

September 6, 2023

Infrastructure and Environment Committee  
City Hall, Committee Room 1  
100 Queen Street West  
Toronto ON M5H 2N2

Dear Chair and Council Members,

**RE: Citywide Approach to Dogs Off-Leash Areas**

Many residents within my ward and across the City have expressed frustration with how the City handles the creation and revitalization of Dog Off-Leash Areas.

Today, we have more people and more dogs living closer together in smaller residences, sharing the same parkland. We need to bring harmony to our parks by creating safe, enjoyable spaces for people with and without dogs.

Toronto has an estimated 300,000 dogs and counting. Toronto's high-rise communities have an estimated 4-8 pets per floor. Adults aged 25-40 now have more dogs than children. Plus, the added number of 'Pandemic Puppies' will bring our already strained infrastructure to a tipping point.

The pandemic has shown how much Torontonians need and value outdoor experiences. Dog owners use parks every day – sometimes multiple times a day – all year long, in all weather. We must plan for the new normal.

More and more municipalities across North America are recognizing off-leash areas as necessary places for people to enjoy legitimate recreation, in the same way that designated spaces are required for other forms of recreation, such as tennis, baseball and so on.

Toronto is a big-city leader in the provision of 75 off-leash areas, including in and around downtown. Yet Toronto's off-leash areas were not planned as a network and are not distributed based on population. Entire wards have no off-leash areas. Properly located off-leash areas are required to facilitate responsible by-law compliance.

Much has been learned through the Citywide Study of Toronto's Existing Off-Leash Areas completed in 2021. The design of new off-leash areas has improved significantly in recent years. However, some challenges persist when seeking to introduce new off-leash areas in dense urban environments. A clear, transparent, and evidence-based approach is needed to guide decision making and facilitate effective designs that balance a variety of park uses in these environments. Further, many existing off-leash areas

are in need of repairs and improvements that reflect current best practices for surfacing, shade, trees, seating, and other design features.

The City's 2010 Off-Leash Policy is brief and no longer sufficient for the needs of our growing city. It contains limited design guidelines and places a limited focus on proactive identification of locations for future off-leash areas. Smaller municipalities with fewer challenges have developed far more comprehensive and effective Off-Leash Area Master Plans and Strategies. Toronto's park users deserve the same level of diligence.

Developing an evidence-based, best practice approach to Off-Leash Areas and integrating this approach within the PFR Facilities Master Plan is the only way to address all ongoing issues once and for all.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

It is recommended that:

1. City Council direct the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to review and update the City's approach to planning, locating, funding, building and maintaining Dogs Off-Leash Areas based on recognized best practices and integrated with the Parks, Forestry and Recreation Facilities Master Plan which includes, but is not limited to:
  - a. International best practices for design, signage, rules, accessibility, shade, shelter, surface materials, fencing and amenities;
  - b. Process to proactively identify and fund new off-leash areas where most needed, reflective of population distribution and development, in balance with other park functions and uses;
  - c. Process to identify and fund priority repairs and improvements to existing off-leash areas;
  - d. Includes accommodations for all types and sizes of Dog Off-Leash Areas including those in urban settings with limited parkland available; and
  - e. Potential opportunities for volunteers to steward these areas and ambassador programs to promote responsible dog area use and promote responsible dog ownership; and
  - f. Review of and updates to the Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan and Dog Off-Leash Area Policy as needed.
2. City Council direct the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to include a comprehensive review of other jurisdictions' Off-Leash Area plans, strategies and approaches, and ambassador/stewardship programs including but not limited to Vancouver, Surrey, Edmonton, Calgary, and Winnipeg as part of the development of an evidence-based, best practice approach to Dogs Off-Leash Areas for Toronto.
3. City Council direct the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation to report back with the recommended new approach to Dogs Off-Leash Areas resulting from recommendation 1 above, including required funding to implement, to the Committee by the third quarter of 2024.

4. City Council direct the General Manager, Parks, Forestry and Recreation and the Executive Director, Municipal Licensing, and Standards, to ensure the approach to Dogs Off-Leash Areas includes by-law enforcement strategies to address the ongoing concerns of all park users.

Respectfully submitted,

Chris Moise  
City Councillor  
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