

**Chebucto Community Council
Draft HRM Off Leash Parks Strategy Workshop
Halifax West High School
Monday, January 29, 2007
Workshop Report**

Over forty local residents took part in the workshop hosted by the Chebucto 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 focussed on one (two if time permitted) 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 present an overview of feedback concerning the strategy's six planning principles (Accessibility, Affordability, Balance, Cleanliness, Environmental and Cultural Sustainability, and Natural Beauty) provided during large group discussions and those noted by the workshop recorders during small group discussions.

Accessibility

- At this time there are not enough off leash parks in HRM to satisfy the demands of dog owners.
- It's reasonable that dog owners should have to drive to an off leash area but many people want parks and off leash trails close by, and within walking distance of their homes.

- Dogs need lots of room to exercise.
- Dog owners always need to have absolute control over their off leash pets.
- Parks less than two acres in size are not sufficient for off leash activities.
- HRM should assess all existing and proposed parks for their suitability for off leash activities.
- Parks should be designed so that dog owners accessing off leash areas won't experience conflicts with other park users.
- Dogs should be prohibited altogether from some parks.
- Some locations just aren't suitable for off leash activities such as parks and areas like linear trails that have joggers, bicyclists, and parents with strollers.
- Off leash activities in children's playgrounds, school grounds, and sport fields (during playing seasons) should be prohibited.
- Timing is important. Park use for off leash activities can be considered based on appropriate times for designated uses. Selected parks could have different schedules for off leash activities. Schedules for each park should be well advertised.
- There have been some off leash problems lately with parks such as Hemlock Ravine with narrow trails.
- People with disabilities need their service dogs to have a place to exercise. Special consideration should be given to service dogs and their owners.
- The Markham model requires dog owner groups to canvas neighbourhoods for support of their proposal for an off leash park before the park is approved by Community Council. This is not acceptable. HRM puts in sports fields and playgrounds in their parks without consulting with neighbouring property owners. Why should an off leash area be any different? HRM should just establish these areas.
- Staff should do more research on the Calgary off leash program. It has a 95% compliance rate for purchases of dog licences. They have over forty off leash parks, stiff fines, and one of the lowest rates of euthanising animals in North America. Calgary also funds this program with tax dollars.

Affordability

- Fencing is expensive but important. At some parks dogs need to be protected from other park users and traffic by fencing.
- Dog owners in HRM are taxpayers. Many of us don't have children but our taxes go to educating other people's children. Sports groups and parent organizations aren't expected to pay for sport fields and playgrounds. Why should we be expected to financially support off leash areas in HRM parks?
- The Markham volunteer-based off leash model mentioned in the strategy (Appendix B) is not acceptable. It places too much financial and organizational responsibility on volunteers.
- The Markham model sets up off leash parks with full infrastructure. The Town is one of Canada's wealthiest communities and shouldn't be compared to HRM where dog owners would be satisfied with minimal infrastructure.
- The Toronto model (Appendix G) with the municipality funding the off leash areas is a better approach than Markham's requirement that dog owner groups reimburse the municipality for capital costs.
- If off leash fees have to be paid then use some of the money from dog licence fees. Dog licence fees are presently just a tax grab by HRM. If dog owners knew part of their fees were going to pay for off leash areas they would be more likely to licence their dogs.
- If you need funding to set up these areas why not charge parking fees at parks like Point Pleasant?
- HRM should invest in new parks designed for off leash activities. All dog owners need is adequate parking, a safe, open area, posted rules, signage, and waste bins. These parks wouldn't require a lot of capital cost but HRM should ensure that waste bins are emptied frequently.

Balance

- HRM by-law officers are victimizing dog owners who let their dog off leash in parks not designated for off leash activities. Don't issue any more tickets until there are enough off leash areas in HRM.
- Education and awareness need to be more easily accessed. This includes a concern regarding the current low level of licensing of dogs.
- Balance the use of parks for non-dog owners.

- HRM should work with dog friendly tourist operators and vets to provide off leash information packages for visitors to HRM travelling with their dogs.
- HRM should also work with vets and volunteers from dog owner groups to educate the public.
- Professional dog walkers allowing several dogs off leash at a time are a concern. They can't control all the dogs they are responsible for.
- On leash and off leash areas should be clearly marked with signage.
- Off leash areas should be designated in selected areas of multi-use trails and beaches.
- Rules and seasonal hours of operation need to be consistent across all off leash parks.
- Rules should be clearly posted at all parks and well publicized.
- More use of signs and signage standards need to be adopted at all parks, in particular, off leash parks. San Francisco has developed humorous but highly effective signs.
- Public education and good communication by HRM is essential. Use the HRM website to advertise off leash area clean-ups. Set up a system on the HRM website for on-line complaints so that maintenance and enforcement issues could be quickly dealt with.
- Post the Park Patrol phone number at all off-leash areas.
- Vets, food stores, groomers, walker, kennels, breeders, and volunteers could also provide information to other dog owners about the availability of dog obedience classes, off leash areas, licensing, and circulate HRM-produced off leash parks and licensing information pamphlets.

Cleanliness

- Self-regulation by most dog owners is evident in HRM parks. Most dog owners ensure that their pet's waste is picked up and deposited in park waste bins.
- HRM is not providing enough park waste bins or adequate emptying of existing waste bins. Many parks and sport fields have bins overflowing with pet waste or no bins at all. Winter maintenance is almost nonexistent.
- HRM should move towards improved methods of disposing of dog waste, such as

composting, and should also investigate the availability/suitability of biodegradable bags.

- Volunteers shouldn't be expected to remind other dog owners to clean up after their pets. There's a risk that some dog owners could react aggressively to a volunteer.
- Annual performance evaluations of off leash parks is not a good idea and is unfair. It would only take a few bad incidents by a minority of dog owners to unfairly harm the evaluation. Closure for non-compliance penalizes responsible owners for the actions of a few. Allied with this issue is the general concern that the recommended best management practices seem to require dog users to enforce rules on others, creating the possibility of conflict. Enforcement should remain an HRM responsibility. Some informal "mentoring", i.e. peer pressure, will no doubt take place but true enforcement is not appropriate for citizen users.
- Best management practices includes a recommendation for four annual off leash area clean-ups by volunteer dog owner groups in their local parks. The strategy needs to clarify the term "clean-up" What is meant by clean-up? Is it only dog waste or would it include litter?
- HRM, not volunteers should take on the responsibility for enforcement and educating the public about "Stoop and Scoop" practices. The City of Ottawa program (Appendix F) is a good example.
- With regard to dog health recommendations for semi-annual deworming; a better proposal would be a requirement for a health certificate, showing that the dog is free of parasites (deworming is a means to the desired end, rather than the desired end itself)

Environmental and Cultural Sustainability

- HRM should identify environmentally sensitive areas in parks and trails. These areas are not recommended as off leash areas and should have signage. Dogs should be prohibited from these areas or required to be leashed.
- Dogs should be prohibited from park areas adjacent to residential wells, e.g. some sections of Hemlock Ravine Park.
- The planning principles of environmental and cultural sustainability and natural beauty are very similar and could be combined.

- There should be a realistic assessment of dog friendly areas such as not coexisting in areas with statuary and gardens that need monitoring.
- The need to develop integrated and adaptive park management approaches is critical.

Natural Beauty

- The strategy mentions conducting park visitor satisfaction surveys. This is not necessary.
- Minimize the need for administrative staff and bureaucrats.
- The HRM parks website should include opportunities for park visitors to post their comments and concerns.

General Comments

- The implementation schedule (24 months) and just one pilot off leash area in that time is not acceptable. Seaview Park has been in operation for a few years. Why not say that was your pilot program? Just find some suitable areas and set up off leash parks. They don't have to be expensive. Keep the design simple. We don't need highly maintained grass fields.
- The strategy needs to differentiate more clearly between off-leash dog "parks" and off-leash walking trails in parks. Some of the strategy applies mostly to the dog-park concept, rather than walking trails.

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. While it was suggested that some informal volunteer activities would be acceptable, participants generally felt that the strategy's recommended volunteer-based, "bottom up" approach to the selection, development and management of off leash areas would be too time consuming and costly for dog owners.

They suggested that it was unfair to single out dog owners for the full cost recovery of off leash areas. They believed their tax dollars should be spent for this service and that it was HRM's responsibility, not theirs, to establish and implement a comprehensive program for off leash areas in parks. Alternatively, if some form of cost recovery was necessary to fund off leash areas it was also suggested that a portion of dog licence fees be dedicated to capital and maintenance costs. Participants emphasized that off leash areas should be designed to keep costs low. They did not want or need off leash areas that required large investments for site improvements or maintenance. The 24 month time frame for strategy implementation with only one pilot park designated during that time was also criticized. Participants suggested HRM should abandon this approach and proceed immediately to the selection and operation of several new off leash areas.

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.

Several participants also suggested a moratorium on by-law enforcement until more off leash parks were developed.

Discussion

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. 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.

The issue of providing off leash areas for service dogs requires special consideration. These dogs are specially trained and interactions with other dogs in off leash areas may not be beneficial to service dogs or their owners. Further consultations with service dog owners will be necessary in order to meet their needs.

It would not be possible to suspend by-law enforcement through a moratorium but 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 sport 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.