

**North West Community Council
Draft HRM Off Leash Parks Strategy Workshop
Basinview Elementary School
Wednesday, January 31, 2007
Workshop Report**

Twenty local residents took part in the workshop hosted by the North West Community Council. The majority of the workshop participants were dog owners. Participants formed small discussion groups and reviewed the planning objectives, recommended program models, and best management practices outlined in the Draft HRM Off Leash Parks Strategy. Each group focused on two of the strategy's six planning principles (Accessibility, Affordability, Balance, Cleanliness, Environmental and Cultural Sustainability, and Natural Beauty). Participants were asked to comment on their impressions of the draft strategy and suggest ways that it could be improved. At the start of the 90 minute discussion period, groups appointed monitors and recorders. Monitors were responsible for reminding participants to focus their comments on the strategy, and the recorders noted participant comments. At the conclusion of the discussion period each group presented their findings to all of the workshop participants.

The draft strategy recommends a volunteer-based or "bottom up" approach to the development of off leash areas in HRM parks where a volunteer group of dog owners could advocate for the creation of an off leash area in a local park and, with the approval of an HRM Community Council, could develop a park management plan in cooperation with HRM to provide stewardship for off leash activities. It is based on a plan for off leash parks recently adopted by the Town of Markham, Ontario that was itself modelled on a highly successful plan first developed by the City of Mississauga. The current HRM strategy relies upon partnerships among HRM, dog owners, and the general public, working towards the goal of fostering responsible, and respectful use of HRM park properties. The strategy contains provisions for dog owner groups to provide public education, financial and in-kind support for the development and maintenance of a designated off leash area in an HRM park.

The following bulleted comments summarize workshop participant comments made during large group discussions and those noted by the workshop recorders during small group discussions.

Accessibility

- HRM needs to educate the public about the benefits of off leash areas. This strategy will only succeed if everyone is educated and buys in to this process. If you don't, it's doomed to failure.
- There are no off leash parks in Bedford.

- Do more research about off leash rules used in other cities. Solicit information via vets, licensing, schools, etc. Good park signage and education is a key to success.
- The strategy implementation schedule (24 months) is way too long. It shouldn't exceed 6 months. More than one pilot off leash area is needed.
- One pilot off leash area is not enough to let all residents take part.
- HRM needs to have multiple pilot projects running simultaneously in Halifax, Dartmouth, Bedford, and Sackville.
- Vets, dog walkers, and dog trainers aren't shown as resources in the strategy. They should be included in HRM's resource list.
- HRM has to realize that there will be park user conflicts regardless of what the strategy proposes but it would cause less trouble to have off leash areas in parks than not to have them.
- Advisory groups, by nature have no teeth. What capacity do they have to make themselves heard?
- Any off leash task force should have equal representation from all sides of the issue.
- If, as the strategy proposes, dog owner groups are organized for each off leash park there should also be an HRM-wide umbrella group with representation from each local off leash park group.
- The system proposed in the strategy is bulky and would take time to organize.
- The process should be kept simple or it will get bogged down. Be wary of the number of roadblocks that could delay getting to the endpoint. At this time there are not enough off leash parks in HRM to satisfy the demands of dog owners.
- The administrators of the Federal and Provincial Parks in HRM need to be part of this conversation.

Affordability

- Dog owners don't want to be the primary fundraisers for off leash areas in parks.
- If the process for off leash areas in parks is to be all volunteer-driven by dog owners then

nothing will change.

- If the development of off leash areas is only left in the hands of dog owner groups it could be a problem. There should be more responsibility shared between the city and dog owner groups.
- The strategy recommends dog owner groups forming non-profit associations. Is this the only way this could be done? Are there other ways?
- Dog owners paying for an extra dog tag for park access won't work. Do all other groups pay fees for the parks they use?
- A portion of dog licence fees and Dog By-law fines should be used to fund off leash areas in HRM parks.
- In order to get buy-in on this strategy dog owners will need to see a clear benefit of registering (licensing) their dogs and know that a portion of the funds are going to support the development and maintenance of off leash areas in parks.
- Keep infrastructure costs minimal in off leash areas. Less is more. Focus on existing parks. Use alternate times for off leash activities.
- Identify off leash classifications for parks such as: off leash zone, fenced area, off leash trail, and multi-use with time constraints.
- HRM could establish a program for charitable donations to off leash areas in parks.

Balance

- Off leash areas should not encroach on environmentally sensitive areas such as ravines and wetlands. The safety of our children is paramount. Areas frequented by children, playgrounds, horticulture displays, ball diamonds, skateboard bowls, and tennis courts should also be out of bounds for off leash activities.
- Off leash park areas require lots of trails and open spaces with trees and grass that are safe for owners and their dogs.
- To be an environmentally sustainable off leash park it shouldn't be a fragile environment with endangered species or rare plants.
- Sand-based enclosures could be provided for dogs to relieve themselves.
- Separate parks with wooded areas such as the proposed Jacks Lake Regional Park could

be provided by HRM for dogs off leash.

- Traps and snares at Jacks Lake are a hazard to dogs. HRM should post signs at Jacks Lake to prohibit trappers from setting out traps and snares.
- Sandy Lake Park is closed during the winter but it should be open for off leash activities during the off season.

Cleanliness

- HRM should compost dog waste and provide biodegradable bags for dog waste to reduce negative environmental impacts on the HRM solid waste system.
- HRM needs to provide an adequate number of dog waste receptacles and empty them on a regular basis.
- The semi-annual deworming suggestion for access to HRM parks is too onerous on volunteer groups. How would it be enforced?

Summary

Although most workshop participants hadn't fully studied the HRM strategy prior to the workshop they were able to focus on selected portions of the strategy during the workshop and suggest improvements. Many indicated that they would follow up with a complete review of the document and then forward more detailed comments to HRM staff.

Workshop participants stressed the immediate need for the development of local off leash parks for urban residents throughout HRM and the need to educate the public about the benefits of off leash areas. The proposed 24 month single pilot park approach to the implementation of the strategy was not acceptable to the participants. They felt that the process should be expanded to include parks in Sackville, Dartmouth, Bedford, and Halifax, and that timelines should be shortened to six months. While there was some support for off leash advisory group structures, the general feeling was to keep processes simple and not let them get bogged down in government red tape. Likewise, they suggested that HRM should adopt a "less is more" approach to the design and development of off leash areas. Extensive infrastructure and associated costs were not necessary; only simple park designs with open treed areas, grass and trails would be required.

The necessity of dog owner group funding for off leash areas was also questioned. Participants suggested that, in order to generate citizen buy-in for the strategy, a portion of dog license fees or fines from the Dog By-law could be used to support the development and maintenance of off leash areas. They pointed out that they were taxpayers and that HRM should financially support

the development of off leash areas in its parks.

The need for leash only restrictions, or the prohibition of dogs for the protection of environmentally sensitive features and the safety and enjoyment of other park users was accepted by workshop participants. The strategy's cleanliness principle was also endorsed. Participants wanted HRM to pursue options for dog waste composting and the use of biodegradable dog waste bags.

Discussion

Participants did not endorse the volunteer driven model (Town of Markham, Appendix B) or the implementation timelines presented in the strategy. The organizational and cost recovery requirements placed on dog owners were seen as being excessively regimented and costly. The 24 month timetable needed to be much shorter. Participants appeared to prefer a more municipally driven approach utilizing existing tax dollars with additional funds generated through a portion of dog licencing fees dedicated to off leash parks. A limited range of volunteer activities were also seen as being acceptable. The strategy could be modified to reflect this preference.

The draft strategy also references recommended off leash models from Toronto (Appendix G) and Ottawa (Appendix F). Both models accept by-law enforcement, public education, and the development and maintenance of off leash areas as municipal responsibilities. The draft HRM strategy could be revised to reduce its volunteer dependant approach to operation and capital cost recovery by including more government driven elements from the Toronto and Ottawa programs.

At this time it is unlikely that a portion of dog licence fees could be dedicated to funding off leash areas. Current revenues from dog licences are minimal and are already committed to caring for, or euthanising, unlicensed stray and abandoned pets. An increase in licence fees appears to be acceptable to most dog owners if there is demonstrable benefit in terms of enforcement, and a convenient range of locations of well maintained off leash areas in HRM parks.

From a budgetary perspective, the strategy's current 24 month implementation schedule provides for staff resources in the 2007/08 fiscal year for the assessment of capital and operating costs for off leash areas. This is to be followed with an off leash program budget submission to Regional Council for the 2008/09 fiscal year. HRM's proposed 2007/08 budget does not currently provide for the development of new off leash areas.

Currently, HRM faces many challenges to adequately fund existing municipal services and meet the needs of its citizens. Regional Council could request staff to prepare costs estimates for 2007/08 but the additional costs from a new service for off leash areas would have to be weighed against existing funding requirements during upcoming 2007/08 budget deliberations.

As an interim measure, discussions could be initiated to amend relevant sections of the HRM Dog

By-law (D-100) regarding off leash activities in HRM sports fields from November 1 to May 1. During this off season for sports activities, the Dog By-law currently permits off leash activities from 6:00-10:00 AM. Off season hours in local sports fields could be extended to better meet the needs of dog owners.

Workshop participants brought forward many good suggestions. Most were dog owners but in order for off leash areas in HRM parks to succeed, the views of citizens that do not own dogs will also have to be considered to develop a lasting partnership among HRM, dog owners, and the general public working towards the goal of fostering responsible, and respectful use of HRM parks.