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City panel votes to cut leash-law fines

Kraft tells dog owners \$1,000 penalty was 'mistake'

By Jill Rosen | Baltimore Sun reporter
May 13, 2009



Leash fine critics included Judith Kunst (foreground), playing with her dog, Mollie Madison McKinley, in Wyman Park along with Tweefie Millspaugh and pets Freckles and Riley. (Baltimore Sun photo by Kim Hairston / May 12, 2009)

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Jackie McGee hadn't exactly put the for-sale sign outside her [Federal Hill](#) house, but she was that upset - as were the other dog owners who joined her Tuesday at City Hall.

These people might tolerate Baltimore's high crime and struggling schools but they drew the line at the recent jump in fines for dogs caught off-leash - from \$100 to \$1,000. When McGee was socked with a \$1,000 ticket, that fit her definition of too much.

"I really wanted to pack my bags and move," she told members of the City Council. "One of the simple pleasures of city living is going to a common area and playing with my dogs."

After a hearing that lasted more than three hours, drew about 50 people and was dominated by those who wanted the fine lowered, the council's legislative committee voted to change the leash law's \$1,000 fine to a staggered penalty system. First offenders would pay \$200, and those caught the second and third times would pay \$400 and then \$600.

Officials also voted to work on establishing off-leash hours in some parks and to lower the fine for those who fail to scoop up their dog's excrement from \$1,000 per offense to \$200.

The revised fines could become law as soon as May 19.

The battle over leash-law fines

Video

size: 1:300x665

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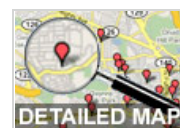
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Education reporter Sara Neufeld spent hundreds of hours interviewing Dr. Andrés Alonso, attending public meetings where he was present and accompanying him on visits to schools and events after he was named CEO of Baltimore City schools in June 2007.

Read her [three-part series](#), which ran Feb. 8-10 in *The Baltimore Sun*, and read Alonso's [live chat on the InsideEd blog](#).

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playground without a dog running up to your kid," she says. "It's not fair to have to worry about that. Leash laws are there for a reason."

Jenny Keller, who lives in Rodgers Forge, wrote on Unleashed, *The Baltimore Sun's* pets

grows from a long-standing tension between residents who want their dogs to romp free and others who worry about dogs running wild in parks. The issue also underscores the frustration of many dog owners that there is just one legal dog park in Baltimore and another set to be built.

After the city began enforcing tougher leash-law penalties this spring, about 1,600 people - mainly dog owners - signed a petition urging officials to reconsider.

Dog people have perennially clashed with the dog-less across the city over claim to green space - from [Patterson Park](#) to [Mount Vernon](#) to Robert E. Lee Park and Riverside Park.

McGee, a Federal Hill real estate agent who has two dogs, had been worried not just about her pocketbook, but for the quality of life she enjoys - and tries to sell to potential newcomers to Baltimore.

"What you've done is said to the people, 'If you have a dog don't live in Baltimore,'" complained Bill Roberts, who lives in [Guilford](#) with two English pointers.

Those fighting the higher fines have pointed out that with \$1,000 fines, leash-law violators would face tougher punishments than those who commit seemingly more serious crimes. A person who exposes himself in public, for instance, faces only a \$150 fine.

But Councilman James B. Kraft told the crowd in council chambers that officials have heard from as many people who want to keep the high fines as those who say that \$1,000 is "ridiculous."

John E. Kyle, a [Bolton Hill](#) resident who doesn't have a dog and doesn't mind lowering the off-leash fine, simply insisted that the city enforce the law.

"There are irresponsible dog owners," he said. "The same dog that everyone thought was cute and friendly attacked my neighbor."

Cynthia Wolberger, who lives in [Roland Park](#), was not at the hearing but said in an interview that she's had to deal with dogs running free at her neighborhood playground. Years ago, she said, an dog chasing a ball knocked over her son's stroller.

"You ought to be able to go to a playground without a dog running up to your kid," she says. "It's not fair to have to worry about that. Leash laws are there for a reason."

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blog, Tuesday to say "no one" pays attention to leash laws.

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"My toddler has been knocked over by dogs many times," she wrote. "I firmly believe all dogs should be leashed unless in a designated area. Sorry, but some people ruin it for everyone."

The leash-law issue came to a head in March, when animal control officers began enforcing changes made to the law in 2008 as part of a broad measure boosting fines for various animal control violations.

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