



September 19, 2023

To the members of the Infrastructure and Environment Committee,

**Submission by Paws for Parks - Item IE6.8 - Citywide Approach to Dogs Off-Leash Areas**

Paws for Parks (“PFP”) is a community-based volunteer organization that promotes environmental protection and sharing of our public parks through responsible pet-walking practices. Formed in 2022 in response to an increasing number of off-leash dogs in on-leash areas in High Park, PFP has been working with City of Toronto By-Law and Toronto Animal Services on community outreach and education regarding the importance of keeping pets leashed outside of designated off-leash areas.

PFP is in support of Councillor Moise’s Agenda Item IE6.8 to create a citywide approach to Toronto’s dogs off-leash areas. We feel that better located, designed and maintained off-leash areas may help to reduce some of the off-leash violations we are seeing in our public parks and schoolyards. The City of Toronto is in need of a People, Parks and Dogs strategy that balances the interests of dog owners and non-dog-owners alike, with the goal of providing inviting spaces for the recreational use of people and their pets while also protecting our natural environment.

This plan must be crafted with meaningful consultation with all interested City of Toronto residents, including environmentalists, dog owners, walkers and trainers, and people who may not love dogs.

Some of the items that we advocate for this plan to include would be:

1. Environmental Protection

The City must follow all of its own as well as federal and provincial laws, rules and guidelines regarding the protection of the natural environment, in particular as it pertains to those areas designated as Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs) or as Areas of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSIs). We refer to you ProtectNatureTO’s submission with respect to Sir Winston Churchill Park and the Nordheimer Ravine<sup>1</sup> which outlines how dogs may impact the natural

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.protectnatureto.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Nordheimer-Ravine-PNTO.pdf>

environment and how balancing interests should not result in the failure to protect our natural heritage.

## 2. Meaningful Enforcement

By-Law officers do not have the ability to require the production of identification which they need to issue tickets and fines. This results in a situation where those violating off-leash by-laws simply ignore by-law officers and walk away with very few tickets issued. Last year, nearly 6,000 complaints about off-leash dogs were registered with the city and only 50 tickets were issued<sup>2</sup>. As there are no consequences for failure to abide by our by-laws, the law-breaking environment flourishes, encouraging more people to engage in the behaviour as it becomes the “norm”. We recommend that as part of the strategy, Toronto By-Law Officers be given Special Constable status which would allow them to require the production of identification and therefore issue tickets and meaningfully enforce our by-laws (and not just those pertaining to off-leash dogs).

## 3. On-the-ground Monitoring and Community Involvement

In busy destination parks and/or parks with environmentally protected status, having a park warden on regular duty to remind park goers of the on-leash rules may be necessary at least until the social “norm” of leashing dogs is re-established.

In some jurisdictions (ex. Calgary), park ambassadors selected from the community fill the role of educating off-leash area users regarding the rules set for off-leash areas. These volunteers act as positive role models, promoting responsible pet ownership, positive pet interaction and safety in off-leash parks. They also provide an avenue for citizens to share their concerns with City staff and can promote City services such as pet licensing and low cost spay/neuter programs. The City of Toronto should investigate this approach and, if it has been successful in Calgary, an off-leash park ambassador program should be considered as part of our off-leash strategy.

## 4. Thoughtfully Designed Off-Leash Areas

More off-leash areas are needed in the city. In the absence of convenient and well-designed off-leash areas, dog owners will naturally be more inclined to let their dogs off leash in non-designated areas.

To ensure that taxpayers money is not spent on underused or unused off-leash areas, new off-leash areas should be designed with international best practices in mind, including without limitation for surfacing, shade, layout, accessibility and water features. Consideration should be made for providing areas for smaller dogs, as in our community outreach we often hear that our off-leash areas are not safe for puppies or smaller dogs. Investments in existing off-leash areas should be made to ensure that they are well-maintained with intact fencing tall enough to keep dogs from jumping out.

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<sup>2</sup> Katie Daubs, Toronto Star, Sept 2, 2023, "Does Toronto Have a Dog Problem?"

To facilitate proper use and enforcement, off-leash areas should be required to have clear, visible boundaries to make them easier to control and maintain.

## 5. Signage

Off-leash dog signage should be clearly visible and placed at all key entry points to the area. Current off-leash dog signage is often out-of-date and not engaging to the public. Signage should include information about the reasons we keep our dogs on-leash. Signs should include understandable graphics and/or translations for those for whom English is not a first language. There should be no public confusion about whether one is in or outside of an off-leash area, a situation we run into in some areas of High Park. We suggest that in larger parks with an area that is partially designated as off-leash, that signage in other areas of the park makes it clear that these areas are on-leash areas.

Paws for Parks is in support of Councillor Moise's Agenda Item IE6.8 to create a citywide approach to Toronto's dogs off-leash areas. This will require a significant commitment of time and resources. To make the most of this investment, we believe it is critical to set the terms of reference broad enough to shift public behaviour toward a culture of compliance and respect. Therefore we recommend amending the terms of reference to include the key points outlined in our submission.

Regards,

Members of Paws for Parks



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