

Feature Article

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Release the Hounds

As incensed cat owners dominated headlines with their disgust at the prospect of registering and tethering their feline companions, Halifax quietly began to catch up to other cities with the opening of five new off-leash areas for dogs. The owners of the pooches say it's about time, but not everyone is thrilled with the idea.

Andy Pedersen



Gray skies bluster overhead as I stride through Shubie Park in Dartmouth, trying to keep up with John Charles. A city planner with the municipal government, he's holding several small flags, really just thin metal rods each topped with a blaze of red plastic. As he walks, he scans the edges of the path, intently looking for something. "There's one," he says, as we round a corner. He points toward the ground near a row of trees, but I can't see anything until he leans down and plants a flag into the ground, right beside a small, brown, coil of dog shit. "The border between two types of vegetation," he says to me over his shoulder, "that's one of the areas dogs tend to use." Standing up again, he stops and shakes his head. "I've learned way too much about this stuff," he says. "I don't even have a dog."

Charles might not have his own pooch, but he's been immersed in dog culture for close to a year, ever since city council directed him to set up five new off-leash dog areas for a year-long pilot project. Shubie's was the first new area to be opened in early October, followed by off-leash zones at Fort Needham Park in the north end of Halifax, Sandy Lake in Bedford, the Dartmouth Commons, and Hemlock Ravine, off the Bedford Highway. But if it seemed like a trivial assignment at first, Charles isn't taking it lightly anymore. "I'd say this issue takes up about 80% of my time now," he says. "Some days, it's 100%."

Although the opening of the off-leash areas was largely ignored by the public, buried beneath outraged headlines about the city's new cat bylaws, it's really these new dog bylaws that could pit citizen against citizen, pet owners versus parents. "There are extreme opinions on both sides of the issue," says Charles. "It's incredibly polarized."

The problem, Charles has learned, is that dog owners have become a different breed over the past generation. A couple of Statistics Canada numbers tell the tale: in 2001, Canadian households spent an average of \$296 on child care and \$296 on their pets. By 2005, while child-care spending remained steady, pet expenditures had shot up by 25% to \$377. The phenomenon is especially prominent here in Nova Scotia, where we spent more on our pets than any other province except oil-rich Alberta. Another statistic, this one from the dog-focused magazine Bark: There are now more households in North America with dogs than households with children. To many, in other

words, a pooch isn't just a pet anymore. It's a member of the family, and a very important one at that.

In Halifax, that's a lot of new family members. Although there's no official canine census for the city, Charles says there are tens of thousands of dogs, perhaps even hundreds of thousands. And with just two official off-leash areas serving the city until this year—Seaview Park and Point Pleasant Park, both on the peninsula—it seemed clear that city hall had to do something.

But other cities have learned that as dog owners exert their influence, certain types of parents and people who are afraid of dogs push back. "We don't have parks in Vancouver anymore, we have doggie toilets," wrote a woman to the Vancouver Sun last summer. "We can't take our kids or grandkids for a picnic on the grass, because the parks smell of dog urine and dog crap, and dogs are running around." In Toronto, editorial writers at The Toronto Star wrote that, "Children must be able to play anywhere in our parks without fear of unknown dogs. Fenced enclosures are necessary if dogs are to be let to run free." And in Paradise, N.L., the mayor was even more blunt in August, telling his city councillors that the best way to deal with the town's befouled sports fields was to "euthanize the dogs" and, for good measure, beat their owners with baseball bats.

So how does Charles plan to keep the peace here? Like a dog trainer, he figures that a strong hand is the best way to keep unruly packs in line. "The problem in other cities has been enforcement," says Charles. "Dog owners really took advantage of the privileges they were given." Not here, he vows. "These parks are going to be under a microscope." Meaning more patrols by park officials and bylaw officers. More fines for unregistered dogs and untethered ones outside of the off-leash areas. And, of course, the red flags like the one that he's just planted beside the abandoned dog shit in Shubie. He tells me that he'll return to this spot in two weeks, and if he finds that the feces hasn't been cleaned up, he'll snap the leash. "Shubie will lose its off-leash privileges for six months," he says. "We'll shut it down."

Full disclosure: I own a dog and understand how connected the human heart can become to a canine. His name is Cocoa, and he's a sweet-natured cross between a duck toller and a spaniel. How much do I love him? A couple of times a day, every day, I lean down and, with my hand, do just what John Charles says I should do: I pick up Cocoa's crap. If you're not a dog owner, think about that for a second. Granted, I have a plastic grocery bag around my hand, but there's really no doubt about what you're doing when you wrap your fingers around a log. Sometimes, like when the ground is covered with fall leaves, it's hard to find and you end up stepping in it. Other times, glistening in the sun or steaming in the cold, its presence is revoltingly clear. But I love Cocoa and I love having him in my life, so it's something I'm willing to do.

"I couldn't even calculate how much dog shit I've picked up in my life," says Janet Chernin, breaking into peels of laughter. A dog lover, and a minor celebrity in the city's canine culture, Chernin has been a professional dog walker and dog day-care owner for more than 10 years. If you've spent any time in Point Pleasant, you've probably crossed paths with her, a dog pack swirling at her feet, her high-pitched commands echoing through the trees.

She likes the idea of trying to shame the recalcitrant dog owners roaming around their city into picking up after their own hounds. But she doesn't like the idea of having to pick up strange poo. "I don't know why, but there's a difference," she says. "I don't want to touch poo if I don't know where it came from." So she thinks it's unfair that, under the city's red-flag rules, she might get punished for another dog owner's sin. "It's like saying that if somebody is caught driving drunk, we all have to stay off the roads for six months."

Chernin is 51 and owns four dogs herself, including a Chihuahua. "I admit to dressing her up every now and then," she says, with more laughter. "She has very short hair, though. So it's about form and function." She pauses. "And it's about style, too. I admit it." More laughter.

I ask Chernin why she thinks dogs are enjoying such a surge in emotional popularity these days. She takes a second to think about it. "More and more people are waiting to have an actual human family," she says. "But that doesn't mean that people don't want somebody to come home to, somebody who will love you, and who you can be proud of, and nurture, and love back. Dogs today make you 'a family,' they make your home feel complete."

As our conversation about the new off-leash rules goes on, Chernin becomes more frustrated—her feeling that dog owners are being treated unfairly begins to emerge. "They say that if these off-leash areas start to become unsightly, all dog owners lose their off-leash privileges," she says. "But are they going to close the park to people if they find too many Tim Hortons' cups? I have as much right to enjoy these parks with my companions—my dogs—as anybody who has family members of the human persuasion."

I got my first real taste of the divide between parents and dog owners during a meeting hosted by Charles about the off-leash area for Needham Hill. It's the closest park to my house and I've been taking Cocoa there for years. There's plenty of room to throw balls and sticks over by the Halifax Explosion Memorial, and I was hoping that was the area that would become the park's off-leash zone.

There were lots of familiar faces when my wife and I showed up at the meeting, but I was glad that Charles had brought name-tags. I'd spoken many times with the woman who owns Hughie, but didn't know until talking with her at the meeting that her name was Sue. I learned that Ruby's owner is David, and that Ajax's "dad" is Andrew. My wife introduced herself to a woman that neither of us recognized. Her name was Christian. We asked her where she lived in the neighbourhood. "Oh, I don't live around here," she replied. "I live in Timberlea." A mother of two boys, Christian had been making it a point to travel to all of the off-leash meetings and air her disapproval of the entire idea. Her point: Dogs are dirty and dangerous, and shouldn't be allowed loose around children. There's a playground at Needham, but "I'd never take my boys there if this goes through," she said.

The meeting got underway, and Charles divided the couple dozen of us into smaller groups to

consider the boundaries of Needham's off-leash area. Christian was at the group beside ours and, after a while, voices at the table grew louder. I glanced over and saw Andrew, red-faced, trying to keep his cool. "I own a company and I pay a lot of taxes," he said to Christian. "I have as much right to use this park as anybody else." I couldn't hear what Christian was saying back to him, but it was only making his face redder.

Later, Charles told me that the Needham meeting was relatively peaceful. "The meeting for Hemlock Ravine, that one's going to be the barn-burner," he said. "There are parents who are worried the dogs are going to form packs and attack the kids coming through from school."

No actual barns were burned during that Hemlock Ravine meeting but, like Charles predicted, there was plenty of opposition. "I am against this plan," said Barbara Musgrave, whose property is adjacent to the park. "My kids travel back and forth to school through the park. I've had a dog jump up on me before and I would not want that to happen to my children."

Even a dog trainer at the event, Susan Jordan, acknowledged the possible risks of having lots of dogs and lots of kids in close quarters. "If this is done poorly," she said, "it could be a very dangerous thing."

More full disclosure: I have an infant son, Max, so I understand how terrifying it can be when a powerful dog crosses our path. Every morning when I walk Cocoa up to Needham, Max comes along for the ride, strapped to my chest. Mostly, he flails all four of his limbs excitedly when he first catches sight of any of the park regulars: Seamus the poodle, Ruby the Lab, or Julia the Jack Russell. But when we come across those muzzled ridgebacks, or that unneutered pitbull, I cross the street, frightened that their owners are going to lose their grip. So I can empathize with Charles when he tells me how frustrating it is when dog owners tell him they have a "right" to let their dogs run off-leash. "Where does that right derive from?" he asks, shrugging his shoulders. "What bill of rights are they referring to? That's like somebody telling me they have a right to speed."

But still, a couple of weeks after our tour of Shubie, the early signs are encouraging. There's no spike in complaints—none of the howls of protest that greeted the cat bylaw. Even the poo that Charles flagged has been cleaned up. "I've learned a lot in this process," he says. "A compromise can usually be reached. People can see that other people, who they may not agree with, can still have concerns that are just as valid as theirs. Listening to each other, we can find middle ground."

We're sitting together on the bleachers by the baseball diamond at Needham, the second area to get its off-leash status. It's late afternoon, and the park is bathed in warm sunlight. Behind us, Sophie the German shepherd is getting some training. Another regular at the park, I knew that Sophie can be rambunctious, but that her "mom" is serious about teaching her to behave.

Looking over his shoulder at the two of them, Charles tells me that the next step in his plan is to encourage more training, for dogs and their owners and for children and their parents. "We already have some volunteers going into classrooms to teach kids how to act around dogs," he says. "That they should never grab at a dog. That they should always ask before petting."

Since he doesn't own a dog himself, I ask Charles if his feelings about dog owners have changed over the past year. "I realize that they have an elevated status," he says. "People make more of an emotional investment in their pets than I knew." He looks back towards the field. "I guess, when you look at society, there's maybe more of a sense of isolation. People are reaching out for belonging."



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