

Daycare for Fido

'Dog-ma' Hopes to Be Hill's Best Friend
by Stacey Zolt

It's hard to imagine Rebecca Bisgyer sitting behind a desk, eyes glued on her computer, trudging through corporate life. Today, sitting on a bench, in her new business, one of her clients nudges up against her leg, begging for attention. "Do you want a treat, Billie?" she asks. Billie is a regular customer at "dog-ma," Bisgyer's doggie daycare center which opened on Capitol Hill last week at 821 Virginia Ave., SE. These days, Bisgyer's clientele is quite a bit different from just a year and a half ago when she worked 12-hour days in corporate marketing. Her new clients prefer lying on the black and white checkered floor rather than sitting in an office chair when receiving Bisgyer's advice. It's just what she had in mind. Dog-ma, a business Bisgyer had long dreamed of starting, provides day-time care for dogs, complete with play groups, nap time, toys and an afternoon snack. For the truly frenzied dog owners, there's even the dog-matic shuttle service. Expanded amenities include dog-matic training sessions, personalized boarding in Bisgyer's Mt. Pleasant home and grooming on the premises. She's even arranging to have a vet on call in case of an emergency. For \$20 a day, just slightly more than many dog owners pay to have their pet walked, Bisgyer and staff will baby-sit, send out monthly newsletters with dog-ma play-time gossip and take pictures of the puppies at play. Bisgyer didn't have to look far to figure out what her clients' owners as she refers to them, would want from a daycare center for dogs -- dog-ma caters to the person she once was. "People that work like we did," she said referring to her husband, Nick Garnett, who also quit his corporate job to start a business, "work 12 hours a day, then come home to let the dog out and the guilt triples." Bisgyer is banking on her suspicion that she's not the only guilt-ridden dog owner out there. Each canine client must be at least five months old and "socialized" to deal with people and other dogs. All prospective clients come in for an application review to assure they have received all their shots, been spayed or neutered, have no record of biting and know how to share food and toys without putting up a fight. The regulars range from young to old, 12 to 100 lbs., active to couch

potato. Bisgyer said the dogs interact well and seem to work out within themselves who is the dominant character and who just follows the group. At day's end, they're pretty pooped. "It looks like someone shot my dog," Bisgyer said, pointing to her dog lying motionless on the floor. And although the idea of doggie daycare is completely foreign to Washington, Bisgyer knows it is a service that has the potential for high demand. Dog daycare centers are nothing new in San Francisco and New York, two other cities renowned for long work days and busy city dwellers where the concept has caught on quickly. In San Francisco, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals founded one of the first doggie daycare centers four years ago. Bisgyer said it is the biggest and the best, serving as a model for other facilities of its kind. In New York, as one might expect, the facilities range from uptown chic to downtown trendy. The most glamorous center in New York costs owners \$40 per day for the beloved canines to perch on full-sized beds designated for each pampered pup. While dog-ma doesn't cater that that level of well-coifed canines, Bisgyer does plan to provide mini dog beds for each client. One client in particular has already claimed a bed as her own -- and she lies there all day long, just watching the others at play. "Abby's the queen," Bisgyer explained with a giggle. Abby's owner, Ann Looper, has just returned to Washington after living a Sacramento, Calif., where she had Abby enrolled in dog daycare. A former Hill staffer who used to work for Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.), Looper said dog-ma is perfect for the Hillite lifestyle. "This city revolves around Capitol Hill," she said, "and, when they're in session, you just don't have the time or energy to really deal with a dog." Ironically, despite the Hill's inherent hectic lifestyle, Bisgyer said one of the reasons she chose the site for her business is there are more dog parks in the Hill neighborhood than in many other areas of the city. Her goal is to make the initial Capitol Hill location, chosen for its highway convenience and outdoor capacity, into a model for future locations in the D.C. area. For more information on dog-ma, call Rebecca Bisgyer at (202) 543-7805.