring a dog to Elm Avenue Park if allowed, and 84.2% would bring a dog to Henry Hudson Park. Compared to dog owners, those who don't currently own a dog would be much more likely to bring one to the neighborhood parks — 39.8%. About 49% would take their dogs to Colonial Acres.



10 Tell us why you would not bring a dog to a Town park.

This open-ended question was presented only to respondents who answered “No” to question 8, “If Bethlehem changes its policy to allow dogs in Town parks, would you bring a dog to the parks?”. About one-third (321) gave feedback, summarized below; many people gave more than one reason. More than one-third of respondents to this question said they would not bring a dog to a park because they do not own a dog.

More than 20% of respondents to this question noted fear of dogs and safety concerns such as aggressive behavior, allergies and disease from waste; about 6% were primarily concerned about waste.

About a quarter expressed generally that parks are for people’s enjoyment, and that dogs would detract from that experience; many of these noted that dogs are already accommodated at the Dog Park.

About 15% of respondents to this question feel that too many dog owners do not follow rules responsibly. A half-dozen noted community liability as an issue. A handful of others noted that their dogs do not do well around other dogs.

11 Tell us why you might or might not bring a dog to a Town park.

This open-ended question was presented only to respondents who answered “Yes” or “Not sure” to question 8, “If Bethlehem changes its policy to allow dogs in Town parks, would you bring a dog to the parks?”. About 11% (117 people) gave feedback, summarized below.

About 23% of respondents to this question said that they do not own a dog; of those, several said they might bring a future dog of their own, or a dog belonging to a friend or family member.

Those who might to bring a dog say they would do so for exercise and socialization (for themselves and their dogs) but going could depend on the activities happening in the park. They might jog or walk the fitness trail with their dogs, play on a grassy field, watch a ballgame or have a picnic. A few said they would want their dog to be able to be off-leash.

Many of those are unsure about bringing a dog are concerned about both human and dog behavior. About 20% of respondents to the question said their own dogs, or others’ dogs, cannot behave appropriately and safely, especially around children or other dogs. About 12% are unsure that other owners would take responsibility for their dogs, while several others would first want to know how strictly park rules, especially regarding leashing and waste cleanup, are enforced.

About another dozen might not bring a dog to a Bethlehem park because backyards, neighborhood streets, or other places are more convenient, or because it is a bother to transport the dog or mind it while in the park. A small number of others expressed generally that dogs might detract from people’s experience in the parks; some noted that dogs are already accommodated at the Dog Park.

12 What is your ZIP code?

The majority of respondents (60.7%) live in 12054. The next-best-represented ZIPs are 12077 (16.3%), 12158 (11%), and 12159 (8.9%). A total 35 others responded from other local ZIPs, with about half of those residing outside of Bethlehem.

13 Please provide any additional comments you may have on dogs in our Town parks.

Of the 322 respondents who left additional comments, the majority were opposed — often strongly opposed — to allowing dogs in parks (187 or 58%). Some not strictly opposed still noted serious concerns. Their comments (summarized here) related to:

- putting people's needs, rights and comfort first (101 or 31%)
- concerns about waste, allergies and disease (85 or 26%)
- claims that too many dog owners do not and will not act responsibly or follow park rules regarding dogs (77 or 24%)
- concerns about safety (76 or 24%)
- a belief that the Town Dog Park or other available spaces are sufficient for use with dogs (34 or 11%)
- claims that restrictions and penalties will be unenforceable (7 or 2%)
- concerns that the Town will be liable for injury caused by dogs (7 or 2%)
- opinion that dogs in parks infringe on taxpayers' rights / taxpayers have already paid for dogs at the Dog Park (4 or 1%).

Of those providing additional comments, only 7 (2%) included positive aspects of allowing dogs in parks. Their comments mentioned dogs enhancing their experience, while some wished to ensure dogs would be well-behaved and leashed. Another 114 (35%) left remarks that were not specifically in favor or opposed to allowing dogs; of these 101 simply reiterated that they don't own a dog.

14 To enter the Friends' random drawing for a \$25 Parks and Recreation gift certificate, and to join our electronic mailing list, please enter your email address.

We collected 695 email addresses from survey respondents. The gift certificate was awarded to a randomly selected respondent on April 30, 2018.