

**Western Region Community Council
Draft HRM Off Leash Parks Strategy Workshop
St. Margaret's Centre, Tantallon
Saturday, January 27, 2007
Workshop Report**

Thirteen local residents took part in the workshop hosted by the Western Region Community Council. The majority of the workshop participants were dog owners. Several participants were interested in commenting on off leash activities at local provincial parks and provincial trails. These areas are not covered by municipal jurisdiction. Participants were therefore asked to focus their comments on HRM-owned parks. Participants formed two discussion groups and reviewed 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 the groups presented their findings.

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 first four of 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

- 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.

- The strategy presents a 24 month implementation schedule for the development of only one pilot off leash area. HRM should shorten this timeline and develop more off leash areas.
- The strategy principle based on accessibility calls for multi-use parks and universal design, which means that they are useful to and useable by everyone using a park. That could mean that off leash areas will be too expensive to develop.
- On no account should dogs be permitted off leash in HRM parks. Off leash areas pose great risks to all other park users, dog owners, and their dogs. Dog owners have unrestricted access to thousands of acres of Crown land in HRM. They should stay away from parks and use those areas instead to exercise their dogs off leash.
- Dedicated off leash parks should have specific times posted, rules posted, good signage and fencing as required.
- Dogs need large areas to exercise and socialize and receive training.
- Service dogs need special consideration in this strategy.
- The strategy should permit tourists with dogs to visit HRM parks.
- In new park designs HRM should provide restricted areas solely dedicated to off leash activities.

Affordability

- Low income dog owners could be excluded from off leash areas if they are expected to pay extra costs associated with an off leash park.
- The high cost of spaying and neutering is also a concern. How can we work to reduce these costs for low income dog owners?
- HRM should make a financial commitment to building and maintaining off leash parks.
- Keep costs down for dedicated off leash parks. They don't have to be fancy. Just provide them in a convenient location with adequate parking, waste bins, water, shade and shelter.
- Fundraising for the development of off leash areas by volunteer dog owner groups is an issue. Dog owners are tax payer too. It's a lot of money for dog owners to help pay for building and maintaining off leash parks. Dog owners could pay part of the cost through membership fees for these parks.

- HRM should also consider using part of dog licence fees to help pay for off leash areas.
- Consider having dog breeders charge an additional fee to new pet owners that would be dedicated to funding off leash parks.
- Also consider the buying power of dog owners and approach companies like Purina for sponsorships for low income dog owners, service dog owners, and capital costs for fencing.

Balance

- Why not establish one or two new parks for dogs only? It would prevent a lot of problems from developing multi-use parks where there could be conflicts between dog owners and people who don't want dogs in parks.
- City-wide and/or local off leash area advisory groups could work. Volunteer dog owner groups need to have a clearer role in this process. Their responsibilities need to be explained better in the strategy.
- It's a priority that each park should have an environmental and social impact study completed before an off leash park is developed.
- HRM should take responsibility for better communication and public education.
- Provide separate off leash areas for big and small dogs to prevent attacks on, and injuries to, small dogs.

Cleanliness

- Ensuring that off leash areas are clean and free of dog waste will be difficult. Public education is vital.
- People need to know that picking up after a pet is all that can be done. There's always an area on the ground that won't be clean even if a pet owner picks up their pet's waste.
- Dogs that haven't been de-wormed or inoculated for contagious diseases are a hazard to the health of well-cared for dogs. HRM should work to educate the public about these risks.
- Dogs shouldn't be de-wormed without testing them first. It's the testing that is the most important. The medication can be harmful. Especially when it's not needed.

- The Healthy Dog Strategy (Appendix J) is a good idea but all the vet bills would be expensive. It would also be hard to enforce and place too much responsibility on volunteers.

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. Many indicated that they would follow up with a complete review of the document and then, if possible, forward more detailed comments to HRM staff.

One participant was adamant that HRM should not develop off leash parks. Based on his professional experience as a dog breeder and trainer he considered it a foolhardy risk to expose the public and dogs to unleashed activities in enclosed areas. While the remainder of the group respected his opinions they felt that the strategy had been well researched and presented a rational compromise to the needs of dog owners and other park users.

Although the group could see opportunities for mixed use parks they favoured an additional approach to segregated off leash parks that they believed would prevent dog owner/non-dog owner conflicts from occurring. They also saw a role for volunteer groups to provide stewardship and peer education. A suggestion for one or two centrally located parks dedicated solely to off leash activities was agreed to by the majority of the participants. The parks could be designed for low cost, minimal infrastructure, and low maintenance costs. There was a willingness to pay part of the costs through membership fees but most felt, that as HRM taxpayers, they also had a right to expect HRM funding for any off leash parks. Alternatively, if additional forms of cost recovery were necessary to fund off leash areas, it was also suggested that a portion of dog licence fees be dedicated to capital and maintenance costs. The 24 month time frame for strategy implementation with only one pilot park designated during that time was also criticized. Participants suggested HRM should shorten the suggested timeline and immediately establish 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.

Discussion

The current strategy focusses on providing equal opportunities for all HRM citizens to use its public park system. It does not provide for parks dedicated solely to off leash activities. It could

also be difficult to find suitable sites near urban areas in HRM. Also, costs associated with land acquisition would likely be prohibitive. Participants suggested that other cities such as Calgary have been able to provide similar types of dedicated off leash parks at minimal cost but the grassland terrain of Calgary is very different from the rocky and mixed forest terrain of HRM. Site preparation costs could therefore be higher. Regardless of a park design based on minimal infrastructure, it is likely that membership fees for exclusive off leash parks would be substantial in order to offset costs but it is possible that HRM could partner with a private operator to provide this service. It would be difficult to justify the expenditure of municipal taxes on an exclusive off leash park unless it could be shown to significantly reduce off leash demands on existing parks. The willingness of volunteer dog owner groups to provide stewardship and peer education could also be seen as a rationale for municipal support.

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 in municipal parks.

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.

Staff could consider amending the strategy to include opportunities for the development of single use off leash parks. Staff could also consider conducting preliminary research regarding suitable locations, associated costs, and public private partnership opportunities.

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.

park properties.