

Oasis Pet Resort Newport, Vermont

By Roxanne Hawn



Andre “Andy” Cabana opened tiny Oasis Kennels in 1976. The dog-only facility, with 16 enclosures and a 12-run outer area where dogs were placed by hand became more or less a hobby. Cabana also did a little grooming evenings, weekends and after school. Things were fine, but the old kennel had no waterers, few windows and no gutters, making the place feel small, cramped and noisy.

Cabana met Dwight Walker in 1993, and together they formed a personal and professional partnership, but over time they were caring for more and more dogs and facing a serious space crunch. It was time for

Vital Statistics

Services Offered:

Dog Boarding, Cat Boarding, Exotics Boarding, Daycare, Training, Grooming, Retail Supplies

No. of Dog Enclosures:

50 indoor/outdoor

No. of Cat Enclosures:

18

No. of Employees:

2 full-time, 2 part-time

a change in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, just five miles from the Canadian border. The plan called for turning their nine-acre parcel in the center of the city of Newport into a real oasis.

The expansion and rebirth as Oasis Pet Resort, including a 1.5-acre play park, took a couple years of planning, but with support of the Northeast Vermont Regional Development Association, they wrote a business plan and received financing from an SBA loan for around \$275,000. The remaining cash for the \$340,000 new facility and \$75,000 renovation of the old one came from Cabana and

Walker's savings. "We decided after 9/11 to sell all of our investments and put the money into this," Walker explains. "This is a better return on investment."

So, Cabana, a former basic education teacher, and Walker, a former nurse and United Church of Christ minister, embarked on a whole new boarding adventure when the large new facility opened on Thanksgiving 2002. The goal? To create a bright, clean, cheery place that dogs cannot wait to visit. In the process, however, they also wanted to build an efficient facility, where fewer employees can manage more. To that end, they used levers instead of knobs so that inside doors can be opened easily, even if you're arms are full of laundry. They put in lights that have switches at more convenient heights, that turn on with a punch of a button or that are activated by motion. In addition to super-energy-efficient appliances for heat, water and air exchange, the crowning jewel of improvements came in the form of radiant-heat floors and walkways. Even sidewalks outside, made of stamped concrete designed to look like red slate, feature radiant heat, which means no shoveling even in the harshest Vermont winter. Yes, it's less work for staff, but it's also safer for two-legged and four-legged visitors alike – no slipping for people or pets and no burning paws from ice-melters.

Opposite page: The entrance way to the resort features a walkway that is radiant heated to eliminate snow shoveling and to ensure safe conditions and good footing. An antique fire hydrant sits near the walkway for canine guests to take advantage of before entering the facility. **Also shown:** Oasis owners Andy Cabana (left) and Dwight Walker (right) with ABKA Region 1 Director Elizabeth Powers.

Top Right: The Oasis front entrance during the Grand Opening event.

Middle Right: Dwight and Andy with friends Hazel (left) and Diane with dog Penny (right). Penny comes to Oasis daily for daycare.

Bottom Right: The 35' x 35' modular play yard.



Facility

All told, Oasis Pet Resort measures more than 9,000 square feet, including a main kennel area, divided into two sections, with centrally located laundry, storage, kitchen and cattery in between the two kennel blocks. The floor plan helps reduce noise and provides infection control.

The walls are made from FPR fiberglass reinforced plastic tongue-and-groove wallboard. The floors are coated with USDA-approved epoxy coating. The custom kennels, constructed by Mason Kennel Company, measure three, four or six feet wide by six feet long inside, with matching

widths and a length of 10 feet outside. Inner areas feature radiant floor heat, which not only keeps the facility warm but also helps floors dry faster after cleaning. Oasis uses Nelson automatic waterers, Mason raised platform beds, Nelson guillotine doors and opaque Lexan sliding panels. Outer areas are not heated per se, but the floors are kept warm to prevent freezing after pressure cleaning in cold weather. Four-foot fiberglass privacy panels prevent nose-to-nose contact and confrontations with adjacent canine guests. They also feature tracks that funnel water from cleaning or urine toward the gutter, which means

the dog on the other side stays dry.

Dog runs slope to the back gutters both inside and out for easy waste removal. It also means they can be cleaned front-to-back from the aisle without ever setting foot in the run, which eliminates risk of cross-contamination. Oasis uses a \$13,000 city sewer connection to dispose of waste. This unique feature became possible thanks to negotiations when the city wanted an easement through the Oasis property to put in sewer and water lines for a new housing development nearby. As part of the deal, Cabana and Walker asked for and got a sewer hookup, so they no longer had to use the parcel's septic system.

The 18 cattery enclosures measure three feet wide, three feet deep and five feet tall. There is also an eight-by-eight-by-ten cat outing gazebo. The vertical enclosures have Plexiglas and hardware cloth and are trimmed in birch harvested from the grounds.

XM Satellite Radio soothes all pet guests with mostly classical music. When Cabana cleans each day, however, he listens to classic rock.

The daycare and training area uses 1,200 square feet. The reception area is about 260 square feet, and the retail and grooming area adds up to another 1,000 square feet. However, soon Cabana and Walker will open a separate 6,000-square-foot off-site retail facility called Pet World five miles away. After the move, Cabana and Walker will convert the retail space into more small-dog boarding. They will also convert six regular runs into deluxe suites with TVs.

Outside, there are three play yards to choose from. One is a 45-by-25-foot enclosure with a six-foot chain link fence, concrete floors and a wading



Top: The entry leads visitors through the large retail area. After the off-site retail store is opened, this space will be remodeled to accommodate additional small-dog boarding.

Bottom: Obedience and training area.

pool during the summer. It is attached to the daycare and training area. The second is a 35-by-35-foot concrete area, which can be divided in half or quarters, using hinged chain link panels. Both of these areas are covered with large shade sails during the summer. In addition, Oasis features a 1.5-acre outdoor play park with natural shade trees and plenty of play equipment. It's surrounded by an eight-foot, secure perimeter fence. Dogs use this area with supervision throughout the day. "Dogs who are part of the play/exercise must pass an initial behavior interview before being allowed to participate in socialization activities," Walker adds.

Protocols

All areas are foamed, scrubbed and rinsed clean using Top Performance 256 disinfectant and a 1,400-psi pressure washer. Any buildup is removed with Mason Kennel Clean. Staff also use rubber broom floor squeegees and

periodically an orbital floor scrubber. Odors are eliminated with ionizers and a final gutter rinsing with Nilodor Odor Neutralizer. "People regularly comment regarding the fact that we have little, if any, kennel odor," Walker says. "The chemicals used for cleaning do a great job, but the frequency of use is what makes all the difference."

In the grooming area, staff use a Hydro Surge Clean Water Bathing System and a drying cabin. Shampoos range from mild to medicated, depending on the pet's needs.

The kennel, retail area and walkways are heated with Polaris High-Efficiency LP Hot Water Heaters.

Owners are asked not to bring beds that can be easily destroyed. Instead, Oasis provides sturdy faux sheepskin blankets that are easily laundered. Cat condos also include a four-poster bed with fleece blankets.

At registration, owners receive a packet with boarding forms, brochures

about the facility, boarding in general and canine cough. They also get a bone magnet with Oasis's phone number and copies of a series of articles written about the facility in various press.

All dogs entering the facility must show proof of vaccination (rabies, DHLPP, bordatella, corona). These strict policies as well as cleaning procedures mean Oasis has never had an outbreak of any kind.

All dogs, excluding those on special diets, are fed a chicken-based, wheat-free mini chunk maintenance food from Pro Pac/Wells Pet Food. Kennel cards with care instructions are color coded to indicate play/exercise times, medications, special diets, municipal boarding or adoption boarding (since Oasis also serves as the "dog pound" for nine area municipalities and as the adoptable dog housing facility for a local humane organization).

Owners can elect for exercise/play

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periods a few times each day, or they can have their dogs take part in daycare activities. “Dogs who are not signed up for playtime, but obviously need to let off some steam or get out and stretch, are given complimentary playtimes,” Walker explains.

Oasis uses Kennel Connection 5.0 kennel software to manage records and reservations. The staff also uses a script for telephone reservations to cover all aspects of care without missing anything. The facility has a three-computer network and uses Quick Books Pro 2005 and a two-line Siemens phone system with eight handsets throughout the facility. Staff also use Motorola handheld radios, and there are plans to install video equipment.

Cabana and Walker divide chores, with Cabana focusing on kennel areas and animal handling and Walker overseeing the business side of things. “Andy is very good with dogs – referred to as ‘the dog whisperer,’” Walker explains. “Andy has an uncanny knack for immediately pinpointing dogs’ personalities, temperaments and abilities.”

So far, their only two part-time employees are “friends who offered to help out and are now on the payroll,” according to Walker. They also have access to a nearby veterinary practice that can make emergency visits any time day or night.

Customer Service

“Many customers comment that when they mention the Oasis, Dwight or Andy, their dog goes nuts,” Walker says. “We treat all our guests as though they are our only guests and want their owners to rant and rave about us to everyone, and they do.”

Some clients continue to use Oasis after moving away. One couple, now living in Nevada, flies their Dobermans to Vermont while they go to Europe for two weeks in the summer.

Personal touches are key. New customers are welcome to tour practically anytime. Children who come by receive a



Top: Andy grooms a guest.
Middle: Bathing and drying area.
Bottom: The cattery.

small packet of bone-shaped sour candies. And, “all dogs and cats who have been either groomed or boarded are given a little something when they leave,” says Walker. “Boarded dogs receive neatly packaged Old Mother Hubbard biscuits. Cats take home a new toy mouse. Dogs who have been groomed are given a rawhide lollipop, and cats who have been groomed or had their nails clipped are also given a toy mouse.”

Marketing

Walker and Cabana have found creative ways to market the facility. In addition to getting a local radio station to broadcast from Oasis for its grand re-opening (just \$700 for four hours), Walker also writes and records regular radio spots that run eight times a day several days each week, four for boarding and daycare and four for grooming and retail. He changes them every 30 days or so to keep the content fresh. The ads run on an AM Western music station Monday through Friday at 7:30 am and 12:30 pm in sponsorship of “Pet Patrol,” where people call in lost pets. The ads also run on an FM alternative rock station in sponsorship of the “Vet Report” at 8:00 am and noon, Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

“We have a great relationship with the manager of the radio station and the owners of the stations,” Walker says, which may explain why he pays only \$10.74 for a 30-second radio spot.

When the rock band Phish played in Coventry, Vermont, the band’s Web site promoted Oasis as a nearby boarding facility. Apparently, devoted fans travel the country with their pets, following the band from place to place. Oasis filled to capacity for the first time, thanks to this opportunity. “They listed five kennels from closest to farthest, and we were the closest at seven miles,” Walker explains. “The next closest was 45 miles away, and they only have room for six dogs.”

A personal friend, Diane, and her Pomeranian/Poodle mix Penny, also do much to promote Oasis in their travels through the obedience and agility trial circuit. “Everyone who knows Penny subsequently knows about The Oasis,” says Walker. *Continued on page 16*



Top: Interior runs.

Middle: The 35' x 35' modular play yard with summer shade sail.

Bottom: Canine guests enjoy the 1.5-acre outdoor play park.

Future Plans

In addition to the new off-site retail space, which will allow room for 20 times more pet products, Cabana and Walker hope to add online reservation functions to their website. They also want to install flush valves at the ends of each gutter run and to earn ABKA

accreditation, which would make Oasis Vermont's only accredited site.

Despite feeling a bit tied down, Cabana and Walker enjoy the people they meet. In fact, Walker explains, "Dog people are good people. It's hard for us to understand or comprehend when people say they don't like dogs."

He adds, "We raise wild geese and have a wonderful garden and numerous flower beds. We love our home and subsequently we love our business too."

When asked for final words of wisdom, Walker simply says to get your name out there. Try all marketing strategies to their fullest, including contributions, community events, local nonprofit support, brochures, magnets and such. "Don't be afraid to try new things," he says. "We often had thoughts like 'no one will want to pay extra for that,' when, in fact, customers utilize all our services and are pleased that they are available to them." 🐶



Left: Wild geese roam the Oasis grounds.

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4	03/25/2002 10:04	03/31/2002	HUNTER	THOMPSON	LARGE DOG KENNELS
13	04/15/2002 17:56	04/26/2002	SPOT	ADAMS	MEDIUM DOG KENNELS
14	04/15/2002 17:57	04/20/2002	HARLEY	JOHNSON	SMALL DOG KENNELS
11	04/16/2002 17:55	04/20/2002	WOODY	BAKER	MEDIUM DOG KENNELS
15	04/16/2002 17:58	04/20/2002	COOPER	THOMPSON	MEDIUM DOG KENNELS
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