

**Marine Drive, Valley & Canal Community Council
Draft HRM Off Leash Parks Strategy Workshop
Ash Lee Jefferson Elementary School
Thursday, February 1, 2007
Workshop Report**

Eight participants took part in the workshop hosted by the Marine Drive, Valley & Canal Community Council. Although it was a small group, several participants had extensive experience as dog trainers and were able to add their professional insights. All of the workshop participants were dog owners. Participants formed two discussion groups and reviewed the planning objectives, recommended program models, and best management practices outlined in the Draft HRM Off Leash Parks Strategy. The groups focussed on four of the strategy's planning principles (Accessibility, Affordability, Balance, and Cleanliness). 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 the rest 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

- Point Pleasant Park and Seaview Park are the only off leash parks in HRM. There are no HRM parks designated in our community. It's a long drive into Halifax for local residents wanting to legally exercise their dogs off leash.
- There are no off leash parks in Fall River.

- Rules for parks should ensure that they are accessible to all users.
- Some parks should be accessible at all times and they should just be for dog owners and their dogs.
- Parks spaces should include fenced areas and designated hours for specific purposes such as areas for small dogs as well as areas for big dogs.
- A combination of single user areas (no dogs or dogs only) and multi-use parks for all users in needed within HRM parks.
- Whether trails should be designated lead or off lead is not the question that should be asked. The real criteria for off lead trail use should be whether a dog owner has effective control of their dog.
- The strategy's requirement for off leash advisory groups places too much responsibility on the shoulders of dog owners. It would require a heavy level of administrative and organizational support.
- Dog owners without their own cars cannot use public transit to visit off leash parks because their dogs are not allowed on HRM buses. Only service dogs are allowed on HRM buses. If HRM is trying to reduce car use and promote public transit then all dogs should be allowed on buses.
- Off leash areas should have access to water.
- Dog owner groups should also be shown as resources in the strategy.
- Dog owner groups shouldn't be required to have liability insurance.
- When dogs are allowed off leash in parks there is overwhelming evidence that crime rates against persons and private property decrease due to increased park usage by dog owners. Youth crime in parks also decreases.

Affordability

- Dog owners don't want to be fundraisers for off leash areas in parks.
- Informal volunteer dog owner group stewardship and mentoring to promote responsible behaviour for other dog owners is OK.

- Do community organizations have to fundraise for playgrounds? Where is this happening?
- Use dog licence fees to fund dog parks.
- Reward dog owners with a dog license fee reduction if they and their dogs have passed the Canadian Kennel Club (CKC) Canine Good Neighbour test. The test certifies that the handler has a certain level of control and that the dog is consistently obedient.
- Redirect some of the HRM budget for playgrounds to dog parks. Dogs are today's kids.
- Don't punish responsible dog owners to get other dog owners to comply.
- Suspend ticketing for off leash infractions until proper off leash areas are available.
- Keep ticketing those owners who haven't licenced or clean up after their pets. This would be proactive since it moves in the direction you want to go - to have all pet (not just dogs) owners have licenses for their animals and use the proceeds to pay for off leash areas.
- Build in interim measures in the strategy to extend off leash hours (currently 6:00-10:00 AM) in sports field during the off season (currently November 1 to May 1).
- Underutilised sports fields could also be permanently designated off leash. When new sports field are developed older fields could be "retired" and designated off leash.
- Pass a law making it mandatory for all pet retailers in the HRM, to fill out a pet registration form and collect the license fee upon sale of a pet.

Balance

- Limit the number of dogs under one person's care. Dog walkers cannot watch or cleanup after several dogs at one time.
- Enforcement mechanisms as well as appropriate signage should be in place to ensure that dogs with a known history of aggressive behaviour are prohibited from off leash areas.
- Aggressive dogs can be rehabilitated with proper training. Form a testing committee to assess re-entry options for dogs banned from off leash areas.
- Extendable leashes are not safe for dogs, their owners or other parks users. Leash lengths should be standardized.
- The need for off leash areas will not go away. There's no need to study the issue. HRM

needs to address it with a positive public education program

- All components of a park (environmental and social) need to be assessed before park development.
- Ways to safely approach dogs, avoiding dog bites, and calming people's fear of dogs can be dealt with through early education in the schools and through continuous public educations.
- Dedicated dog parks require special designs. It's not just a matter of building a fence and providing parking. If the park is not designed well there could be dog fights and injuries to dogs and dog owners.
- Park buffer zones should be provided between neighbouring properties and off leash areas.
- Inform park neighbours and park users of off leash area nominations. Allow a simple majority (over 50% support) of agreement from local residents for off leash approval.

Cleanliness

- Public education and enforcement should include vets, trainers, better relations with media, regular HRM public service announcements and adequate funding for education and enforcement.
- Informal volunteer dog owner group stewardship and mentoring could be used to model responsible behaviour for other dog owners
- 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 bags) and empty them on a regular basis.
- Semi-annual deworming is not always necessary. What is necessary is regular fecal sample testing. Regardless, this would be difficult to monitor.

Summary

Some participants had thoroughly reviewed the strategy. Others hadn't fully studied the HRM strategy prior to the workshop but they were able to focus on selected portions of the strategy during the workshop and suggest improvements. Most indicated that they would follow up with a complete review of the document and then, if time permitted, 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. Some were upset that they were being harassed by HRM by-law enforcement staff. The group wanted the strategy to focus on delivering interim measures to permit dog owners to legally use sports fields for extended hours during the off season. It was also pointed out that dogs (with the exception of service dogs) were not allowed on public transit. Dog owners without cars were being penalized. It was suggested that HRM review this policy.

Participants wanted designated off leash parks as well as off leash areas in existing parks. While some felt that parks should just be fenced areas, others suggested that designated dog parks required extensive design to ensure dog and dog owner safety. It was also mentioned that dogs should also be well trained before they are permitted in off leash areas. Research concerning problem dog behaviour associated with poorly designed off leash enclosures was provided to HRM staff for further review.

Participant didn't want to be fundraisers for off leash areas but they did support some volunteer activities to promote responsible behaviour for other dog owners. As taxpayers they felt they had a right to expect HRM to provide this service. They questioned whether other taxpayers were expected to be responsible for playground maintenance and fundraising. Some participants suggested that their dogs were like their children. Their taxes supported schools but some members of the group didn't have children and didn't benefit directly from schools. Participants suggested that, in order to generate dog owner buy-in for the strategy, dog license fees could be used to support the development and maintenance of off leash areas. Others suggested a licence fee reduction for owners with CKC's Canine Good Neighbour certification.

They also stressed the need for educating children and adults about dogs. Knowing how to approach or avoid dogs depends on understanding dog behaviour. It was also pointed out that the problem of off leash activities in HRM parks would not go away. HRM along with other partners, had to respond with extensive public education as well as fair enforcement. Dog owners needed to ensure their dogs were well trained and the general public needed to respect the right of responsible dog owners to use HRM parks. Participants were willing to volunteer informally in off leash areas but not as members of formal dog owner groups.

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.

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 and fund these services through municipal taxes. 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. Volunteer dog owner groups providing stewardship and peer education could also be a component of the strategy but at a lesser level than that proposed in the Markham model.

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.