

Six Principles for a Sound Dogs-in-Parks Strategy

www.geocities.com/dogsinparks/principles.html

1. The policy should recognize the social value of off-leash areas in neighbourhood parks.

The community as a whole benefits from having off-leash areas in neighbourhood parks. These benefits include:

- better socialized dogs;
- crime deterrence and prevention at times when parks are otherwise deserted; and
- a valuable opportunity for neighbourly interaction.

The policy should recognize the positive contributions off-leash areas make to our neighbourhoods, and require City decision-makers to take these contributions into account when administering the policy.

The City's draft policy:

As currently drafted, the City's document is a catalogue of problems and supposed incompatibilities. It contains virtually no mention of the many social benefits of dogs in parks. This is a serious defect in a document that is supposed to be a framework for decisions on off-leash access going forward.

2. Encourage good citizenship and individual accountability. Do not impose collective liability or devolve on citizens the responsibility for park maintenance and enforcement.

The City should be responsible for enforcing the park rules. Individuals should be legally accountable for their own conduct.

Local groups, where they exist, can be involved in measures of education and persuasion. Dog owners can be encouraged to show pride in their park and to participate in clean-up days, etc. (like all other users).

However, dog owners should not be made responsible for enforcing the park rules against other users, maintaining the park, and raising funds for infrastructure, as the price of having an off-leash area in their neighbourhood park.

The City's draft policy:

As currently drafted, the policy would require local dog owners to organize into a group and apply for a collective permit for an off-leash area. The permit would be conditional on dog owners effectively enforcing the park rules and maintaining the off-leash area, and on their assuming as-yet unspecified additional responsibilities.

3. Grandparent existing off-leash areas.

Off-leash areas are vital neighbourhood amenities on which citizens rely in deciding where to live. Existing park uses need not be forever frozen in place, but the policy should make clear that if certain residents want the City to “re-evaluate” (i.e., revoke) off-leash access in a particular park, a heavy onus rests on them to justify the withdrawal of their fellow citizens’ rights and to show that there is an adequate alternative off-leash area within the same neighbourhood.

The City’s draft policy: Existing off-leash areas would not be “grandparented.” The City plans to “re-evaluate” all existing off-leash areas, bringing them under the new system rather than relying on “outdated or historic practices” (p. 13).

4. Invest in amenities.

A share of the Parks budget should be allocated to maintenance and the provision of amenities in off-leash areas, including but not limited to signage about off-leash rules and owner responsibilities.

5. No mandatory infrastructure requirements without resources.

The City should not impose infrastructure requirements for off-leash areas (e.g., fencing) unless it provides resources to meet those requirements.

The City's draft policy:

The policy suggests that fencing or other requirements might be a condition for having an off-leash area, but it emphasizes that no tax money will be made available to meet these requirements.

6. Aim for 80 off-leash areas by 2010

In Toronto's 1,400 parks, there are more than 800 playgrounds and 800 sports fields ... and only 32 off-leash areas.

Yet, there are hundreds of thousands of dog-owning households, and sound public policy reasons for ensuring that owners can exercise their dogs in their own neighbourhoods.

Toronto should set a target of 80 neighbourhood off-leash areas within a reasonable timeframe, say 2010. The number doesn't have to be 80, of course. The point is that one-tenth as many neighbourhood off-leash areas as playgrounds is not aiming too high.

The City's draft policy:

The draft policy recognizes that existing off-leash areas are "overcrowded," but it establishes no target. Moreover, the location criteria spelled out in the policy are in essence a long, vague list of "exclusions" which seem designed to ensure that priority will be given to other uses, with off-leash areas being located only in spaces that no one else wants.