

RESPONSIBLE OFF-LEASH RECREATION IN TORONTO PARKS:

Four good reasons why

To The Members of Toronto City Council:

June 2007

This document is offered as a reminder that any City policy must recognize that responsible dog exercise is a legitimate park use.

A vital amenity for dog owners, off-leash areas in neighbourhood parks also benefit the community at large by promoting:

- better behaved dogs,
- safer parks and neighbourhoods, and
- stronger bonds of community in our neighbourhoods.


The policy should recognize the responsibility of dog owners for their own conduct and for their own dogs, but it should not make them responsible for enforcing park rules against other dog owners.

In our view, the proposed collective permit system is unworkable, and unfair to dog owners.

Signatures

(Name and first three letters of postal code)

(A-Cleveland)



316
signatures
as of July
4, 2007

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Joan Avery M4N
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Sergio Benetti M5R
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Reason No. 1:

Calmer, better socialized dogs

“Dogs that exercise and are allowed to run freely are not as aggressive towards people as dogs that are under-exercised.”

Humane Society of PEI

“Over 20 years [NYC’s off-leash policy] has reduced the number of dog bites.”

New York City
Parks Dept.
Press Release,
May 10, 2007

Exercise is essential for the adequate socialization of Toronto’s 250,000 dogs. Regular walks are necessary, but for many dogs not sufficient exercise.

But it’s not just about burning off energy. Off-leash areas in each neighbourhood are also needed so that, through play, dogs can learn to interact peacefully with one another. Dog owners also learn and internalize responsible behaviour by meeting and observing other owners at the park.

Off-leash areas lead to better behaved dogs, which is good for everyone.

Reason No. 2:

Fairness for dog owners

36% of Ontario households
own a dog.

Angus Reid Poll,
Apr. 9, 2007

Thousands upon thousands of dog-owning individuals and families live in Toronto. No less than other individuals and families, they are entitled to fair access to their city's parks for legitimate recreational activities.

Throwing a ball or frisbee to one's dog, and letting him or her play with other dogs, is a legitimate park use.

Dog owners, like all other park users, must act responsibly. Responsible dog owners respect park rules and are considerate of other users.

All citizens of Toronto, including dog owners, must have the same right to enjoy the park.

Reason No. 3:

Safer parks and neighbourhoods

“Allowing responsible dog owners to exercise their dogs is good for the community. Dog owners are community members who regularly visit parks and have a vested interest in keeping parks clean and safe. A constant presence, especially at night when parks are less crowded, helps keep parks and the surrounding neighborhoods safe.”

New York City Parks Dept.
Press Release, May 10, 2007

“Cities with dog-friendly parks have experienced a decrease in crime in parks and their surrounding areas.”

City of Regina Parks &
Recreation

Dog owners are among the most dedicated users of Toronto’s parks. Morning and evening, 365 days per year, in all weather, dog owners congregate in the park to exercise their dogs.

Sometimes, dog owners are the only people in the park. At other times, they share the park with the occasional jogger, walker, tennis player, or commuter taking a shortcut. Either way, all users and neighbours of the park are safer because dog owners are in the park.

Park and neighbourhood safety is another way in which off-leash areas benefit everyone.

Reason No. 4:

Stronger bonds between neighbours

“Dog-friendly parks provide opportunities for neighbours to meet and socialize. Communities with dog-friendly parks often experience increased attendance in community events and participation among residents.”

City of Regina Parks and Recreation

“Dogs ... are an antidote for the human anonymity of the public places of our contemporary society. Dogs facilitate contact, confidence, conversation and confederation among previously unacquainted persons who might otherwise remain that way.”

Robins, Sanders and Cahill study, in the Journal of Contemporary Ethnography (1991)

Study after study has shown that dogs and other animals can be an extremely important source of companionship to people, but dogs also benefit society at large by facilitating interaction among people who would otherwise be strangers.

Dog ownership cuts across ethnic, religious and socio-economic lines. It eases social interaction for the shy and the isolated. When dog owners meet in the park to exercise their dogs together, they break down barriers, and build neighbourly bonds that strengthen the social fabric.

Dog exercise in neighbourhood parks strengthens the community, which benefits everyone.

The City's draft policy: what's good and what's bad

What's good:

- The policy recognizes the need for additional off-leash areas throughout the City. (p. 5)

Toronto needs more off-leash areas. By way of comparison, the City of Toronto has 33 off-leash areas for 2,500,000 residents, compared with Vancouver's 31 off-leash areas for 600,000 residents.

What's bad:

- The policy reveals little or no awareness of the social value of off-leash dog exercise in neighbourhood parks. This is especially problematic in light of the vagueness of the suitability criteria (pp. 10, 14-15), and the proposal to apply these criteria to the reexamination of existing off-leash areas.
- The policy would make dog owners organize into groups and apply for a collective off-leash permit. The permit would be conditional on the group's effective enforcement of the park rules against any irresponsible users. (pp. 14-16)

The collective permit system is unfair.

Dog owners should be responsible for their own conduct, not for enforcing the rules against others.

The proposed process is unworkable.

If community consensus has been elusive to date, it will be no less elusive in the context of dozens, if not hundreds, of applications for collective off-leash permits, let alone the proposed reexamination of the 33 existing areas. The proposed process is a recipe for prolonged neighbourhood acrimony.

References

Humane Society of Prince Edward Island:
<http://www.peihumanesociety.com/park.htm>

City of Regina Parks & Recreation:
http://www.regina.ca/content/parks_and_rec/dogpark/index.shtml

Angus Reid:
<http://www.angusreidstrategies.com/uploads/pages/pdfs/2007.04.09%20Pet%20Food%20Press%20Release.pdf>

New York City Parks Department Press Release: http://nycgovparks.org/sub_newsroom/press_releases/press_releases.php?id=19895

Douglas Robins, Clinton Sanders and Spencer Cahill, "Dogs and Their People: Pet-Facilitated Interaction in a Public Setting" *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 20 (1991): 3-25