

**Peninsula Community Council
Draft HRM Off Leash Parks Strategy Workshop
The Tower, St Mary's University
Saturday, February 3 2007
Workshop Report**

Sixty local residents took part in the workshop hosted by the Peninsula 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 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

- Reconfigure the Commons for off leash areas by reducing the number of ball diamonds. Investigate whether an off leash area could be fenced to separate it from nearby sports fields.
- HRM should consider purchasing the former Legion property at the intersection of

Cogswell, Rainnie, and North Park and designating it for off leash activities.

- Provide more green spaces as well as off leash areas downtown. Increased condominium construction in the core has meant that there are, and will continue to be, increasing numbers of condominium owners with dogs.
- The Toronto model (Appendix D) is good in that it provides a certain number of full and part time off leash parks. Only one of the 31 Toronto off leash parks is fenced.
- Currently not all our parks are accessible, i.e. Long Lake Provincial Park has boulders that obstruct wheelchair users while York Redoubt's trails have restricted access so people with mobility problems cannot use this area.
NOTE: The Draft HRM Off Leash Parks Strategy only deals with municipal parks. The parks mentioned in this comment are not municipal parks.
- Designs should include all users needs. Off leash areas should be designed for direct access by dog owners and their dogs and should avoid other public areas and playgrounds. Where possible new parks should include designs for off leash areas.
- Consider fencing off playgrounds and picnic areas instead of off leash areas. Parents and children would be in an area protected from dogs.
- The suggested best management practice (BMP) that HRM adopt design criteria for off leash areas has to be specific to HRM's existing parks. We have to be able to work with what we have now.
- Develop 24/7 off leash schedules for some city parks. Consider having lighting for night time off leash parks.
- Extend the current availability period (hours and seasons) for sports fields and park areas by designating locations such as Needham, the Commons, Gorsebrook, Conrose, and the Dingle for off leash activities.
- If no sporting activities are scheduled on a field then dog owners should be able to use it for off leash activities.
- If a park is to be re-designated as an off leash area HRM should post a sign to notify the public of the affected area and invite residents to send HRM their comments.
- The suggested 400 foot buffer between residential properties and off leash park areas won't work in many of our parks. There's not enough space for this to work.
- The suggested best management practice (BMP) that HRM create a pilot program to

survey the costs, and social and environmental impacts of an off leash area is not necessary. We don't need only one, 1 or 2 year pilot program to see how off leash areas work. We already have them. Don't change the current status quo in order to do a study.

- If a pilot study approach is approved then there should be four or five locations situated across HRM.
- HRM should recognize the benefits of off leash areas. A well exercised and socialized dog is a happy dog and good HRM citizen.
- There are also excellent health benefits for dog owners who get regular exercise by walking their dogs.
- The suggested best management practice (BMP) for city-wide and/or local off leash advisory groups is a good idea. The suggested terms of reference for these groups is OK.
- Advisory groups should not be expect to “police” people. Their role should be to organize clean-ups and similar activities.
- Our interest is in shared use by all park users, not exclusive parks for dogs.
- The suggested best management practice (BMP) to establish clear off leash area rules and regulations is to be expected but most rules are just common sense and should be self-policing, e.g. picking up after pets, avoiding organized sporting events, and not permitting dogs that display aggressive behaviour. The rules and penalties for non-compliance should be easily available from the HRM website and information packages should be supplied to vet offices.
- Signage should also utilize the principles of universal design. Park signs should clearly explain the rules for ALL activities including rules concerning dogs.
- The rules from other municipalities prohibit dogs less that 4 months old from off leash areas. Puppies need to have access to off leash areas to learn socialization skills. HRM should allow puppies in off leash areas and post notices saying it is not liable for the safety of dogs under 4 months old.
- If it is necessary, the suggested best management practice (BMP) to establish one first year pilot program is OK.
- The strategy's Accessibility principle should stress that as far as possible the needs of dog owners will be satisfied in all areas of HRM. The idea of universal design also needs to be better explained.

- There may be also be some park areas suitable for off leash activities that wouldn't be suitable for other park uses.
- HRM should ensure off leash areas will be developed BOTH in existing and new parks. This should include BOTH large tracts of land with trails systems and smaller city parks such as ballfields.

Affordability

- HRM should crack down on dog owners who haven't paid for dog licences and use the fees to fund any additional infrastructure or maintenance needs for off leash areas. Also use Dog By-law fines to pay for off leash areas.
- Calgary has 95% compliance on the purchase of dog licences. They also have over forty off leash parks, huge fines, and one of the lowest rates of euthanising animals in North America. Why don't you follow that model?
- Possibly increase licence fees to pay for off leash areas. Dedicate the increase (\$10 or higher) to off leash areas.
- Launch a campaign to increase compliance. Go door to door selling licences. Sell licences at parks. Show the value of having a licence and more people will buy them.
- People would be convinced of the value of a dog licence if licenced dogs found roaming were returned home instead of being taken to the HRM animal shelter.
- When dog owners purchase licences they should receive an information package about off leash park locations, rules, etc.
- HRM should sell park day passes online for tourists travelling with their dogs. HRM could also work out purchase agreements with local dog friendly hotels. The hotels could provide complementary day passes for their guests.
- Allow use of off leash parks to only those owners who have licenced their dogs and fine those who haven't.
- Review the rules to ensure that dog owners can afford them. If HRM requires that dogs in parks be free of parasites and communicable diseases then vet fees could cost a lot of money for dog owners to ensure compliance. Realistically look at what does, and does not need to be municipally regulated.
- Increase the licence fee for unaltered dogs.

- Educate the public. Reach the public through vets, breeders, pet stores, SPCA, newspaper ads, website notices and e-mail.
- Establish a grace period for licencing with a clear deadline for compliance. After that, issue fines.
- Less is more! Off leash areas in parks don't need a lot of infrastructure, organization and investment. Keep it simple and rely on self policing by dog owners.
- Get the federal and provincial governments involved with funding off leash areas in their parks.
- Volunteers dog owner groups could host fundraising events that could include dog parades. How about Council designating a Halifax Dog Day to celebrate dogs in our community and educate the public about the benefits of dogs and dog ownership?
- Draft a mission statement for the strategy on the importance of dogs to HRM and their contributions to our community.
- Halifax is full of spaces suitable for off leash activities as is. I'm confused as to what the "costs" of off leash areas are. Just choose the site and post a sign.
- The Survey of Off Leash Practices in 15 Ontario Municipalities (Appendix H) shows how other municipalities fund off leash areas. Most of the cities in the survey fund off leash areas through municipal taxes and/or a portion of dog licence fees. HRM should do the same.
- Fencing areas isn't the answer. Other cities have successful off leash areas without having them fenced.
- Fenced off leash areas will detract from the aesthetics of HRM parks. How would they fit in with the objectives of the HRM Urban Design study?
- There's no need for any fenced area if owners have trained their dogs and have control over them.
- The suggested best management practice (BMP) that Dog Owner Groups should have liability insurance is ridiculous. Individual dog owners are already covered for liability through their home insurance. No! Group liability insurance will lead to litigation.
- The BMP suggesting that dog owner groups agree to full repayment of capital cost associated with off leash area infrastructure and development cost is unacceptable. Dog owners are already paying taxes.

- BMPs requiring dog owner groups to form non profit associations, purchase liability insurance, sign MOUs, and repay capital costs should be the same as HRM already has with other community sport and playground groups. Cost share, co-insurance, maintenance and cost recovery agreements between HRM and dog owner groups should also be the same.
- Are softball teams paying all capital costs of the Commons fields? Are schools paying all capital costs of sports fields? Are walkers paying capital costs of Point Pleasant Park?
- There are benefits to volunteer groups. Having informal dog owner groups for some types of parks is OK. Formal non profit dog owner groups, MOUs with HRM for each off leash area, capital cost recovery, etc. is not acceptable to dog owners.
- Volunteer dog owner groups could cooperate with HRM with fundraising activities for some of the up front site development and infrastructure costs. HRM could issue tax receipts for charitable donations.
- Don't establish a compliance process. It could be biased against dog owners and a waste of money.
- Volunteer groups can help with some items but HRM should clean out waste receptacles and perform all other maintenance functions regularly.
- HRM doesn't need to provide bags for dog waste but could install boxes for users to donate clean bags for those dog owners who have forgotten to bring them to the park.

Balance

- All public spaces should be available to humans and dogs that are under effective control.
- Time of day or seasonal restrictions, or outright bans for off leash activities are acceptable.
- HRM should adopt an overall policy for off leash areas rather than relying on user groups.
- It would be highly unlikely that a majority of park neighbours within a specified distance of a park would approve an application for an off leash area.
- Neighbouring landowners should be informed but not be asked for their permission to have an off leash area in a local park.
- Simplify the rules and enforce them.

- No to mandatory user groups needed to maintain an off leash area in a park.
- Yes to volunteer user groups to provide feedback and yes to individuals to provide their feedback on off leash areas.
- If we develop new parks off leash areas should be considered as important. It is also necessary to educate the public at the same time.
- The strategy should look at other models such as Calgary and it should also consider wildlife values and more research about waste disposal options.
- Park plans should consider environmental impacts and environmental inventories should be compiled.
- HRM, not dog owner groups, should be responsible for notifying the public about a local park being considered for an off leash designation.
- Volunteers (not just dog owner groups) should help with scheduled park clean-ups.

Cleanliness

- Since HRM is responsible for maintaining and cleaning off leash areas they shouldn't be closed for user non-compliance.
- This is not just a dog waste issue. Off leash areas should be free of all waste and rubbish including dog waste.
- The idea of formal and mandatory dog owner groups will not work. It's better to consult with willing volunteers.
- HRM should investigate biodegradable bags and methane conversion options.
- HRM should provide biodegradable bags as many other cities do.
- HRM should research composting possibilities.
- HRM doesn't provide enough receptacles period! All types of garbage cans are needed at all major intersections in parks.
- HRM should balance public education and enforcement to keep sites clean.

- Yes, yes, yes! HRM should schedule regular site surveillance and enforcement.
- The BMPs suggest dog owner groups conduct regular site clean-ups and ongoing public education. Neither of these suggestions should be mandatory.
- One BMP suggests that dogs should be dewormed twice a year in order to use off leash areas. No! HRM should monitor fecal samples at parks to see if there is a problem with parasites.
- The idea of requiring deworming is excellent but who will enforce it when even licencing isn't being policed?

Environmental and Cultural Sustainability

- Ecosystem management of all HRM parks should already be a standard feature of every park evaluation. If this is so then dog access should be a non issue. It's just another park use feature to be evaluated.
- Adaptive management approaches should consider that off leash uses are being focussed on Point Pleasant Park. With more off leash areas spread across HRM the environmental and cultural impacts will be lessened.
- HRM should evaluate the regional requirements for off leash areas and determine the appropriate distribution of parks necessary to meet this need.
- The City of Montreal provides biodegradable bags and has a dog waste management strategy.
- If Point Pleasant Park is to be closed to off leash activities for a special event then notify dog owners in advance. Have notices posted throughout the park, not just at the main entrance.
- Adaptive management strategies should involve public consultation. Most people are compliant. Peer pressure is effective.
- Enforcement is a part of an adaptive management strategy. It will also produce revenue for funding adaptive management. If enforcement is to be effective it must be visible.
- Imposing rules and obligations on responsible dog owners will not eliminate the need to deal with those people who always break the rules. That can only be accomplished

through enforcement by HRM.

Natural Beauty

- The strategy should not require dog owner groups to conduct park visitor satisfaction surveys.
- Off leash advisory groups should not be responsible for establishing clear pass/fail guidelines for annual park inspections.
- The HRM parks website should include opportunities for park visitors to post their comments and concerns.
- Off leash advisory committees should not make recommendations to Community Councils regarding off leash park closures. Community Councils should make all decisions regarding park closures.

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.

Participants were concerned that while the population of peninsular Halifax was growing, opportunities for off leash areas were still confined to sports fields (limited hours during the off season) and only two parks (Point Pleasant and Seaview). They called for an immediate expansion of the program to other parks on the peninsula and other communities in HRM. Participants were not satisfied with the strategy's recommended volunteer-based, "bottom up" approach to the selection, development and management of off leash areas.

The group expressed interest in pursuing informal volunteer activities and some thought that local and city-wide off leash advisory would be acceptable but participants generally felt that the Markham model (Appendix B) would not work in HRM. The strategy's recommendations for formal non profit dog owner groups, liability insurance, and full cost recovery on capital improvements were all rejected. Some groups suggested that there was an opportunity for a compromise that would demonstrate that dog owners were not being singled out for unfair treatment. Dog owner groups and HRM could develop agreements similar to existing arrangements between HRM and sports and recreation associations.

Many participant also pointed out that as taxpayers they had a right to expect that their tax dollars should be spent to ensure that an adequate number of off leash parks was developed.

Several groups suggested that the fees for dog licences be increased to finance off leash park development. They realized that most dog owners in HRM didn't licence their dogs but felt that if licences were shown to have some real value (park access, recovery of stray pets, etc.) that more people would purchase them. Many participants recommended that HRM staff review the successful Calgary dog licencing program (95% compliancy, hefty fines, low euthanasiation rate, and 40 off leash areas). The emerging consensus of the group was that HRM should launch a campaign for compliance; establish a grace period; advertise a deadline; and then "crack down" on offenders.

Some groups thought that enforcement was not the only option. They felt that HRM sponsored public education about the benefits, rules, and responsibilities associated with off leash areas would be a critical element in the success of the strategy. Partnerships with vets, breeders, pet stores, and dog owners should be key facets of the approach. Some suggested that dog owner groups could sponsor Halifax Dog Days to celebrate the role of dogs in society while also educating the public. Others came up with innovative approaches to providing park day passes to tourists travelling with their dogs.

A few individuals wondered why the strategy was so complicated. They thought HRM should just post signs and open up more off leash areas. Others pointed out that HRM needed to keep designs for off leash areas simple and costs low. Extensive and costly fencing for off leash areas was not necessary and would harm the beauty of HRM parks. The need to consult with off leash park neighbours was also discussed. While participants agreed that local residents should be informed about new designations of off leash areas in their local parks they felt that HRM should not seek their approval.

The 24 month time frame for strategy implementation with only one pilot park designated during that time was both supported and criticized. While some participants were willing to accept the time frame, others suggested HRM should abandon this approach and proceed immediately to the selection and operation of several new off leash areas throughout the municipality. Participants also noted that the potential overuse of Point Pleasant Park for off leash activities would be mitigated if there were more choices of off leash areas in other parts of HRM.

The need for clear, fair, and economically sustainable rules, leash only restrictions, or the prohibition of dogs for the protection of environmentally and culturally sensitive features was accepted by the group. The need to ensure the safety and enjoyment of all park users was also endorsed. The strategy's cleanliness principle was supported. Participants wanted more emphasis on self regulation by dog owners but also advocated for strict enforcement in off leash areas where there was evidence of chronic non-compliance. While participants wanted HRM to research more innovative methods of dealing with dog waste they were adamant that HRM provide more waste receptacles in parks and that more frequent maintenance (especially during winter months) was necessary to ensure cleanliness.

Discussion

Based on the comments of workshop participants, Calgary's off leash program appears to be highly successful. The combination of a progressive licencing system, numerous off leash parks, an extensive public education effort, excellent maintenance, and strict by-law enforcement was seen as a good example for HRM to follow. 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.

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.