

## Item IE6.8 - Citywide Approach to Dogs Off-Leash Areas

Submitted by Friends of Sherwood Park

September 18, 2023

Dear Members of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee,

**Friends of Sherwood Park welcomes** Councillor Moise's recommendation for a city-wide Approach to Dogs Off-Leash Areas. Here are four issues in our park that could be addressed by a comprehensive, city-wide plan.

### Issue #1 Need for Long Term Planning to Meet Increasing Demand

Last year, 210,000 people visited Sherwood Park and its connecting park Alexander Muir, up from 19,000 in 2018. **That represents a 1000% increase in park visitors in 4 years.**<sup>1</sup> More than half of those visitors are coming with dogs.<sup>2</sup> **Sherwood Park has one of only two off-leash trails in the city.** Dog owners prefer nature trails to a pen-style dog park. As one commercial dog walker put it "The trails provides more stimulating exercise for her dogs and results in less aggressive and harmful behavior between dogs."<sup>2</sup> Dog owners and walkers are coming in greater numbers from other parts of the city.<sup>1</sup> Add in the thousands who will be moving into one of the many condo towers in Yonge/Eglinton area and along the Metrolink LRT that are currently up for approval.

Councillor Moise's is calling on Parks **"to proactively identify and fund new off-leash areas where most needs, reflective of population distribution and development."** Additional off-leash dog parks in neighbouring low impact areas would reduce the pressure on Sherwood Park.

### ISSUE #2 Ecological Degradation Due to Inadequate Fencing & Surface Materials, Patchwork Repair

The off-leash trails run through an old growth forest and a tributary stream, an 'Environmental Significant Area' (ESA). Post-and-wire fencing was installed in 2004 to protect the ESA but it has been relatively easy for people to roll back the wire to allow off-leash dogs into the forest. Today, there are large gaps in the fencing, some years old, even though \$250,000 has been spent on upkeep and repairs since the fencing was installed.<sup>3</sup> The broken wire poses a risk to the dogs and once inside the ESA, dogs run through forest to find a way back out. **According to TRCA latest report, trampling in the forest is 'high to extreme', soil compaction and exposed tree roots is threatening some of our largest trees and pose a liability risk for trail walkers.** There is little regeneration in the understory. Over half of the native plant species present in 1974 have disappeared.<sup>4</sup>

Councillor Moises is recommending **"an approach based on International best practices for design, signage, rules, accessibility, shade, shelter, surface materials, fencing and amenities"** and a process **"to identify and fund priority repairs and improvements to existing off-leash areas"**. Sturdier fencing, trail surface material, and tree protection zones could be applied here. There are no capital projects in the current budget cycle.<sup>3</sup> *Friends of Sherwood Park would be interested in meeting with the Parks Development Unit to explore funding options.*

### ISSUE #3 Confusion & Safety on Multi-Use Trail

The off-leash trails are also part of the 'Heritage Trail' system and used by recreational walkers and 'thru' hikers. At peak hours, or anytime two commercial dog walkers and 12 dogs converge with walkers on the trail, things come up. There is no signage stating that the Off-Leash Trail is a Multi-Use Trail, no messaging to "Yield" or "Share With Others". So it is understandable, or at the very least defensible, that dog walkers feel they have a right of way in an Off-leash Area. One 80-year-old visitor told us "He doesn't feel safe on the forest trail with so many off-leash dogs". Families with young children are in a similar predicament.

The location and design of Off-Leash Areas would be **"in balance with other park functions and uses"**. We believe that equitable access and public safety in Sherwood Park's off-leash trails CAN be achieved. It is our hope that City staff with expertise in trail design and protocols can work with us to find solutions.

### ISSUE #4 - Absence of Meaningful By-Law Enforcement

**Over 90% of 311 calls received for Sherwood Park between 2012-2022 related to incidents involving dogs.**<sup>5</sup> A total of 84 tickets were issued, 47 of them in 2018 after two children were attacked by an off-leash dog. The remaining 37 tickets were issued over the remaining 9 years, for **an average of 4 tickets a year**. The absence of meaningful by-law enforcement is also a concern of the TRCA who identified serious erosion along Burke Brook which has been caused or hastened by dogs running in and out of the stream.<sup>3</sup>

Councillor Moise is calling on the General Manager of PRF and the Executive Director, MLS to consider **"by-law enforcement strategies to address the ongoing concerns of all park users"** AND for a community-led solution: **"potential opportunities for volunteers to steward off-leash areas and ambassador programs to promote responsible dog area use and promote responsible dog ownership."** Friends of Sherwood Park would welcome collaborating with the city and the **Toronto Dog Park Community** and **Paws for Parks** to run a pilot.

Friends of Sherwood Park cares deeply about the long-term health of our park, and like you, we want the best for our community. Councillor Moise's recommendation couldn't come at a better time.

Sincerely,

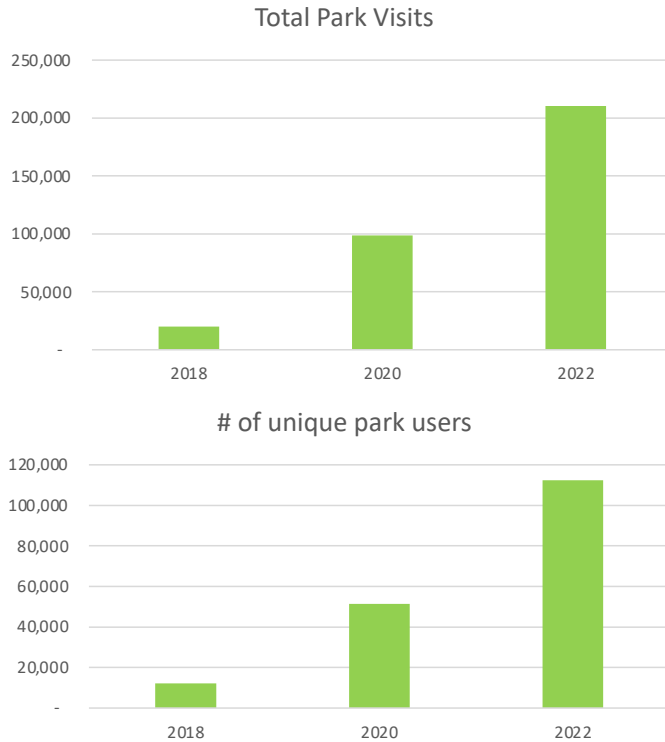
Janet Young  
Convenor  
On behalf of Friends of Sherwood Park  
<https://www.instagram.com/friendsofsherwoodpk/>

- 1 Geomedia Inc., Mobile ID Data, Spring 2023
- 2 Friends of Sherwood Park Survey, 250 surveys conducted, Summer 2023
- 3 Parks Capital Group, Spring 2023
- 4 TRCA Biological Inventory Report, January 2022
- 5 Freedom for Information Request, November 2021

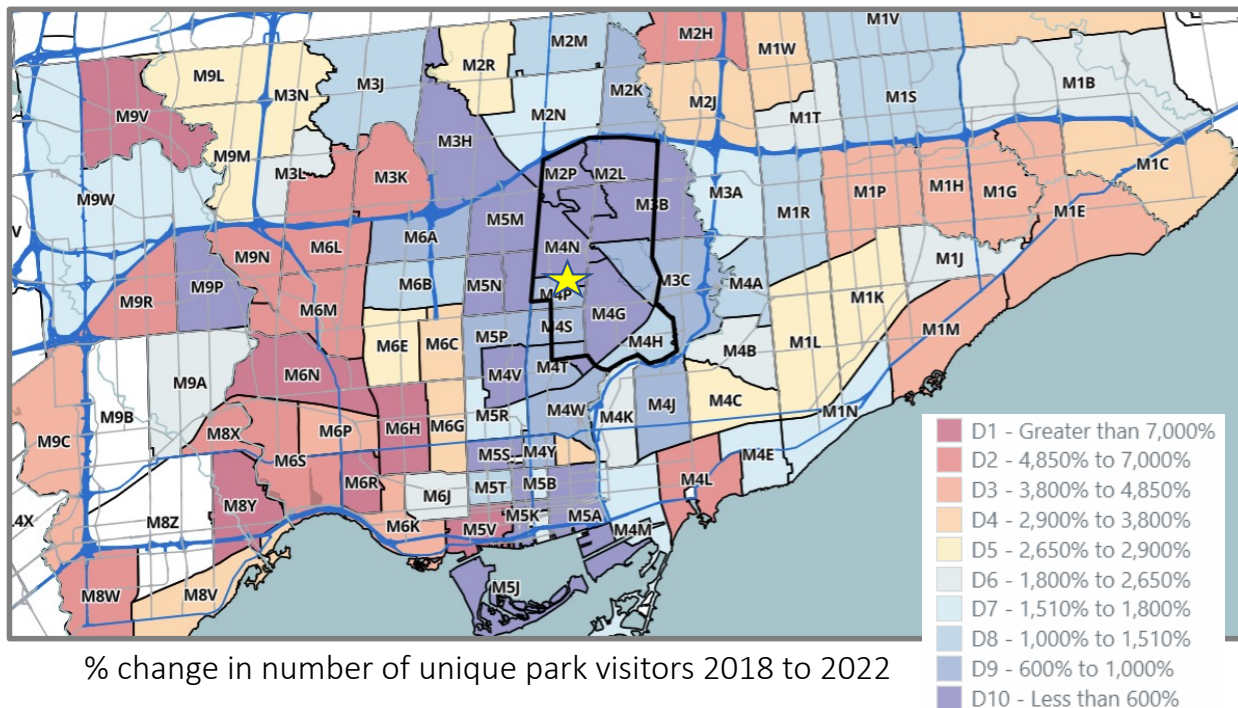
# Mobile ID Data, Geomeia Inc

## Sherwood Park & Alexander Muir Park - Change in park usage 2018-2022

Combined, total park visits rose from **19K in 2018** to **210K in 2022**



WHERE park users are coming from has also changed



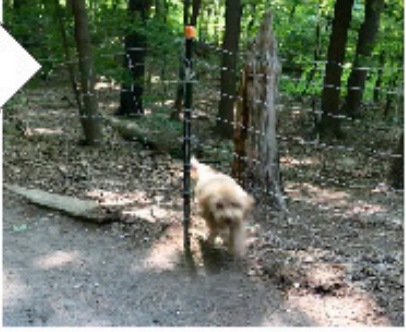
Using mobile ID data, we can track the number of individual users of the parks

**ISSUE #2 Ecological Degradation on Off-Leash Trails and in the ESA.**



# ISSUE #2 Downed fencing that hasn't repaired in two years.

May 25,  
2021



April 1,  
2023



Large trees at risk



Erosion along Burk Brook

