



Off Leash Parks Strategy

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Table of Contents

- Table of Contents** 1
- 1 Introduction 3
- 2 Guiding Principles 3
 - 2.1 Accessibility 3
 - 2.2 Affordability 4
 - 2.3 Balance 4
 - 2.4 Cleanliness 5
 - 2.5 Environmental and Cultural Sustainability 5
 - 2.6 Natural Beauty 6
- 3 Strategy Components 6
 - 3.1 Off Leash Designation Criteria 6
 - 3.1.1 Designation Types 7
 - 3.1.2 Park Size 7
 - 3.1.3 Park Facilities 7
 - 3.1.4 Proximity to Schools, Community Centres and Homes 7
 - 3.1.5 Site Development, Operating, and Maintenance Costs 7
 - 3.2 Interdepartmental Off Leash Strategy Committee 8
 - 3.3 Off Leash Area Designation Process 8
 - 3.3.1 Step 1 - Off Leash Area Proposal 8
 - 3.3.2 Step 2 - Initial Review 8

	3.3.3	Step 3 - Community Consultation	9
	3.3.4	Step 4 - Implementation	9
	3.3.5	Pilot Off Leash Area Review	9
	3.4	Discretionary Park Redesignation Process	9
	3.5	Signage	10
	3.5.1	Park Rules for Dog Owners	10
	3.6	By-law Enforcement	11
	3.7	Responsible Pet Owners Communication Plan	12
4		Implementation Schedule	12
	4.1	Parks	12
	4.2	Sportsfields	14
5		Strategy Review	15

1 Introduction

The HRM Off Leash Parks Strategy establishes fair and consistent criteria to ensure that all park users will be able to choose a park experience that could include dogs off leash, dogs on leash, or no dogs at all. The Strategy will ensure access to some parks for dog owners as well as freedom from dogs where parks, parts of parks, or park activities are not compatible with the presence of dogs. It includes a comprehensive set of planning principles to guide the development of an off leash parks program. The practical components of the Strategy relate to how and where off leash areas will be designated and managed; why sites will or won't be designated; who will be involved in decision making processes, and finally; when implementation will take place.

2 Guiding Principles

The Strategy's six guiding planning principles of Accessibility, Affordability, Balance, Cleanliness, Environmental and Cultural Sustainability, and Natural Beauty provide a foundation for the strategy.

2.1 Accessibility

Areas suitable for dog-related activities should, as far as possible, be accessible to all. They should follow the principles of Universal Design, which means they are useful to and useable by everyone. However, it is possible that conflicting uses may mean that not all parks, or areas of a park, are accessible to all users at all times.

Goal:

HRM will employ universal design principles to ensure that off leash areas are accessible to all park users.

Objectives:

- a) Establish equitable and transparent public consultation processes for the selection, design, approval, and operation of off leash areas.
- b) Where appropriate, include off leash areas in new park designs.
- c) Develop multiple use design criteria for off leash areas.
- d) Anticipate conflicting uses.
- e) Develop mitigation strategies.

2.2 Affordability

Capital projects and services for off leash areas in municipal parks should be affordable. The selection of off leash park areas should be based on available capital funds and reasonable maintenance costs. The design of off leash areas should not require extensive site alteration or the construction of dog-related amenities. HRM will consider supporting the voluntary fundraising efforts of dog owners to provide additional dog-related park amenities if operating and maintenance costs are minimal.

Goal:

As funds become available HRM will establish and maintain cost-efficient off leash areas in city parks.

Objectives:

- a) Establish economical site design criteria, capital, operational, and maintenance costing procedures for off leash areas.
- b) Develop an application process and guidelines for voluntary fundraising efforts by dog owners to provide additional amenities for dog-related uses in city parks.

2.3 Balance

Dog-related uses should be sensitively balanced with other park uses in order to benefit all citizens. They must also be balanced with the need to maintain the ecological health and natural beauty of the parks, and to provide an enjoyable experience for all park users.

Goal:

Adopt a balanced decision-making process for the designation of park off leash areas.

Objectives:

- a) Inventory current park uses, environmental assets, and aesthetic features.
- b) Consult with park users and adjacent landowners.
- c) Evaluate potential environmental, social, and aesthetic impacts.
- d) Develop mitigation strategies for potential impacts.
- e) Identify impacts that cannot be mitigated.

- f) Develop dispute resolution mechanisms.

2.4 Cleanliness

Planning for dog-related uses should include effective means of controlling environmental contamination by dog waste.

Goal:

Ensure off leash areas are clean and free of dog waste.

Objectives:

- a) Develop dog waste management plans for city parks.
- b) Include measures for public education and by-law enforcement.
- c) Establish performance measures for cleanliness.
- d) Monitor for compliance.
- e) Initiate voluntary park clean-ups with park users.
- e) Establish off leash area closure procedures for non-compliance.

2.5 Environmental and Cultural Sustainability

The maintenance of environmentally healthy parks is an important aspect of the HRM parks system. Dog-related use should be integrated into a park with consideration for its ecosystem, including the flora, fauna, soils and hydrology. The protection of cultural resources within a park must also be a consideration.

Goal:

Site selection and management approaches will consider ecological and cultural sustainability.

Objectives:

- a) Establish appropriate off leash area site selection criteria to ensure the sustainability of environmental and cultural assets.
- b) Develop integrated and adaptive park management approaches to mitigate dog-related impacts.

2.6 Natural Beauty

Integrated planning, design, and management objectives for areas selected for dog-related uses should protect and enhance natural beauty and foster memorable visitor experiences.

Goal:

The natural beauty of parks will be protected and maintained.

Objectives:

- a) Formally evaluate off leash areas on an annual basis.
- b) Conduct visitor surveys.
- c) Develop intervention strategies including permanent or temporary off leash area closures.

3 Strategy Components

The HRM “Internal Off Leash Dog Park Guidelines” approved by Regional Council in August, 2004 form the basis of this section of the Strategy. They have been revised, and supplemented with additional guidelines required for the successful implementation of an off leash park program.

3.1 Off Leash Area Designation Criteria

The criteria are intended to assist in the assessment of site constraints and opportunities for the designation of dog-related activities in HRM parks. They include: park size, park facilities, proximity to schools, private residences, and community centres as well as minimal site development, operating and maintenance costs.

3.1.1 Designation Types

The types of designations considered within parks will be:

- a) No Dogs
- b) Dogs On Leash
- c) Dogs Off Leash
- d) Timed Off Leash (time of day, days of the week, or months of the year)

3.1.2 Park Size

Through the Regional MPS and the Regional Subdivision By-law HRM has adopted a parks classification system comprised of Neighbourhood, Community, District, and Regional parks. Smaller parks with limited open space opportunities are more susceptible to user conflicts and other impacts from off leash usage than larger parks. Therefore, Neighbourhood and Community parks with less than one hectare of open space suitable for exercising dogs will not be considered for off leash designations. On leash activities not conflicting with existing park uses and facilities may be considered in Neighbourhood and Community parks. Off leash activities in District and Regional parks with a minimum of one hectare of suitable open space that do not conflict with existing park uses, facilities and neighbouring land uses will be considered for off leash and/or timed off leash designations.

3.1.3 Park Facilities

Due to the potential for user conflicts, the need to preserve cultural and environmental assets, user enjoyment and public safety, and the compatibility of certain facilities to dog-related uses, dogs will generally be prohibited from certain areas of parks such as: playgrounds, wading pools, beaches, sportsfields (May 1 to Nov. 1), sport courts, environmentally sensitive features, cultural heritage sites, historic monuments, horticultural displays, and cemeteries. On a site specific basis, some seasonal on or off leash timed designations may be considered if it can be shown that impacts are minimal.

3.1.4 Proximity to Schools, Community Centres, and Homes

In order to preserve public safety and the peaceful enjoyment of private property, off leash areas within 25 metres of abutting school, community centre, or residential properties will generally not be considered.

3.1.5 Site Development, Operating and Maintenance Costs

Parks requiring extensive site alterations, operating, and/or maintenance costs will generally not be considered for off leash designations. Preference will be given to parks with existing parking facilities and open spaces suitable for off leash activities.

3.2 Interdepartmental Off Leash Strategy Committee

The successful implementation of the Strategy will require an ongoing interdepartmental approach that will include staff and budgetary commitments. A permanent interdepartmental Off Leash Strategy Committee will oversee implementation. It will serve as a decision-making body for the selection and design of off leash areas in parks as well as a forum for staff to share views and raise concerns or concepts. The Committee will also establish monitoring and enforcement protocols for dog-related issues, and develop and administer a conflict resolution process. From 2007-2009, the Committee will prepare annual reports for Regional Council concerning Strategy implementation and will make recommendations to Regional or Community Councils concerning the designation or de-designation of off leash park areas. Thereafter, the Committee will provide reports as needed.

The Committee will include staff from Real Property Planning, Halifax Regional Police, and Transportation and Public Works. On occasion, staff resources from other HRM departments may be requested to assist the Committee.

3.3 Off Leash Area Designation Process

With the anticipated future growth of new urban communities the need for additional off leash areas will be considered on an ongoing basis by the Interdepartmental Off Leash Strategy Committee. It is also likely that some community groups may wish to nominate off leash park areas for consideration. In both cases, it is recommended that the following steps be followed in order to establish an equitable and transparent public consultation process for the selection, design, approval, and operation of off leash areas.

3.3.1 Step 1 - Off leash Area Proposal

A Committee member or community group proponent will submit a brief outline of the proposal detailing the park area to be considered for off leash activities. Community groups may submit their proposal to their Councillor or to the Committee.

3.3.2 Step 2 - Initial Review

The Committee will review the proposal and assess the recommended site(s) against the requirements of the Strategy's guiding principles and designation criteria. If the proposal does not meet the requirements, the Committee will advise the proponent and the local Councillor of the reasons for the site being deemed unsuitable. Where the Committee agrees that the proposal is suitable for further consideration, the following actions will occur.

3.3.3 Step 3 - Community Consultation

The Committee will coordinate a public meeting in the community where the proposed off leash park area is located. For the first year of operation the site will be considered a pilot program and will be subject to close scrutiny. Proponents and community stakeholders will be invited to discuss the proposal and comment on elements of the proposal such as: size and location, hours of operation, site improvements, maintenance requirements, signage, dispute resolution, by-law enforcement, site monitoring, and local communication strategies.

3.3.4 Step 4 - Implementation

Prior to opening the pilot off leash park area the Committee will ensure that any required site improvements are complete, and that appropriate signage has been posted. The Committee will also ensure that dog waste containers and bag dispensers have been installed. As well, additional public education materials and by-law enforcement will be provided.

3.3.5 Step 5 - Pilot Off Leash Area Review

The Committee will monitor the pilot off leash area and will adapt management practices as situations arise. The Committee will coordinate a community meeting within six months to determine if further remedial actions are necessary or, if the situation is unresolvable, that the pilot off leash area not be considered for official designation. At the end of the twelve month trial period the Committee will submit a report recommending that Regional Council (for Regional Parks) or a Community Council (for District Parks) approve, or reject, the official designation of the pilot off leash park area.

3.4 Discretionary Park Redesignation Process

At its discretion, the Committee may revoke an on leash or off leash area designation and impose a “No Dogs” designation in a park or sportsfield where dog owners chronically fail to follow the “Stoop and Scoop” provisions of the Dog By-law. The Committee may also choose to apply a “No Dogs” designation in a park or sportsfield where chronic user conflicts or environmental impacts cannot be resolved. The Committee will prepare an information report to the responsible Council stating its concerns and its intention to redesignate the affected park. This will be accompanied by a published public notice (14) days before the “No Dogs” designation is scheduled to take effect. On a semi-annual basis, reinstatement appeals will be considered by the Committee.

3.5 Signage

Staff will develop a signage program to provide clear and consistent messages to the public concerning park designations, rules, and by-law enforcement for dog-related park uses. The program will ensure that signage is placed at appropriate locations including all primary park entrances, prohibited sites, as well as on and off leash areas. The signage will indicate where, if, or when, dogs are prohibited; are required to be on leash; or are permitted to be off leash. Additional signs will provide park users with the rules governing dog-related activities in municipal parks. To reinforce compliance, key messages concerning responsible pet ownership will also be repeated in HRM publications and its website.

3.5.1 Park Rules for Dog Owners

- Owners or other responsible persons must be able to present an HRM dog licence registration tags for the current season. All dogs residing in HRM, 3 months of age and older, must be licensed. HRM enforces a zero tolerance policy on all unlicensed dogs with the fine for no licence being \$222.
- Unless otherwise indicated, with appropriate signage, all parks in HRM are considered on leash for dogs. Areas where dogs are prohibited at all times include: playgrounds, cemeteries, wading pools, and beaches.
- Responsible dog owners always carry a plastic bag when walking, on or off leash, immediately pick up poop and deposit it in an appropriate garbage container. The fine for not picking up your dog's poop is \$222.
- Owners are legally liable for any injuries caused by their dogs.
- Dogs with a recorded history of assault, or who exhibit aggressive behaviour are prohibited from HRM parks.
- Responsible dog owners always keep their dogs on leash when walking them, except when walking in a designated Off Leash area.
- Off Leash areas are not "out of control" areas and dog owners have responsibilities when using them. Dog owners must have control of their dogs at all times which means that the dog must be within visual sight of the owner and obey the owner's commands when

called.

- Responsible dog owners keep their dogs on leash while in the parking lot adjacent to an off leash area to prevent any injuries from moving vehicles.
- Dogs must be on leash prior to entering and upon leaving an off leash park area.
- While on a pathway, your dog must be on leash unless posted signs indicate otherwise. Dogs must not interfere with, obstruct, or chase other pathway users.
- Only three dogs per owner or other responsible person are allowed in off leash areas.*
- Dogs in heat and puppies under three months old are not permitted in off leash areas.
- You cannot cycle, in-line skate or skateboard with a leashed dog - it's dangerous for you and your dog.

* Note: Subject to further discussion with professional dog walkers.

3.6 By-law Enforcement

Positive public education and vigorous by-law enforcement will ensure successful outcomes for the Off Leash Parks Strategy. Halifax Regional Police (HRP) staff will cooperate in the Strategy by enforcing the provisions of the Park and Dog By-laws. They will take a leadership role with education and awareness initiatives while ensuring that consistent enforcement protocols (education, warning, and enforcement) are practised throughout HRM parks. HRP units recognize that their joint support and enforcement will maximise the effectiveness of their efforts in municipal parks. A clear zero tolerance message will be delivered to chronic violators.

The units have also committed staff resource to the Interdepartmental Off Leash Strategy Committee. There, they will work to create a coordinated data base of site issues and violations to ensure that information gathered can be used to adapt park management practices to reflect public safety concerns.

3.7 Responsible Pet Owners Communications Plan

A Responsible Pet Owners Communication Plan will be developed by the Interdepartmental Off

Leash Strategy Committee. The Plan will include regular public updates on the progress of the Strategy. It will also contain messaging about the responsibilities of pet ownership and provide public education materials to reinforce the benefits of positive interactions between dogs, dog owners, and non dog owners that can arise through responsible pet ownership. Responsible pet ownership messages will be disseminated through press releases, brochures, website publications, workshops, and special events.

Fortunately, the Plan and associated communication materials have already been produced by the City of Calgary. HRM staff has received support from Calgary to model an HRM program on their internationally recognized approach to responsible pet ownership. Calgary staff has provided HRM with a range of brochures and program ideas with a proven record of success. Additionally, Calgary staff has offered to serve as mentors during the development of the HRM plan.

4 Implementation Schedule

The initial phase of Strategy implementation for pilot off leash areas in parks and sportsfields will take place over 24 months. The following schedules outline the actions required to ensure that the strategy can be successfully implemented during that time.

4.1 Parks

The proposed parks for Phase One (2007/08) of the pilot program are: Dartmouth Common, Fort Needham Memorial Park, Hemlock Ravine Park, Sandy Lake Park, and Shubie Park. In Phase Two (2008/09) of the implementation schedule four principle off leash areas are proposed. Pilot programs requiring additional design and corresponding capital cost improvements are proposed for Flinn Park, Glenbourne Park, Jacks Lake Regional Park and Ravenscraig Park. Consideration will be given to off leash areas in the Master Plan for the Mainland Common and possibilities for creating fenced off leash areas on HRM lands located at the corner North Park, Rainnie Drive and Cogswell Street (PID 40724304) as well as HRM lands abutting Don Bayer Sportsfield will be explored. Cost estimates for design and site improvements related to off leash infrastructure will be included in the 2008/09 Capital Budget. Based on lessons learned in Phase One, an additional ten parks requiring minimal site improvements will be selected during Phase Two. If all of the off leash park areas are successfully implemented there will be a total of twenty designated off leash areas in HRM parks by June, 2009. The following tables outline the implementation schedules and associated tasks for Phase One and Phase Two of the pilot program (4.1, 4.2).

Phase One: Pilot Parks Program - Off Leash Parks Implementation Schedule: 2007/08		
Month	Year	Tasks
June	2007	Develop off leash designation proposal briefs for pilot parks. Review proposals and develop draft off leash area designs. Develop and initiate phase one communication plan. Publicize public meeting schedule for pilot sites.
July		Coordinate public meetings for pilot sites. Finalize pilot site designs. Develop cost tracking system. Develop enforcement protocols.
August		Implement design recommendations. Coordinate staff resources for site openings. Schedule pilot site launch dates. Develop site monitoring system.
September		Launch pilot sites.
October- November		Monitoring, cost tracking, adaptive management as required. Conduct preliminary design.
December		Monitoring, cost tracking, adaptive management as required. Prepare cost estimates for 2008/09 operating and capital budgets.
January	2008	Publicize public meeting schedule for pilot sites 6 month review.
February		Coordinate public meetings for review of pilot sites.
March- August		Implement public meeting recommendations. Monitoring, cost tracking, adaptive management as required. Prepare Council reports: annual report as well as individual reports recommending for or against official park designations.
September		Present reports to Regional Council and Community Councils.

Table 4.1

Phase Two: Pilot Parks Program - Off Leash Parks Implementation Schedule: 2008/09		
Month	Year	Tasks
January	2008	Develop off leash designation proposal briefs for phase two pilot parks. Review proposals and develop draft off leash area designs. Develop and initiate phase two communication plan. Publicize public meeting schedule for pilot sites.
February		Coordinate public meetings for pilot sites. Finalize pilot site designs. Commence cost tracking system. Review enforcement protocols.
March- May		Implement design recommendations. Coordinate staff resources for site openings. Schedule pilot site launch dates. Commence site monitoring system.
June		Launch pilot sites.
July- October		Monitoring, cost tracking, adaptive management as required.
November		Publicize public meeting schedule for pilot sites 6 month review.
December		Coordinate public meetings for review of pilot sites. Prepare cost estimates for 2009/10 operating and capital budgets.
January - May	2009	Implement public meeting recommendations. Monitoring, cost tracking, adaptive management as required. Prepare Council reports: annual report as well as individual reports recommending for or against official park designations
June		Present reports to Regional Council and Community Councils.

Table 4.2

4.2 Sportsfields

Off season evening use of sportsfields for off leash activities will be considered (5:00-10PM from November 1 to May 1) to supplement currently approved daytime use (6:00 - 10:00 AM). A trial initiative will also take place. Ten sportsfields will be considered for year-round off leash activities. Decision making will be based on the Strategy's Designation Criteria and Designation Process. Sportsfields in urban and suburban areas will be screened for suitability and then short listed. At the end of the sports season in October 2007, ten fields will be selected from the short list for a ten month trial period to assess the social and physical impacts of dog-related activities. Measures may include options such as extending permitted hours of use of trial sportsfields to all

day use, and/or to introduce timed designations permitting off leash activities during certain times of the day, and/or days of the week. As key stakeholders, sports organizations will be encouraged to take part in public consultations throughout the trial period. Pending successful trial period outcomes the year-round program may be expanded to include additional sportsfields. The following table outlines the implementation schedule and associated task for Phase One of the sportsfield trial (Table 4.3).

Phase One: Sportsfield Trial - Off Leash Parks Implementation Schedule: 2007/08		
Month	Year	Tasks
June - September	2007	Monitor field conditions. Develop sportsfield short list. Develop off leash designation proposal briefs for trial sportsfields. Review proposals and develop initial off leash timed designations.
October		Publicize public meeting for trial sportsfields. Contact affected sport organizations. Coordinate public meeting. Finalize general sportsfield and trial site designs. Commence cost tracking system. Review enforcement protocols. Implement design specifications.
November		Launch off season evening hours. Launch trial sites. Monitor field conditions.
December		Prepare cost estimates for 2008/09 operating and capital budgets.
January-March	2008	Monitoring, cost tracking, adaptive management as required. Publicize public meeting for trial sites 6 month review.
April		Coordinate public meeting for review of trial sites.
May-August		Implement public meeting recommendations. Monitoring, cost tracking, adaptive management as required. Prepare Council reports: annual report as well as individual reports recommending for or against official sportsfield designations.
September		Present reports to Regional Council and Community Councils.

Table 4.3

5 Strategy Review

In June 2009, the 24 month implementation schedule of the Strategy will be complete. It is recommended that at that time the Interdepartmental Off Leash Strategy Committee initiate a public review of the Strategy to determine its effectiveness in implementing off leash areas in HRM.