

A controversial dog park that divided Chevy Chase will be dismantled

By **Jessica Contrera**
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More than 100 people packed into a public hearing in Chevy Chase Village on Monday to debate what one board member called “the most contentious and emotionally charged issue” in the community’s history: the barking of dogs.

The village board voted 5 to 2 in favor of disestablishing the dog park that has divided this Maryland suburb for months. The gate of the fence enclosing the area will be removed, turning it into a park where dogs are welcome but must be leashed.

“The size and location of this off-leash area is not meeting standards,” board chairwoman Elissa Leonard said before a chorus of boos from dozens of dog lovers who wore matching white hats to show their support of the park.

“You should be ashamed of yourselves!” someone from the crowd yelled before leading a mass exodus from the meeting.



The decision put an end to months of howling from the humans in this wealthy enclave just outside Washington. What began as a plan to turn a patch of land frequented by local pups into a formal dog park became a breeding ground for animal animus.

Neighbors who live directly beside the park complained that they found their lives disrupted by the barking dogs, the carelessness of their companions and the nuisance of outsiders' cars parked in front of their homes.

The tension escalated when The Washington Post published [a story about the divisions](#), chronicling the powerful players embroiled in the debate: Leonard, the wife of Federal Reserve Chair Jerome H. Powell; Doug Gansler, a former attorney general of Maryland; loads of lawyers; and Chubbs, a 5-month-old golden retriever.



While Chubbs has been rolling in his [newfound fame](#) (dog sitters on Rover.com contacted his parents to ask whether he was *the* Chubbs), neighbors who opposed the dog park found themselves being threatened by anonymous commenters online. They said strangers have driven past their houses to beep, yell and create even more noise.

Dog owners shared the address of the park on Reddit to encourage people with particularly vociferous pooches to visit. Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-Md.) brought his 3-year-old Siberian husky, Toby, to the park to sniff out the situation. The president of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, better known as PETA, sent a letter reminding the board that dog parks are the “canine version of a human happy hour.”

By the time the board convened Monday to make its decision about the park's fate, it had received more than 110 pages of letters filled with extensive bulleted lists, references to research journals and analyses of canine bowel movements.

“For the sake of the total living environment of the Village, resist the forces of NIMBY and keep the dog park open,” one neighbor wrote.

“My friends and I will leave no stone, I mean tennis ball unturned in our dogged opposition to the proposal to close the park,” declared a “press release” sent by one

resident, Patty Martin, in the voice of her French bulldog Louie.



On Monday night, 12 people lined up to voice their support of the park in person, despite pleading from the board that only those who had yet to submit comments take the microphone.

“The dogs are voices of living beings,” said Judi Dash, a resident wearing a “Make Woof Not War” T-shirt. “The nice people who live behind me [do carpentry] in the summer, spring and fall. It’s really loud. Should I tell him to hammer less?”

Their poetic odes to the park weren’t persuasive enough to those in power.

“I saw Chubbs and Louie play together before they were internationally famous, and I would challenge even the staunchest critics of the park to keep smiles off their face when watching those two. But on the other hand,” board treasurer Gary Crockett said, “there’s only so much you can do when you have maybe 10 or more dogs in the park at one time that are three feet from someone’s backyard.”

“I move to disestablish — ” board member Richard Ruda began.

“Louder, please!” a voice yelled from the back of the room.

“Okay,” he said. “Sorry about that. Are you sure you want to hear this?”

“No!” cried a chorus.

“Okay, sorry I asked,” he said. “I move to disestablish the dog area, effective immediately.”

After the vote, Leonard tried to reassure the park’s fans that the village manager had spoken with Montgomery County officials, who are planning to build additional dog

parks in the area soon. But the dog lovers were already storming out of the building. They surrounded Martin, who was devastated.

“I don’t know how I am going to break this to Louie,” she said.

By the next morning, the park gates would be taken off their hinges. The dog owners would be plotting puppy play dates in their backyards.

“Someone joked that we should have more community crises to bring us together,” Dash would write in a late-night email to her neighbors. “You are the real heart of Chevy Chase Village, and have my vote as board members come the next opportunity.”

For now, the board carried on with its business.

“We have to move on to the next item on our agenda,” Leonard told the remaining crowd. “The noise of gas-powered leaf blowers.”