

June 30, 1998

**To: Community and Neighbourhood Services Committee**

**From: Joe Halstead**, Commissioner of Economic Development, Culture and Tourism

**Dr. Sheela V. Basrur**, Medical Officer of Health

**Subject: Uniform Policy for Leashed and Unleashed Dogs in Parks**

**Purpose:**

To submit for consideration various recommendations relating to dogs in parks in order to reduce conflict between park users and to harmonize different practices existing in the former municipalities.

Source of Funds: Not applicable at this time.

**Recommendations:**

That the Community and Neighbourhood Services Committee adopt the following recommendations and refer them to City Council for approval:

1. The attached process and guidelines for designating off-leash areas in City of Toronto parks be adopted. (Appendices 1 and 2);
2. The number of dogs allowed under the control of one person in a City of Toronto park be limited to 3 which is the maximum allowed to be owned by one household, and the City Solicitor be asked to draft appropriate legislation to give effect thereto.
3. That Animal Services be requested to report back on any additional resources required to increase their capacity to work with the community to encourage voluntary compliance with park by-laws. Further that Animal Services be authorized to approach potential corporate partners to solicit funding for educational programming.
4. That staff be directed to review all existing arrangements where off-leash areas currently exist and report back with suggested amendments in accordance with recommendation number 1.
5. That the Commissioner of Corporate Services be requested to report on the feasibility of using vacant City lands for the development of "dog parks".
6. That this report be sent to the Board of Health for comment to City Council.
7. That appropriate City officials be authorized to give effect thereto.

**Background:**

The Community and Neighbourhood Services Committee on March 26 and 27, 1998, had before it a communication (February 2, 1998) from the City Clerk advising that York Community Council on January 21, 1998, recommended to the Community and Neighbourhood Services Committee that the Medical Officer of Health be requested to report on the development of a City-wide uniform policy regarding leashed and unleashed dogs in City parks.

Since this is a significant policy and operational issue for the Parks and Recreation Division of the Department of Economic Development, Culture and Tourism, staff are bringing forward a joint report for consideration. Further, the Board of Health at their July 6, 1998 meeting is considering a report on Municipal Animal Care and Control Legislation as a deputation item that is expected to proceed to the next City Council meeting.

**Comments:**

The Uniform Parks By-law that was consistent across all the former municipalities stipulates that no person having control of any dog shall allow it to run at large, except in a designated area. In the former City of Toronto, 21 parks have designated off-leash areas and are considered to be temporary "pilot project" locations subject to reporting back on impact. Several of these parks have restricted hours for off-leash dogs.

The former City of Etobicoke started a "pilot project" two years ago designating one park with dogs off-leash between certain hours from May to October and 24 hour dogs off-leash, between November and April in an area that is partially fenced.

The former City of North York has recently built a fenced dogs off-leash area in one large park.

The former Borough of East York, City of Scarborough, City of York and Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto have no dogs off-leash areas.

Permitting dogs to roam unleashed in City parks is a controversial issue given the challenge of satisfying the interests of all park patrons. While most dog owners obey all by-laws and keep their dogs under control, problems are on the rise in part because of the increase in the number of dogs, their natural behaviours and a minority of irresponsible dog owners. The Parks and Recreation Division and the Animal Services have been monitoring the dogs off-leash locations and report the following observations:

City residents who own dogs benefit from their companionship, security, social and recreational activity.

Dogs off-leash areas promote dog owners socializing in parks thereby creating a presence, enhancing the perception of public safety and deterring inappropriate or criminal activity in the area.

Most dog owners comply and many participate in informal enforcement and public education activities with park users.

Off-leash activity frequently expands beyond the designated areas and park boundaries into on-leash park areas,

neighbourhood streets and private properties.

“Stoop and Scoop” violations are on the increase in parks.

The public is reporting health and safety concerns particularly for children and senior citizens including: confrontation between incompatible dogs resulting in dog bites; confrontations with pet owners who refuse to comply with leashing and stoop and scoop requirements; and, dogs in playground areas. The recent media reports of dog bites and attacks on children have raised particular concerns.

There have been a growing number of professional dog walkers arriving with many dogs at a time, causing concern to park visitors and damage to parkland. Adherence to stoop and scoop by-laws is particularly problematic with multiple dog walking.

Park damage is occurring throughout the year including holes being dug by dogs creating trip hazards to park patrons and sportsfield users. As well, the fragile nature of forest ecology of the ravines is being threatened by dogs who are a major contributor to erosion and damage to sensitive plant material.

Designated park areas for dogs off-leash creates a situation of concentrated usage, resulting in park damage.

There have been a number of staff complaints of dogs bothering or attacking them during their performance of park maintenance activities.

Enforcement of the existing bylaws with current resources is seriously inadequate.

#### **Conclusions:**

There is an ever increasing demand for the provision of dogs off-leash areas in parks. Without a rational multi-faceted approach to the issue, complaints from other park users and park damage can be expected to continue. Other cities have experimented with fenced dogs off-leash areas in large tracts of parkland as well as on unused city land with some success. Enforcement alone without community participation and education is nearly impossible. The process and guidelines for approving new dogs off-leash areas is described in Appendix 1 and features:

1. Community consultation
2. Annual reviews
3. Dog owners assuming “dog watch” responsibilities
4. A list of areas that would be rejected because of their unsuitability through safety, operational or environmental reasons.

#### **Contact Names:**

Jill Cherry, James Bandow; Parks and Recreation Division Animal Services

Joe Halstead, Commissioner of Economic Development, Culture and Tourism Evaluation as per procedures for review

Provisions for review, implementation and enforcement are set out below:

Implementation Parks and Recreation will arrange for and install signage which would clearly indicate on and off-leash areas, hours of off-leash times and stoop and scoop regulations and fines.

Annual Review Parks and Recreation Division and Public Health Division - Animal Services in consultation with the Ward Councillor and the community dog watch group will undertake a review annually to determine if further action is required to improve or remove the dogs off-leash area resulting in a report to Community Council with:

(i) recommendation to continue or (ii) revisions to off-leash areas.

Enforcement Public Health Division – Animal Services and Metropolitan Toronto Police when contacted by the community dog watch group as required.

#### **Appendix 2**

##### **Off-Leash Guidelines**

1. All parks and vacant City of Toronto land should be considered for dogs off-leash areas. The following, in most cases, will be excepted:
  1. Parks that have passive and active uses, such as playgrounds, wading pools, permitted sportsfield activities; paths used for cycling, rollerblading and pedestrian links (boardwalks).
  2. Active play areas of parks such as toboggan areas, permitted locations and athletic running tracks.
  3. Environmentally sensitive areas such as ravine areas and naturalized planting areas.
  4. Parks adjacent to schoolyards.
  5. Natural and artificial rinks.
  6. Internal pedestrian park pathways that are used on a regular basis (neighbourhood connections).
  7. Sportsfields.
  8. Ornamental gardens.
  9. Parkettes under 0.5 ha in size.
2. That fenced in dogs off-leash areas be considered for selected parks on a regional basis in parks larger than 10 ha,

subject to the process and guidelines outlined in recommendation 1.

3. Before considering an application for a dogs off-leash area, dog owners using the park must form a group with a minimum of 15 members who agree to:
  1. Provide "Dog-Watch" eyes and ears on the park to identify and help educate irresponsible pet owners.
  2. Organize park clean-ups at a minimum of four times per year.
  3. Repair areas damaged from dogs/digging.
  4. Consult with Public Health – Animal Services for by-law enforcement when required.
4. In consultation with the community and Ward Councillor off-leash times be designated (except in fenced areas) to minimize potential conflict with other park users.