



**Off Leash Parks Strategy
Guiding Principles & Designation
Criteria**

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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 ensures 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 and who will be involved in decision making processes.

Sports fields in HRM are primarily intended for the use of sport teams however this use is seasonal. Currently there are thirty sport fields open from November 1 to May 1 for off leash uses. During the summer most fields are booked by sport teams but some fields are not booked and may be available for off leash uses. The guiding principles and design criteria used for parks are also generally applicable to sport fields.

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.

3.1 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 generally 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 requires an ongoing interdepartmental approach that includes staff and budgetary commitments. A permanent interdepartmental Off Leash Strategy Committee oversees the implementation of the Strategy. It serves 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 also establishes monitoring and enforcement protocols for dog-related issues, and develops and administers a conflict resolution process.

The Committee includes 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 Parks Strategy Committee. It is also likely that some community groups may wish to nominate off leash park areas for consideration. The following steps are followed in order to provide 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 submits 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 reviews 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 By-law A-300. 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.