

**Peninsula Community Council
Draft HRM Off Leash Parks Strategy Workshop
Maritime Room, Halifax Forum
Wednesday, March 14, 2007
Workshop Report**

Twenty-one local residents took part in the second workshop hosted by the Peninsula Community Council. An earlier workshop took place on February 3, 2007 at St. Mary's University however, at the request of their North End constituents, Councillors Murphy and Sloane agreed to host an additional workshop at the Halifax Forum. The majority of the workshop participants were dog owners. At this workshop participants discussed the Accessibility, Affordability, Balance, Cleanliness, Cultural and Environmental Sustainability, and Natural Beauty principles of the strategy. Participants formed four working groups and discussed the planning objectives, recommended program models, and best management practices associated with the planning principles that their group had been assigned to review. Each group focussed on two of the Strategy's planning principles. 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 ninety 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 working 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.

Group One reviewed the Strategy's Accessibility and Affordability principles. Groups Two and Three reviewed the Balance and Cleanliness principles. Group Four reviewed principles related to Cultural and Environmental Sustainability and Natural Beauty.

The following bulleted comments present an overview of feedback provided during large group discussions and those noted by the workshop recorders during small group discussions.

- **Accessibility - Group 1**
- More on leash as well as off leash parks should be available at convenient locations and times throughout the day.
- Why is it that people without dogs can be in an off leash area but people with dogs are restricted to one area of a park?
- Pedestrian access to Seaview Park is not safe. It's dangerous to cross the street to get to the park.
- Off leash parks should be designed to allow safe pedestrian access.
- Most dog owners care about the environment, the health of their dogs, and the health of other park users. These people clean up after their dogs and dispose of the waste properly but it's apparent some dog owners need to be more responsible about picking up after their pets. There should be more garbage cans in the parks.
- HRM should enforce licencing and immunization requirements. The HRM Park Patrol should be handing out tickets for by-law infractions.
- HRM should use revenue from these fines to finance additional off leash areas.
- It's important for dog owners to be able to walk safely with their dog off leash. Otherwise it's not unlike unruly kids that are allowed anywhere.
- Water access is important for dogs to cool down after exercise.
- Public transit only allows service dogs on buses. HRM should allow responsible dog owners to use public transit to travel to off leash parks with their dogs.
- The City has been dragging its heels on this off leash issue. It's important for dogs and their owners to have off leash areas for exercise. Dogs need to play, roam, and have opportunities to socialize. The spaces currently available are limited. Why do well behaved dogs have to be on lead in a park?
- We can dream of more areas for dogs and their owners to be free to walk and run in parks as we like. All park areas should be open to responsible dog owners and their dogs.
- Dog owners are taxpayers and we should have equal access to parks like any other park users.
- HRM is reactionary. Someone gets upset with a dog, they react, and then the City reacts.

- HRM policy should adopt the Calgary model of animal control and enforcement and gently force owners to be more responsible for their pets.
- Off leash areas can just be open space areas with garbage cans. They can be quite simple. They could be self-supporting and self-policing.
- HRM's Strategy should use the City of Ottawa points system model to identify off leash areas. There are clearly designated no dog, dogs on leash, and dogs off leash areas.
- There needs to be more flexibility in HRM's approach to the accessibility of sportsfields. HRM should allow off leash activities on sportsfields during times when no games are scheduled (e.g 9:00 pm to 9:00 am).
- Clear signage is an important design feature. There should be signs to show that you're entering or leaving an off leash area.
- Seaview Park is poorly designed. There's a playground at the entrance to the off leash area that dogs have to pass through to access the off leash area. The park access to the off leash area should be redesigned to funnel dogs away from the playground.
- Park designers should consider dog behaviour. Narrow access and exit points to off leash areas create opportunities for dog fights. For example, there's a pinch point at the upper parking lot gates at Point Pleasant Park that could be redesigned.
- There's too much salt on the trails in the winter. It burns the dogs paws and harms the environment. HRM should use sand on the trails.
- Even though sportsfields are periodically not in use some sports organizations don't want dogs using the fields during the sports season.
- If dog owners are not cleaning up after their pets HRM should threaten to close the park for dogs. There should be one warning that the park will be closed unless it is cleaned up. Dog owners would self-police and clean up the park to keep it open.
- The Strategy proposes more off leash areas will be accessible if Dog Owner Groups sponsor them. Dog owners just don't want to follow this community group model.
- A city-wide advisory group or community groups could be part of the solution.
- Dog owners need to be more forthcoming and cooperative. We need to be involved in the process somehow.

- There should be value for the money owners pay for dog licences. This should be reflected in more accessibility to parks for off leash activities. Enforce licencing and use the fines to pay for more enforcement and garbage bins.
- Off leash park areas should be evenly distributed throughout HRM. Don't lose any, gain more.
- We mostly agree with the Strategy's approach to accessibility.

Affordability - Group 1

- HRM should licence all dogs and ensure they are inoculated.
- Microchipped dogs should be exempt from licencing.
- Not everyone in the group supports mandatory licencing but it does fund services for stray and abandoned pets.
- Too much of the cost of the Strategy falls to Dog Owner Groups. The costs should be more balanced among all taxpayers.
- Licence fees should be directed to supporting off leash areas.
- Dog Owner Groups should be responsible to take part in public consultations but should not be expected to pay back capital costs, or police, develop, and operate off leash areas.
- Access fees (park access tags) won't work as a way of financing off leash areas. Dog Owner Groups shouldn't be expected to enforce this.
- There shouldn't be a great capital expense for HRM to develop off leash park areas.
- HRM should find low cost areas to develop.
- One member of the group thought that the community-based model would work.
- Victoria Park in Truro has good off leash areas. Truro's approach should be examined by HRM.

Group 2 - Opening Comments

The recorder for this group captured the following opening statements by members of the group. The names of the speakers have been omitted.

- **Speaker 1:** There should be off leash parks in Dartmouth. Parts of Bisset Road Park should also be off leash. I'm concerned about the Strategy's recommendation for obligatory de-worming and vaccinations. These should be at the owners discretion. We want to be law abiding. I've spent the past 13 years in caring for the health and welfare of my dogs as well as other dogs. I work with rescue dogs and invest lots of time and energy with my dogs. They are very important in my life. My ideal for an off leash area would not be an enclosed area but a place to play and run and not worry about people who don't like dogs. There shouldn't be a fenced area because they tend to be too small and dogs need more space.
- **Speaker 2:** Dogs are my life and a big part of my lifestyle. I don't think we need new parks. We just need certain areas of parks at certain times of day to be off leash. I don't want to see us lose any existing on-leash rights, I just want to see enhanced off leash rights. There's no need for more fenced areas. There are already enough for those dog owners who feel they need a fenced area. My dogs have great recall so I don't need a fenced area but I would like to have more off leash options.
- **Speaker 3:** It's important for dogs to exist in harmony with the urban environment. HRM needs an off leash policy. People move here from other cities with off leash areas and expect similar facilities. The ideal here would be an equal distribution of off leash parks in all neighbourhoods. Maybe within 1 km. of your house. Ideally all dog owners would clean up after their pets. Sometimes it's a lack of bag and receptacles but also just laziness so we just need more enforcement. It would be good if communities could self-police the parks and be responsible for clean ups.
- **Speaker 4:** I have three high energy dogs and live in a suburb that doesn't have any off leash parks so I end up breaking the law. Dogs do not get enough exercise on leash. I like areas like Seaview Park and Long Lake Provincial Park. I like areas to walk. I don't like the idea of shared use parks. I would rather have separate off leash areas.
- **General Discussion:** There are two types of off leash parks. Seaview Park (stay in one place) and parks with trails (sniff and pass). Off leash parks lead to a sense of community with other dog owners. There's a feeling of guilt about breaking the by-law. Having parks close enough to walk to is important. Shared use is good. Maybe there should be an off leash section in the Commons. We need to see what will work in our neighbourhoods. We want to maintain the status quo but have it legalized.

Balance - Group 2

- Take Seaview Park as an example. It's multi use so you have to walk through the playground to get to the off leash area. It would be better to have separate entrances. It might be better to separate areas of this park to avoid conflicts. Dogs need to be considered in the design of a park, not just people. There needs to be more public education about dog behaviour.
- What do we want in a park? Drumlins, trees, lots of garbage cans, lighting, somewhere to get to water (maybe fountains for drinking or areas for swimming).
- There's the interplay between sports and dogs at the Commons.
- A big issue is not picking up waste that includes issues of education (dog owners don't know it is important) and also lack of supplies.
- Licensing would be acceptable if the money went for off leash areas.
- It's important to have education for dog owners and non dog owners.
- Use City Watch for registered dog owners (grouped by community or not - have owners choose) and warn people that there have been complaints and that there may be repercussions. Other avenues to inform people would include newsletters and websites.

Cleanliness - Group 2

- HRM should supply dog waste bags, more dog waste receptacles, more signage, more enforcement, and more education about the need to clean up after pets.
- Signs should state that off leash areas will be closed if not kept clean.
- HRM should empty waste receptacles in a timely manner and sponsor cleanups.

Balance - Group 3

- HRM should identify neighbourhoods in need and create a mixed use environment that should include fenced areas within parks designated for dogs.
- The Toronto model allows for off leash at certain times of the year for various neighbourhood parks.
- Will Long Lake ever become an official off leash park? (Note: Long Lake is a Provincial Park)

- Animal Control gets a lot of calls regarding people afraid of off leash dogs in parks. Some complaints are about unacceptable off leash activities in the Hydrostone area.
- Why not simply fence off a controlled environment with a park where dogs can run freely while being ‘controlled’? People will more likely pick up after their dogs. Toronto has some fenced areas.
- Having a fenced area allows for security and safety for dogs (from cars) and protects people with children.
- User pay. Charge a licence ‘club fee’ to use off leash parks (fenced? or not). Perhaps land can be donated by the Crown. The ‘club’ would accept only licenced dogs.
- Ottawa uses former industrial lands for off leash areas. Ottawa also maintains these areas.
- Ideally each ‘community district’ should have an off leash option and not necessarily within a children’s playground area.
- ‘Dog runs’ are fenced in but they only cater to one or two owners at a time and times are limited. This is typical in the USA but we can do better.
- Forested dogs run areas tend to be easy to maintain. People stick to the path while dogs wander.
- It’s important to keep water in mind. We’re a coastal city, therefore we should definitely have access to water at at least one park with water, i.e. Long Lake (Note: Long Lake is a Provincial Park).

Cleanliness - Group 3

- In Bedford the City doesn’t pick up garbage, thus ‘dog do’ bags are piled grossly high with overflowing garbage cans. This is common at many ‘unofficial’ parks. Perhaps the City could monitor these parks (i.e., Bedford, Sackville Ball Field).
- Allow for parks dedicated to dogs and for fenced areas. Form volunteer committees to be responsible for clean ups, bag dispensers, and emptying garbage cans.
- If volunteers don’t fulfill their ‘duties’ then the park cannot be operated. Local accountability involves local users and also lowers costs. Include the entire local district.
- Some parks provide sand boxes for dogs. Scoops are provided. This is ideal for the urban core. These are often smaller fenced parks.

Environmental and Cultural Sustainability - Group 4

- The impact of dogs and dog waste on waterways is a concern. It's important to not concentrate off leash activities in only a few areas. More areas would reduce the impacts.
- Flora and fauna protection is important. There should be restrictions in sensitive areas during certain seasons. Spring is highly sensitive time for flora and fauna.
- Time restrictions are not logical, especially during the off season.
- There should be an advisory committee for off leash issues and monitoring.
- Fines and licencing funds should be dedicate to off leash facilities.
- Education is essential for responsible ownership.
- HRM staff should advise on the environmental suitability of parks for off leash.

Natural Beauty - Group 4

- Parks should be kept as natural as possible.
- Noise problems (barking) need to be controlled.
- Signage should be designed to compliment the area.
- It's very important to have immediate enforcement or action by City staff to deal with issues as they arise.
- It's agreed that HRM should establish parks and staff should decide if parks with off leash problems should close.
- Community Council should not have the responsibility to control closing a park

Summary

A few of the participants had reviewed the Strategy. For those who hadn't read the Strategy there was ample time during the workshop to review, and then discuss, selected portions of the strategy. Many of the participants lived in the North End and wanted to see more local off leash opportunities in parks such as Fort Needham Memorial Park.

Most of the participants were dog owners and supported the creation of more off leash parks. They talked about the importance of dogs in their lives and the benefits of pet ownership. Many felt that off leash uses could be harmoniously and sensitively balanced within many existing parks and sportsfield uses. Some participants were concerned about the environmental impacts of off leash areas on waterways and some thought that increased off leash activities could harm their enjoyment of parks. .

Three of the groups felt that the “bottom up” volunteer based approach for off leash areas required too much effort and unfairly targeted dog owners. It was frequently mentioned that dog owners were tax payers and they expected improved off leash park services. There were suggestion that fees for dog licences be increased to finance off leash park development. Many participants recommended that HRM staff review the successful Calgary responsible pet owner program.

Participants were generally satisfied that HRM staff could design and designate off leash areas without dog owner input. They also felt that HRM should close any off leash areas where dog owners weren't cleaning up after their pets. One group thought that volunteers should be responsible for off leash areas and suggested a user pay approach. The same group also thought that fenced off leash areas would be a simple way of controlling dogs and avoiding conflicts with other park users. Other groups suggested that fences weren't necessary and that a simple approach with minimal infrastructure was all that would be needed.

By-law enforcement and park cleanliness issues created lengthy discussions about the rights of all users to feel safe in a park environment and to enjoy recreational activities without dogs. Public education was seen as a way of helping lead dog owners to compliance with park rules rather than having to focus on enforcement. There were criticisms of park maintenance as well. Participants wanted more waste receptacles, waste bag dispensers, and more frequent emptying of the bins.

Environmental protection of waterways, flora and fauna was seen as being important. The natural beauty of parks needed to be preserved. Suggestions were also made to sensitively integrate signage to preserve the natural beauty of parks.

Discussion

The discussions and suggestions at this workshop were similar to those of all of the preceding six off leash workshops. Participants preferred an HRM- run approach that did not rely on volunteers. Low cost infrastructure with regular maintenance, good public education, clear signage, and vigorous by-law enforcement were seen as key components necessary for a successful off leash program. Calgary's off leash program was mentioned once again as a model for HRM to consider. Pending further HRM staff research, revisions to the HRM strategy could include more elements of this model.

The Toronto model (Appendix G: Toronto Dogs in Parks Strategy) presents a more municipal

government driven “top down” approach to design, development, maintenance, and enforcement than the Markham model. However, it does include similar requirements for the establishment of local dog owner groups (Leash Free Zone Teams) and a lengthy pilot program (6 months) and approval process based on clear performance measures that involves city staff, advisory committees, and local Councils. Revisions to the draft strategy could include more elements from the Toronto Dogs in Parks Strategy to reduce funding and site management demands on volunteer dog owner groups and support a more city-driven approach to funding, by-law enforcement, public education, and the development and maintenance of off leash areas.

Although there were many who suggested that a portion of dog licence fees could be dedicated to funding off leash areas, the revenues from dog licences are fully committed to animal services. Less than ten percent of HRM dog owners have licenced their dogs. Until more dogs are licenced it would be unrealistic for the Strategy to be revised to recommend this action.

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 2007/08 budget does not provide for the development of new off leash areas with extensive infrastructure. However, revisions to the Strategy could include low cost options for opening some additional off leash areas in existing parks without impacting the current budget.

The Strategy could also consider interim measures regarding off leash activities in HRM sports fields. Off season hours in local sportsfields could be extended to meet the immediate needs of dog owners.