

City delays changing dog rules

More consultation

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Foes of proposed rules governing "leash-free" dog zones in Toronto parks cheered yesterday after city councillors decided to seek community advice before making any changes.

A staff report recommended councillors adopt a number of controversial measures, including charging professional dog walkers an annual \$100 fee to use city parks and instituting a new process for creating leash-free zones.

But the economic development and parks committee yesterday voted to defer debate until residents and the city's four community councils are consulted.

Conflicts have erupted across the city between dog owners and residents who claim roaming dogs make parks dirty and unsafe.

Gideon Glass, who lives near a leash-free zone in Jean Sibelius Park, said he was glad councillors were taking time to consider residents' concerns.

"If other people start getting involved who live near other parks, the number of people at these meetings will start to multiply," he said. "I'm not a political activist, but the staff report is so lopsided and detached from reality that I felt I had to get involved."

The report proposes leaving the creation of new leash-free zones to the discretion of local city councillors, residents and park supervisors. Mr. Glass said he is worried the process will allow "small groups of dog owners" to lobby their councillors and override the best interests of a neighbourhood.

He said it has become difficult to use his local park since a leash-free zone was established, because of the dog feces.

"I think there are areas where off-leash areas will work, such as larger parks where there is enough room to separate the dogs from the people," he said. "But in our neighbourhood, we have a small park and no fence to separate the dog area."

Premika Ratam, another resident, agreed Toronto needs to create fenced areas and separate parks to accommodate dog owners, rather than allowing the animals to roam free in areas used by families. "Dogs are dangerous animals to have running about free," Ms. Ratam said. "I don't want to come across as anti-dog. We love dogs. But we're also concerned about safety and health."

There are 32 off-leash zones in Toronto parks.



CREDIT: Brent Foster, National Post

Mike Young plays with a leashless Mirro in High Park yesterday. City council has deferred a decision on creating more dog zones in parks.

Kelly Manis, a professional dog walker for the past two years, said problems mostly arise in smaller parks, such as Withrow and Wildwood in the east end, where there is limited room.

"Everything's on top of each other, so I can totally understand why people get upset," Ms. Manis said yesterday as she exercised dogs in Riverdale Park. She noted the space was large enough for five dog walkers, their charges, a group of children playing soccer and a city employee riding a lawn mower.

"When the kids came, we all moved to the side and it was all good," she said. "It just takes common sense and courtesy."

Ms. Manis said she did not object to the proposed \$100 fee, but worried the city would use the permit process to impose further restrictions.

City staff have proposed limiting walkers to six dogs at a time.

Toronto has approximately 1,200 professional dog walkers. Ms. Manis said there are a few disreputable walkers and she would welcome increased enforcement efforts. "I saw one fellow who had 11 dogs and when he left, he piled them all into a car," she said. "These are the ones who have given us a bad name."

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