

‘NO EXCESSIVE BARKING’: A Chevy Chase dog park divides the rich and powerful

By **Jessica Contrera**

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Everyone knows there’s a problem with Chubbs.

Dirt is smeared across his face. His tongue is rolling out of his mouth. He’s surrounded by signs that say “NO EXCESSIVE BARKING.”

But the 5-month-old golden retriever does not know how to read. At a dog park in one of Maryland’s wealthiest suburbs, he spends this sunny August morning rolling on his back. He opens his mouth, and then, he does it.

He woofs. Twice.

“CHUBBS!” four humans around him yell, trying to stop him from doing what dogs do — just not in Chevy Chase Village this summer.

Here in this community of the rich and powerful, where the average household income is \$460,000, barking is the subject of a ferocious (fur-ocious?) debate — one that has divided the two-legged one-percenters for nearly a year.



The drama began last fall when the village spent \$134,000 to turn a muddy triangle of land into a park where pups could run off-leash in a fenced refuge. Chase tennis balls. Sniff one another's butts.

But after about a month, signs decrying the barking of those dogs began appearing around the park. The village police started receiving almost daily calls about the noise, mostly from one particular neighbor whose house backs up to the park. By spring, the tension had escalated so much that the Chevy Chase Village Board of Managers called a public hearing. Then another in June. And another in July.

At the center of it all is Elissa Leonard, chair of the village board and wife to Jerome H. Powell, who is also a chair — of the Federal Reserve. In recent months, her husband has been under attack from President Trump, who appointed him but blames him for the tanking stock market. “My only question is, who is our bigger enemy, Jay Powell or Chairman Xi?” the president tweeted Friday.



Leonard, meanwhile, is on the receiving end of a different siege: from village residents who say their peace and quiet has been disturbed by barking dogs.

“Around dinner time, I’d like to be able to sit on my deck and maybe read a book and chat with a friend or have a glass of wine, and the dogs are barking,” Joanie Edwards, the neighbor who had been calling police, testified at the meeting in May.

“As residents of Chevy Chase, how many times is it acceptable for you to be bothered in your house every day?” Tom Bourke, a real estate developer whose house sits across the street from the park, asked in June. “You’ve created a nuisance.”

The park regulars, he acknowledged, were trying to hush their hounds. He heard that they were ostracizing the yappiest dogs, including, he told the board, “a certain standard poodle whose name should be withheld.”



“But there are people,” chimed in Bourke’s wife, Dale, “and I don’t mean to characterize the District, but I just notice that they have District plates on their cars, and they have very little regard for us or our property . . . there are dogs barking and they’re just not doing anything.”

“I *hear* you,” Leonard said again and again, with the patience of a dog trainer. She explained to the residents that no, they could not restrict access just to dogs from the immediate neighborhood (where the houses for sale currently range in price from \$1.1 million to \$22.5 million). The village purchased this 15,000-square-foot parcel of land in the 1980s, in part, using state money, so it had to remain open to the public. For years, it had been a favorite spot of local dog owners, so when the village wanted to update its parks, a dog park just made sense. Neighbors voiced their support. A unanimous vote followed.

But now the park was somehow both a wild canine circus sabotaging property values and a beloved gathering space for only the politest of pooches.



Leonard, whose Norwich terrier, Pippa, does not frequent the park, tried to make both sides happy. To limit barking in the early hours, the board changed the opening time from 7 to 8 a.m. To stop outsiders from driving to Chevy Chase Village and parking on the Bourkes' street — taking the spots where the family liked their lawn maintenance service to park — the dog park was wiped from the village website. To determine the extent of the barking and the parking, the board paid \$1,300 for a woman with a graduate degree in epidemiology to spend weeks studying the behavior of the dogs and their humans.

During 54 visits, the researcher witnessed seven dog owners who drove to the park instead of walking.

“One of these people,” she testified in June, “did allow his dog to relieve himself on the green space next to the street.”



But on the barking, no conclusion was reached. What was minimal to some was enough for Edwards to call the police, exasperated that she had to turn on music inside her home so she didn't have to hear the dogs. She doesn't want to be the bad guy, she said in an interview. But as a retired elementary school teacher, she now spends her days at home painting. She does landscapes from her travels and portraits of people, vibrant creations so popular in her circle that friends and strangers have also commissioned her to paint their most beloved companions: their pets.

She and her husband, a lawyer, used to have dogs of their own. Her last, a black lab named Zoe, died four years ago.

“People in the community keep saying, ‘She should get another dog, if she had a dog, it would be different,’ ” Edwards said. “Well, first of all, I am a very considerate person, and if I had a dog, and he was barking in my back yard, I would bring him in. If my children were in a restaurant crying, I would take them out.”

The fence, she says, should come down, so the dog park is just a park. At a public hearing on Sept. 9, Leonard and the board may decide to do just that.

The dog lovers are planning to crowd the hearing, have organized a letter-writing campaign and started a Facebook group, Save the Chevy Chase Dog Park, with more than 100 likes.

“What are they going to do next, ban dancing?” asked Pat Murphy, the group’s moderator. Murphy, who lives in a nearby section of Chevy Chase, says he literally does “not have a dog in this fight.” He does not own a dog. He used to take his son’s miniature Australian shepherd to the park, but his son moved away this summer. Now he sometimes walks alone to the park, where every morning, the conversation returns to the handful of complaining neighbors.

“They should be put in jail,” said Doug Gansler, a former Maryland attorney general and an unsuccessful gubernatorial candidate, while his King Charles spaniel, Jack, searched for a new dog to hump.

“Doug!” scolded Patty Martin, mother to the park’s unofficial mayor, a French bulldog named Louie, and wife to the head of gastroenterology at Washington Hospital Center. She, too, thought the complainers were being selfish.

“Where’s the democratic process?” Martin asked in an interview last week. “Why is the 1 percent deciding for the 99 percent?”

“This is not verified,” she continued, “But we have heard through reliable sources that this woman has threatened a lawsuit against the village over the park. Well, many dog park users are lawyers, too, so we’re wondering, should we get a lawyer? Do we have grounds to sue?”

While lawyers consulted lawyers, her husband contacted media outlets. Eventually, the story made its way to this reporter, and to her recently adopted mutt, who visited the park in hopes of sniffing out what was really going on.

Despite their owners' fretting, Chubbs, Jack, Louie and all the other dogs appear unaware that their joyful morning romp has caused such a kerfuffle. The aforementioned "standard poodle whose name should be withheld" did not make an appearance.

After this reporter's dog spent some time digging (for the truth, we presume), he was asked what he thought of the park.

He woofed. Twice.

The police did not arrive.