

Designate land, time for city dogs to roam; [ONT Edition]

Full Text (594 words)

According to poet Robert Frost "Good fences make good neighbours." But they could also make for better relations between Toronto dog owners and fed-up residents who resent unleashed canines roaming through city parks. Few issues are more divisive than the proper place of dogs in public spaces. Many pet owners adore their dogs, often regarding the pooch as akin to a family member. But other Torontonians fear and resent canines, especially big dogs running free in parks among small children.

It is an emotional divide that stands to deepen as both this city's dog and human populations steadily grow, creating increased competition for Toronto's public spaces. In response to that pressure, city hall is examining its policies on unleashed dogs in Toronto's more than 1,000 parks. Officials are considering a strategy that would nudge dog owners and community groups to agree on off-leash rules for their local green space.

Regrettably, that vague "sort it out yourselves" approach could aggravate hostilities in some neighbourhood. And confrontations on this issue can turn ugly, as witnessed by the cruel poisonings at Withrow Park in the Riverdale area, where a scattering of pesticide-laced wieners killed one dog, sickened others, and led to bitter accusations from both sides in the dog leash debate.

Rather than highly charged neighbourhood discussions, Toronto needs decisive leadership from city hall. More territory in new and existing parks should be set aside for dogs to run free and - most important - these lands should be fully enclosed by fences and gates to keep loose dogs in.

Leash-free zones need to be big, giving dogs space to run, and they should be spread across the city. In a few rare cases, it may even be necessary to make smaller parks entirely fenced and leash-free. Once these areas have been designated and properly enclosed, the city's leash laws should be aggressively enforced in all other public spaces.

Dog owners who let their animals unlawfully roam should be punished with a \$245 fine - without exception. That would be the trade-off for having more leash-free zones. This would require some spending, for fences and the hiring of more animal control officers, but having clear and enforced boundaries would ultimately ease tensions.

Another option to defuse the problem is to let owners walk dogs off leash from, say, 9 p.m. to 8 a.m. when most children and others are not in the parks. Such an informal agreement now operates in some city parks with great success.

There are more than 250,000 dogs in Toronto, yet only 33 of the more than 1,000 parks in the city have off-leash opportunities. That isn't enough to serve a booming canine population, especially since some larger breeds need to run fast and free for proper exercise.

Dogs and dog owners have a right to use parkland. But owners should not expect to let their animals run wherever they please. Right now, many do in defiance of leash laws.

That poses a problem. As much as dog owners are loath to admit it, some loose dogs pose a potential threat, especially to small children. Seniors and cyclists can also be knocked over.

The obvious solution is to provide clearly segregated areas or times for dogs to run free while strictly requiring dogs to be leashed everywhere else or at other times. Dogs deserve more places to roam. But just as baseball players in a park cannot expect to put home plate in the middle of a crowded playground, dog owners clearly need reasonable restrictions on their leash-free use of city space.