TORONTO'S DOG OFF-LEASH STRATEGY:

A Citywide Approach to Dogs Off-Leash Areas

April 2025

Executive Summary

Dogs off-leash areas are an important part of Toronto's park system and have become cherished community assets across the city. Off-leash areas (OLAs) are designated spaces where dogs can exercise, play, and socialize off-leash with other dogs. OLAs also enrich the lives of dog owners by providing spaces for people to socialize with community members, spend time outdoors, and exercise. Stakeholders and other jurisdictions have also noted that OLAs can play a role in crime prevention by activating underutilized spaces and increasing residents' presence throughout communities.

Toronto's Dog Off-Leash Strategy ("Strategy") represents the next chapter for OLAs as the City of Toronto works to improve the park experience for all visitors, including both dogs and people. The Strategy builds on the City's current approach to OLA development in place since 2010. The goals of the Strategy are to refine and update it to reflect Toronto's growth that has seen more people and dogs living together in increasingly dense communities and sharing limited parkland with many competing demands.

The Strategy takes a comprehensive, citywide approach to addressing how and where future OLAs will be built and what they should look like; the maintenance and improvement of OLAs; and ways to enrich the user experience while providing flexibility to enable OLA development in different community contexts and with consideration to adjacent land uses and the natural environment.

The Strategy will serve as both a framework and decision-making tool to guide the lifecycle of OLA development as well as promote responsible dog ownership through community engagement, positive education, and bylaw enforcement.

The goals of the Strategy are to:

1. **Plan Proactively:** Implement a citywide and proactive approach to planning for new OLA development integrated with the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan.
2. **Engage Community:** Reinforce and strengthen the important role of residents including OLA users in creating well-functioning and welcoming spaces across the OLA network.
3. **Design, Locate, and Build Quality OLAs:** Locate and build OLAs to a high and consistent standard with consideration to adjacent land uses and the natural environment.
4. **Maintain – Keep Every OLA Clean and Well-Cared For:** Maintain all OLAs to a high and consistent standard.
5. **Improve – Sustain and Increase Value:** Improve existing OLAs through ongoing state-of-good-repair investments.
6. **Ensure Responsible Use of OLAs:** Communicate and enforce simple and consistent rules of conduct at OLAs to support bylaw compliance through education and enforcement.
7. **Commercial Dog Walker Access:** Support Commercial Dog Walker access to OLAs by implementing established guidance at new OLAs.

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1. Toronto's Dogs Off-Leash Areas

1.1 Dog Ownership in Toronto

It is estimated that Toronto may be home to 600,000 or more dogs.[1]

Numerous national surveys indicate rising dog ownership across Canada,[2] with at least one survey indicating that 32 per cent of Canadians own a dog – with 3 per cent of households without a pet adding one during the COVID-19 pandemic.[3]

In Toronto and most other cities, it is difficult to get a definitive count of the dog population because of low rates of participation in pet licensing. Regardless of the exact figure, dogs are an important part of life for many Torontonians – and studies show that dog ownership helps humans live healthier, longer lives and build social capital in communities.[4]

In 2024, there were 44,229 dogs licensed with the City. Toronto's number of licensed dogs has decreased by over 21 per cent since 2017, even while national surveys indicate rising rates of dog ownership suggesting decreasing compliance with pet licensing requirements.

1.2 Toronto's Off-Leash Area Network Today

Toronto's residents and dogs are served through a combination of the City's 81 designated OLAs and private delivery though an increasing number of high-rise building amenities and businesses offering off-leash spaces for dogs. The City's OLA network currently extends to 21 wards. An additional 13 OLAs are under development and are anticipated for delivery over the next 2 years, which will bring the total to 94 OLAs in 23 wards by 2027 (see Map 1). Other jurisdictions reviewed have between 6 and 190 OLAs. Only Calgary (160) and New York City (190) have more OLAs than Toronto; other cities have fewer, such as Chicago (33). Under the City of Toronto Municipal Code, dogs are not allowed to run at large in parks, except in a designated off-leash area.

1 Extrapolating from national polling conducted in 2022 by Statista. Statista. (2024). Number of cats and dogs in households in Canada in 2022. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1015882/number-of-pet-cats-and-dogs-canada/

2 For example: Narrative Research. (2020, November 27). Canada has seen a significant increase in pet ownership since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. https://narrativeresearch.ca/canada-has-seen-a-significant-increase-in-pet-owners-since-the-start-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/; Pet Value Canada Inc. (2022, February 10). National Survey of Canadian Pet Owners Reveals an Estimated 3 Million Pets Joined Canadian Homes During the Pandemic. Cision. https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/national-survey-of-canadian-pet-owners-reveals-an-estimated-3-million-pets-joined-canadian-homes-during-the-pandemic-889445509.html; Statista. (2024). Total pet population in Canada from 2016 to 2025. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1255017/pet-population-canada/; Statista. (2024). Number of dog-owning households in Canada from 2016-2020. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1255057/number-of-dog-owning-households-canada/

3 Coletto, D. (2021, June 10). Pandemic Pets: Did Canada see a pandemic pet boom?. Abacus Data. https://abacusdata.ca/pets-pandemic-canada/

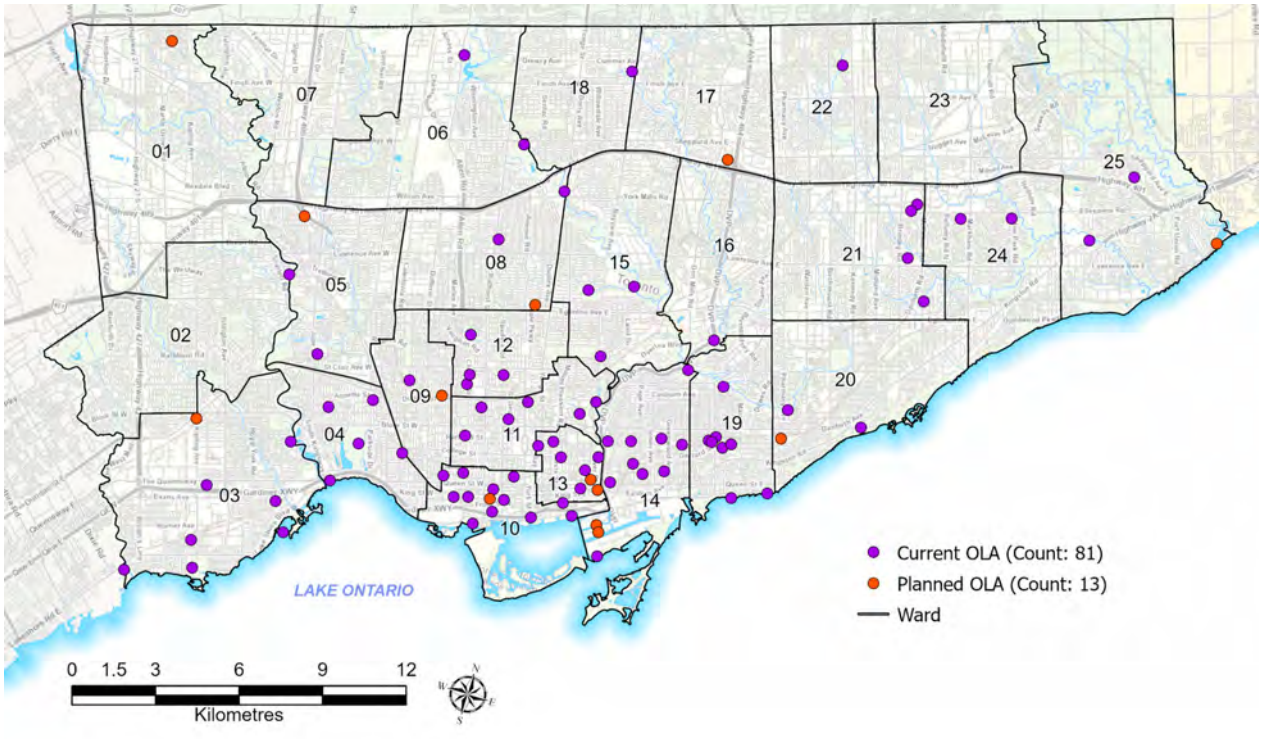
4 For example: Kramer, C. K., Mehmood, S., & Suen, R. S. (2019, October). Dog Ownership and Survival. Circulation, Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes, (12)10. https://doi.org/10.1161/CIRCOUTCOMES.119.005554; Wood, L., Martin, K., Christian, H., Houghton, S., Kawachi, I., Vallesi, S., & McCune, S. (2017, December). Social capital and pet ownership – A tale of four cities. SSM – Population Health, (3). 442-447. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2017.05.002

Wide variation in OLA sizes and designs across Toronto provide a unique user experience at each location and reflects the diversity of site conditions and community priorities. While most OLAs are intended to serve residents in the surrounding community, certain atypical sites attract users from across the city. These OLAs are almost always larger than community OLAs and typically also include additional desirable features such as beach access.

Toronto's network of public OLAs is augmented by private off-leash spaces, including condominium amenities and commercial facilities. While the City increases the number of OLAs in its portfolio, it will also continue to encourage the addition of private off-leash spaces to complement the City's network and better meet residents' needs.

A key challenge for Toronto's OLA network is population growth. Since OLAs were first introduced in Toronto, the city has grown with more people and dogs living together in increasingly dense communities and sharing limited parkland with many competing demands. In an increasingly vertical city, Torontonians need and value the outdoor experience offered by parkland. For many Torontonians, OLAs are necessary places for people to enjoy recreational time outdoors, just like other park assets such as sports fields, playgrounds, and splash pads. To accommodate the growing needs of dog owners in balance with other park functions and uses, a refreshed approach is needed.

Through this refreshed approach, the City can continue to enhance and expand the OLA network to ensure Torontonians have proper spaces for their dogs to exercise, play, and socialize.



Map 1: Current and Planned Off-leash Areas in Toronto

2. Research and Engagement Approach

The Strategy was developed based on extensive research and engagement findings that identified what's working well with Toronto's current approach, opportunities for improvement, and best practices from other cities. Research and consultation included a jurisdictional review, public surveys, focus groups, a stakeholder workshop, one-on-one interviews with City Councillors, and meetings with stakeholders. See Attachments 2 and 3 to the staff report for the research and public and stakeholder engagement results.

The research and engagement process were undertaken through a combination of staff efforts and the consulting services of thinc design.

Jurisdictional Review
The review examined OLA policies, programs, and practices in sixteen municipalities across North America, including in-depth interviews with thirteen municipalities. The review explored how municipalities: plan, locate, and design new OLAs; promote responsible dog ownership through education and enforcement; engage residents in OLA stewardship; and the policies and strategies in place. Additionally, the City conducted a later review of fourteen municipalities specific to commercial dog walker policies. In addition, the jurisdictional review also included and leveraged the results from a 2021 *City-Wide Study for Existing City of Toronto Off-Leash Areas* ("2021 Study") which included an in-depth examination of design, operations and maintenance, and administration in thirteen cities.

Online Surveys
To hear broadly from the public, including people who do and those who do not use OLAs, the City conducted an online survey open to all Torontonians in May 2024. Over 8,400 residents participated. The City conducted an additional survey in October and November 2024 specific to developing criteria for Commercial Dog Walker use of OLAs which received over 1,600 respondents.

May 2024 Survey Participation

8,408 respondents

- 81% dog owners
- 31% don't regularly use OLAs
- 81% of all registered Commercial Dog Walkers in Toronto

Focus Groups
The City invited over 70 organizations, as well as individuals without an organizational affiliation, to participate in a series of three virtual focus group sessions in May 2024, each with a distinct focus: (i) planning and location of OLAs; (ii) design guidance for OLAs; and (iii) improving the park user experience, including volunteer opportunities and bylaw compliance. Each session had 20-25 participants. Some additional stakeholders who could not attend provided written feedback via email.

Stakeholder Workshop
In November 2024, the City invited licensed Commercial Dog Walkers and members from over 70 organizations to participate in a workshop to inform the

development of criteria for Commercial Dog Walker use of off-leash areas. Over 45 participants, representing dog owners' associations, dog-related organizations, nature and stewardship groups, residents' associations, school boards, Commercial Dog Walkers, and individual OLA-users attended the three-hour workshop.

City Councillor Interviews
In April 2024, all Toronto City Councillors were invited to participate in key informant interviews to help identify constituents' perspectives related to off-leash areas, particularly around OLA locations, design, and the park user experience.

Stakeholder Meetings
Throughout the project, in addition to regular communication with stakeholders via email, the City met with key stakeholders to discuss particular areas of interest, explore issues and opportunities, and receive feedback on various aspects of the OLA review project or Toronto's OLA network.

Key findings from public and stakeholder engagement

OLA Planning

- Both OLA users (62 per cent) and non-users (59 per cent) support focusing the building of new OLAs in high density and high growth areas with a focus on areas that lack a nearby OLA.

- Focus group participants encouraged exploration of non-parkland for new OLAs (e.g., hydro corridors) and to minimize OLAs' ecological impact.

Engagement

- Residents who were interested in volunteering at an OLA were most interested (59 per cent) in joining a citywide advisory group.
- Some stakeholders experienced challenges with their local OLA volunteer group, including with dwindling interest.

Design, Location, and Maintenance

- The most important features for OLA users were: cleanliness/maintenance (63 per cent); fencing (63 per cent); and surface material (51 per cent).
- OLA users expressed highest satisfaction (satisfied and very satisfied) with: OLA size (70 per cent), geographic proximity to residence (64 per cent); and accessibility (62 per cent).
- About half of OLA users (52 per cent) said they would visit their local OLA more often if maintenance and amenities were improved.
- There was high support for fencing. Non-users (83 per cent) said every OLA in a park should be entirely enclosed by fencing and OLA users (78 per cent) identified fencing as an important OLA feature.
- OLA users said surface materials need to be accessible for all park users and recommended removal of pea gravel and sand surfaces outside of beach areas.
    - Grass was the most popular surface type (34 per cent) followed by engineered wood chips (22 per cent), natural surfaces (19 per cent), and artificial turf or rubber surfacing (10 per cent).
- Top OLA concerns amongst non-users were: improper disposal of dog waste; child and adult safety; impacts on the environment; and use of City resources.
- Focus group participants said enhanced 311 data analysis and bylaw education and enforcement are needed to reduce conflicts.

Education and Supporting Enforcement Efforts

- Stakeholders stressed the importance of bylaw education and enforcement to ensure compliance with OLA rules of use.
- Stakeholders noted signs should be clear and accessible, including the use of graphics, to support responsible use of OLAs and compliance with rules.
- OLA users supported a variety of communication techniques for the City to use, with no one technique emerging as the preferred option.

Commercial Dog Walkers (CDW)

- Most respondents (74 per cent) had no concerns with CDW use of OLAs and half (51 per cent) said CDWs should be allowed to use every OLA.
- Just over a third (37 per cent) said CDWs should have access to an OLA whenever it is open; just under a third (29 per cent) preferred a designated timeslot for CDWs, between 10 am to 4 pm.
- Workshop participants preferred that CDWs visit large OLAs and those set apart from homes and amenities, to reduce crowding and noise.

Key learnings from other jurisdictions include

Planning OLA Development

- Most cities plan for new OLAs using population density coupled with travel distance (or convenient access) including Vancouver, Winnipeg, Surrey, and Denver.
- Distances for convenient access to a nearest OLA ranged from 800 m to 4 km, depending on the city.

Engagement

- Over half of the municipalities had experience with a volunteer or ambassador programs although some had ended these programs due to challenges related to resourcing, lack of interest, or conflicts among participants and OLA users, and the high level of staff support required.

Design, Location, and Maintenance

- Minimum size for OLAs was commonly around 400-465 square metres, although New York City's minimum size is 200 square metres.
- Fencing is required in about half of the cities reviewed with cities of similar density to Toronto tending to prioritize fencing.
- Every municipality considered adjacent land uses when siting an OLA with about half recommending setback distances from homes and other park uses.
- About half of the cities have standard design features for all OLAs that typically include benches, waste receptacles, shade, and water access where possible.
- Grass and wood chips are common surface materials.
- Staff in other cities commonly identified dog waste as an issue at OLAs.

Education and Supporting Enforcement Efforts

- Cities used a variety of methods for OLA bylaw education including signage at OLAs, online information, public education campaigns, and social media.
- Most cities had standard hours of operation for all their OLAs and consistent rules posted on signage at OLAs.

Commercial Dog Walkers (CDW)

- Only four of the 14 cities reviewed had regulations about commercial dog walkers in OLAs.
- In some cities, regulations limited which OLAs CDWs could access, day/time restrictions on access, and/or the number of dogs CDWs could bring into the OLA.

3. Dog Off-Leash Strategy Goals

The research and engagement activities, along with internal stakeholder consultation, helped inform the Strategy development and updates. The next seven sections detail the goals of the Strategy; the City's action to achieve those goals; and the research and consultation supporting the goals and actions, including: (1) how the City will plan for new OLA development; (2) engage with communities and stakeholders; (3) build, locate, and design new OLAs; (4) maintain the spaces; (5) upgrade existing OLAs; (6) facilitate responsible use of OLAs through consistent rules, education, and enforcement; and (7) Commercial Dog Walker access to OLAs.

Goal 1. Plan Proactively

- Identify OLA provision gap areas based on current and/or anticipated high population density, and nearby OLAs
- Incorporate OLA provision gap areas into the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan and future Capital Budget planning to determine sequencing, timing, and funding, and review every 5-years
- Encourage delivery of off-leash space outside of City-owned parkland
- Remove requirement for residents interested in establishing an OLA to establish a local dog owners' association

The first goal of the Strategy is to **implement a citywide and proactive approach to planning for new OLA development integrated with the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan** so that new OLAs are built where they can serve the most people and dogs both in areas with and without OLAs.

Densely populated neighbourhoods in particular are areas where OLAs can serve an important role for people and dogs. These neighbourhoods are increasingly vertical communities where residents may have limited access to private greenspace thus requiring public spaces to exercise and socialize their dogs, making OLAs all the more valuable for these residents. OLAs in these neighbourhoods help meet that need. Walkability to these spaces is important as there is typically a lower rate of private vehicle ownership and public transit limits the hours owners can travel on the system with their dogs. Furthermore, this is how OLA users prefer to access OLAs; 76 per cent of OLA users indicated walking, jogging or running was one of the typical ways they traveled to an OLA.

These densely populated neighbourhoods are increasingly found throughout Toronto, owing to growth and development patterns. This includes both neighbourhoods with existing OLAs and those without nearby OLAs. The Strategy's proposed approach is to meet the growing need for OLAs by building new OLAs in provision gap areas identified using:

- Current population data from the national census;
- Future population estimates from the City Planning (10-15 year outlook); and
- Location and size of nearby OLAs.

Based on survey responses and an analysis of user patterns in Toronto, along with benchmarks from other cities, the current Policy's 1 km walking distance measure of access will be maintained. Many cities use similar measures of access including Calgary, Denver, Vancouver; Edmonton; and Winnipeg (see Map 2 for current and planned OLAs with a 1 km walking area applied). While the number of dogs within 1 km of an OLA would be a preferred indicator of need, human population density is the better measure due to the low compliance with dog licensing requirements.

A provision gap analysis revealed areas across the city where new OLAs are recommended (see green areas in Map 3). These provision gap areas, mapped by neighbourhood, represent:

- Areas with current and/or anticipated high population density with no local access to OLAs; and
- Areas where the existing OLAs are insufficient to meet local demand due to population density.

It is estimated that 45-50 OLAs will be needed to address these provision gap areas and ensure that every Ward in the City has at least one OLA. The Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan will prioritize where new OLAs should be located over the next 20 years and will identify funding requirements to be considered in future Capital Budgets. The Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan is reviewed every five years, and the provision gap areas will be regularly reviewed.

This planning-focused approach will formalize how new OLA needs are identified, so that OLA planning is embedded in the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan and future Budget and Capital Plan development. A proactive OLA planning approach was highly supported by stakeholders and survey respondents, including both OLA users and non-users alike. A data-driven OLA expansion plan to respond to population density and growth is needed to provide more residents with walkable access to an OLA.

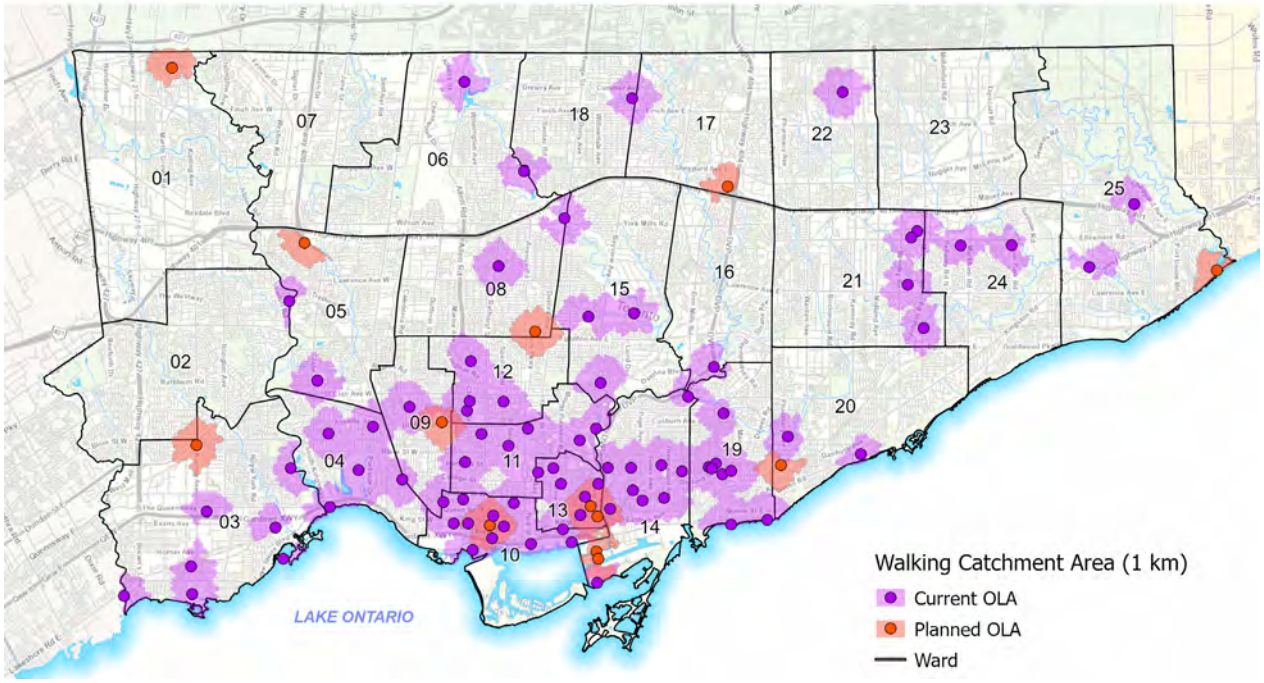
Developing Off-Leash Spaces Outside of Parks

There are opportunities for OLA development outside of City-owned parkland, such as hydro corridors. This supports the addition of new OLAs into the network without added pressure on limited parkland. The City will encourage OLA development in public spaces outside of City-owned parkland and where appropriate will seek to enter into agreements to build and maintain OLAs in these locations. Furthermore, the City will continue to encourage the private delivery of off-leash space, including by applying City Planning's Pet Friendly Design Guidelines and Best Practices for New Multi-Unit Buildings to development applications.

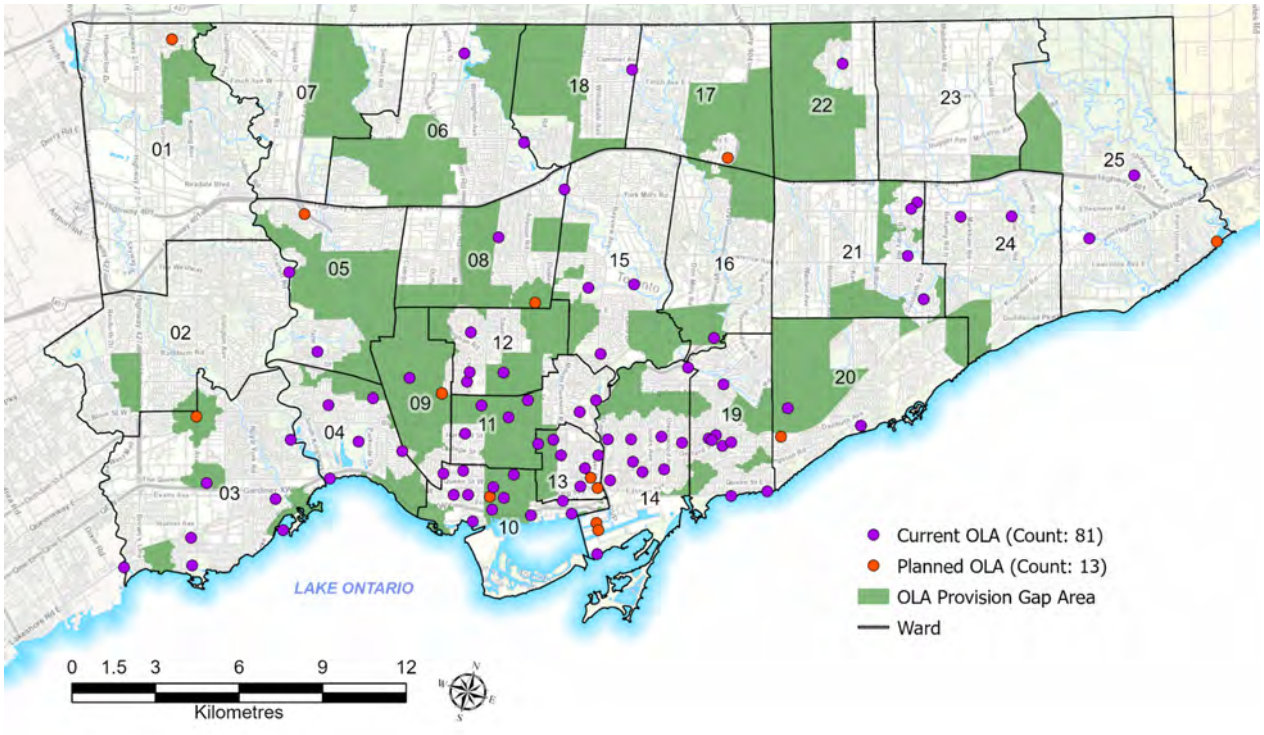
Removal of Dog Owners' Association Requirement

The 2010 Off-leash Policy requires residents interested in establishing an OLA to establish a local dog owners' association and to apply to the City for delivery of an OLA in their local neighbourhood. Many stakeholders identified that this process has led to disappointment when there is no funding or suitable location for an OLA after community members have put in the effort to organize and submit a compelling application.

The proposed Strategy will remove this requirement. Community members can instead identify OLA opportunities and community needs directly to the City and these requests will be assessed through established parks planning processes and the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan, like all other parks amenities. These needs will then be considered, alongside other inputs such as 311 data, to show demonstrated demand for an OLA in an area and inform the OLA planning process. Demonstrated demand may also identify areas outside of the provision gaps areas. Where possible and within available resources, the City will work with the Ward Councillor to determine suitability for an OLA, alignment with existing park uses and planned park projects, and any funding requirements.



Map 2: Current and Planned OLAs with 1 km Walking Distance



Map 3: OLA Provision Gap Areas

Goal 2. Engage Community

- Update and implement engagement processes and methods to ensure local community voices contribute meaningfully to OLA development and design, and an updated standard OLA communications protocol
- Establish a Citywide OLA Stakeholder Reference Group to support implementation of the Strategy
- Create a shared webpage with information about local OLA community groups to facilitate connections and recognize local OLA volunteer groups

The second goal of the Strategy is **to reinforce and strengthen the important role that residents including OLA users play in creating well-functioning and welcoming** spaces across the OLA network, including participation in local OLA planning and development, as well as engaging stakeholders in the implementation of the Strategy.

Community members and OLA stakeholders are valued and needed to:

- Communicate local and citywide priorities to the City.
- Participate in identifying and evaluating potential OLA locations within neighbourhoods.
- Explore and respond to design options for OLAs.
- Support implementation of the Strategy.
- Promote responsible use of OLAs.
- Support OLA stewardship.

Building on existing engagement approaches, the City has updated its engagement processes for new OLA builds and improvements to ensure alignment with the approach to community engagement used for other important park amenities, ensuring that each process is responsive to the specific needs of the project, aligned with broader Parks and Recreation facilities planning, and provides the opportunities for public input.

Community members will be engaged meaningfully in projects that are confirmed to proceed including where an OLA is located and designed, and the role of community input in final project decisions will be documented and posted online for greater accountability. This includes the update and adoption of a principles-based engagement process to ensure community members contribute to important decisions around where a new OLA goes and what it looks like, and how improvement projects can enhance the user experience. This engagement framework will ensure that OLAs are developed and improved in a way that reflects community input and needs while addressing practical considerations such as site conditions, environmental impacts, and budget constraints.

The City will also implement a standard park development communications protocol to notify residents about an OLA project, such as a park improvement, and explain clearly how public input influenced the final outcomes. The protocol will also be used to communicate other important OLA changes.

See Appendix A for the updated community engagement process for new OLA development, improvements and communications protocol.

Additionally, in response to public preference, the City is proposing to establish a 'Citywide OLAs Stakeholder Reference Group,' to support implementation of the Strategy. OLA users interested in participating in an OLA volunteer program identified a citywide advisory group as their most popular option (59 per cent). The reference group will be a forum for sharing diverse community perspectives, including from both OLA users and non-users, to support implementation of the Strategy. Finally, to support OLA stewardship and encourage volunteer participation at OLAs, the City will create a shared webpage with information about local OLA community groups to facilitate connections and community interest. Staff will continue to explore ways to further support local OLA stewardship including with advice from the reference group.

Figure 1.1. OLA in Huron Street Playground

Goal 3. Design, Locate and Build Quality OLAs

Update location criteria to include recommended setbacks from adjacent and sensitive land, establish minimum OLA size, and update exclusion areas to include Environmentally Significant Areas

Update design guidance to include both mandatory and optional features to create consistency in design and more predictability for residents and development costs

Update the process for review of an OLA designation or boundaries

The third goal of the Strategy is **build new OLAs to a high and consistent standard, for people and off-leash dogs to enjoy that are responsive to a range of urban contexts and community needs, and balance the needs of all park users and neighbours and reduce impacts on the natural environment.**

The Strategy proposes to update OLA location criteria and design guidance to ensure consistency in OLA design and location citywide, provide more predictability for residents, and enable the City to better plan capital investments and optimize available funding. Updates to design and location measures are informed by the current 2010 Off-leash Policy, the *City-Wide Study for Existing City of Toronto Dogs Off-Leash Areas* completed by thinc design in 2021, public and stakeholder engagement, and the jurisdictional review, and include:

- Location criteria to include setbacks from adjacent and sensitive uses in parks to find the best possible location for an OLA within a park.
- Design guidance to include both mandatory and optional features to create consistency in design and more predictability on the development costs, including fencing.

Choosing a suitable park and location within a park is an important step to ensuring compatibility with surrounding land uses, protecting the natural environment, and creating an OLA that meets the needs of the community. This involves deciding on the size and configuration of the OLA and proximity (setback) from other land uses. OLAs, while creating positive experiences for the dogs and people using them, can create community disturbances through noise, have the potential for conflict with nearby land uses such as playgrounds and schools and impact the surrounding natural environment. Thus, the setback distances from surrounding land uses are important to building OLAs that fit well within a community and mitigate potential conflicts. Suitable sites would then be evaluated against current and future estimated population, existing park uses and functions, feedback from Parks staff, input from the community and Councillor, and estimated cost.

The design of OLAs also helps ensure compatibility with surrounding land uses and well-designed spaces facilitate positive park experiences for dogs and people. This includes decisions around

fencing type and height, surface material, shade, entrances, benches, and signage, amongst other elements.

Combined, these tools provide an updated OLA location and design framework that is flexible enough to respond to Toronto's diverse neighbourhood contexts. See Appendix B for the full *Location Criteria and Design Guidance for Toronto's Dogs Off-Leash Areas*.

Location Criteria

The proposed updated location criteria builds on the 2010 Off-leash Policy by adding and defining recommended setback distances from adjacent and sensitive park uses and areas while providing flexibility to site OLAs in different community contexts through use of mitigation measures when setbacks cannot be achieved.

The setback distances proposed largely align with other jurisdictions and are based on what we heard from residents, OLA users and stakeholders. In addition, the criteria defines a minimum size (200 m^2) for an OLA to allow siting in different community contexts while providing adequate space for people and dogs, and provides additional considerations for evaluating a location such as availability hydro, water, and sanitary services, and parking. The location criteria also builds on the 2010 Policy's off-leash areas exclusions by adding Environmentally Significant Areas.

Toronto has five OLAs located within or overlapping an Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs). Twenty one more OLAs are located within or overlapping Toronto's ravine system. Use of these OLAs by dogs and people can have significant ecological impacts, due to the trampling of sensitive and rare vegetation, change of soil chemistry from pet waste, change of soil structure from compaction and digging, and disruptions to urban wildlife.

Protecting the natural environment is a City priority which must be balanced with the need for active use of green space. ESAs are areas of land or water within Toronto's natural heritage system that require special protection to preserve their environmentally significant qualities. The City's Official Plan outlines policies protecting ESAs and known ESAs are shown on Map 12A of the Official Plan. On a go forward, it is proposed that the City will not build OLAs in ESAs.

Location criteria for new OLAs:

- Recommended setback distances from nearby park and land uses;
- Where setback distances cannot be fully achieved, mitigation measures to improve site suitability, for example: berms, natural landforms, screening, and gate placement;
- Minimum size of 200 m^2, but look to build larger OLAs wherever possible;
- Areas where OLAs cannot be built including the addition of ESAs; and
- Additional considerations for parking and sanitary, water, and hydro service.

Design Guidance

The proposed design guidance builds on the 2010 Off-leash Policy and incorporates recommendations from the 2021 *City-Wide Study for Existing City of Toronto Dogs Off-Leash Areas* that was led by thinc design with broad input from Toronto stakeholders and was based on best practices from cities across North America. Since receipt of the 2021 Study, the City has been implementing and testing a number of key recommendations including: testing new

latch designs; increased use of trees and shade structures; assessment of various surface materials at OLAs of varying sizes and traffic levels; and improving entrance and exit gates through the use of concrete pads and double-gate vestibules which have informed the design guidance in the Strategy.

Similar to other jurisdictions, the Strategy proposes to update the City's approach by implementing both a mandatory set of design features to promote consistency in OLA design and increase predictability around OLA costs, as well as optional features to be considered based on site conditions, community input, and project budget. This approach was supported by stakeholders, and, where possible, OLA user preferences, such as fencing, surfacing types, and shade, were included as mandatory design features.

Mandatory design features for new OLAs:

- Topography and drainage or appropriate design and material to facilitate a well-drained site
- Full enclosure fencing
- Surfacing must be grass, engineered wood chips and/or K-9 turf, depending on size, site conditions, and budget (no pea gravel)
- Irrigation system and/or sub-surface drainage, as required by surface type and characteristics
- Shade, either through trees or artificial shade structures. Trees inside an OLA require a tree protection zone
- Double-gated pedestrian entrances (minimum 2)
- Maintenance gate (at least 1)
- Signage at all entrances and exits
- Benches: minimum of 1 per 500 m^2
- Waste receptacles, including Green Bins, at every entrance/exit
- Pathway to gate and within OLA

Optional design features for new OLAs, subject to budget, site conditions, and community perspectives:

- Water fountain
- Lighting
- Trees/shrubs for shade, noise barrier, beautification
- Zone for small dogs
- Play elements

Review of OLA Designation or Boundaries

There may be instances where an OLA designation or its boundaries may need to be reviewed. Building on the requirements and process included in the 2010 Off-leash Policy, the designation of an OLA may be cancelled by the General Manager of Parks and Recreation where in the opinion of the General Manager:

- The off-leash area is not being used on a regular basis.
- Extensive damage to the park and / or natural environment is occurring.
- The park is no longer suitable for an off-leash area.
- Repeated, ongoing non-compliance with the posted Rules of the Run for OLA use and the City of Toronto Municipal Code Chapters.

Should an OLA's designation or boundaries need to be reviewed, the General Manager will engage the Ward Councillor, OLA users, the local community, and relevant stakeholders to review options, mitigation approaches, and solutions.

Figure 1.2. OLA in Bob Hunter Park

Goal 4. Maintain – Keep Every OLA Clean and Well-Cared For

- Implement harmonized and updated OLA maintenance standards on a citywide basis and respond to local service requests from the community
- Improve tracking of responses to community service requests through forthcoming integration with 311
- Publish maintenance service standards and for the OLA network on the City's website

The fourth goal of the Strategy is **to maintain all OLAs to a high and consistent standard, delivering a positive user experience for dogs and park visitors.**

Survey respondents identified maintenance as a top feature that influences how OLAs are perceived and experienced. Among OLA users, 63 per cent said maintenance was the most important factor in choosing which OLA to visit, and most said they would use their local OLA more often if conditions (maintenance and amenities) were improved.

Currently, the City performs maintenance on OLAs in the course of regular maintenance of all park amenities. This work includes litter-picking, raking and/or mowing, emptying waste bins, and ensuring fences and gates are properly functioning. Maintaining OLAs is a shared responsibility between the City and OLA users. Pet owners play an important role by properly disposing of dog waste and filling in holes dug by their pets, something that requires ongoing education efforts to support.

In response to resident feedback and the 2021 Study, the City will harmonize and update, as needed, maintenance service standards and will publish these on the City's website to provide greater predictability for residents. Maintenance requirements at OLAs across the network need to account for OLA size, site characteristics, and operational considerations, with heavily used sites generally requiring more frequent servicing.

Through the Parks and Recreation Division's planned integration with 311, the City will be able to improve the tracking and handling of community requests for service at OLAs and will be able to report on response times and outcomes more accountably.

Maintenance needs of an OLA depend on the characteristics of the facility and its level of usage, with heavily used sites typically requiring more frequent servicing. Maintenance and inspection scheduling will reflect these variations in need and will be reviewed and updated regularly in response to staff assessments and/or analysis of 311 data.

Goal 5. Improve – Sustain and Increase Value

Implement a citywide, data driven plan for state-of-good-repair program for OLAs that is based on regular condition assessments and is responsive to community feedback and regular staff inspections

Prioritize critical repairs, accessibility upgrades, environmental impact, and fencing needs

The fifth goal of the Strategy **is to ensure the longevity and benefits of the OLA network** through ongoing state-of-good repair investments and by addressing critical repairs, environmental protection, fencing, and accessibility needs on a timely basis using new design guidance, where possible.

Improving conditions at OLAs through capital improvements and state-of-good-repair work is fundamental to ensure these spaces continue to provide enjoyable experiences for both people and dogs as well as sustaining and growing the value of the existing OLA network.

Toronto's OLAs vary widely in design features and condition, in part due to when they were developed, site conditions, and evolving design approaches. In 2024, a comprehensive condition assessment of all OLAs was completed. The capital repairs and improvements identified through condition assessments enable the City to take a proactive and citywide approach to improving conditions across the OLA network, addressing the most important repairs and sites with the most need first, using new design guidelines where feasible.

In addition to a systematic approach to improving the OLA network, the City will continue to upgrade OLAs during major park redevelopments or expansions and leverage the new design guidelines, where site conditions allow.

To bring OLA asset management into alignment with most other important park facilities, the City will conduct a comprehensive condition assessment of the OLA network every five years.

The City will prioritize OLA repairs and upgrades to improve:

- Failing infrastructure (e.g., broken gates);
- Accessibility (e.g., remove pea gravel; install pathways);
- Environmental impact; and
- Security (e.g., install or repair fencing).

In alignment with the *Toronto Ravine Strategy's* principles and actions to manage and protect ravines and Environmentally Significant Areas (ESA), the City will look for opportunities to upgrade fencing enclosures for OLAs located in ESAs.

This mitigation work can be quite costly as it often requires specialized contractors operating in challenging conditions, such as steep ravines or areas which cannot easily be accessed by construction equipment, and the work must be conducted in a manner that minimizes any additional harm to sensitive habitats. Nevertheless, where there is significant ongoing or imminent environmental harm, the City will look for opportunities to

incorporate and prioritize this work within the schedule of planned improvements to OLAs.

Given the strong support for fencing at OLAs from both OLA users (78 per cent) and non-OLA users (83 per cent) identified through the consultation process, the City will review existing unfenced OLAs on a case-by-case basis and, where it is appropriate and feasible, install fencing or other barrier options as part of the OLA SOGR program. As with any major park facilities project, City Councillor and community feedback will be sought to assess the options as well as a review of 311 data, and an evaluation of site conditions and park uses.

In 2024, the City began a multi-year project to replace the fencing along the off-leash pathways in High Park, allocating approximately $700,000 to upgrade nearly 2 kilometres of fencing, to protect the ESA by preventing dogs trampling the forest's understory.

Goal 6. Ensure Responsible Use of OLAs

- Simplify and consolidate OLA rules of conduct
- Refresh and implement updated OLA signage, website, and public communication
- Establish consistent hours of operation for new OLAs
- Continue to promote responsible dog ownership through public education and support enforcement efforts

The sixth goal of the Strategy is **to communicate and enforce simple and consistent rules of conduct at OLAs to support bylaw compliance through education and enforcement,** so OLAs work well for everyone and conflict is reduced with adjacent park users and neighbours.

Although OLAs are intended to be spaces for enjoyment, they can sometimes be a focus of conflict, either between OLA users or between OLA users and other park visitors and neighbours. Public survey participants, stakeholders, and City Councillors stressed the importance of bylaw education and enforcement to ensure compliance with OLA rules of use.

Responsible dog ownership contributes to a well-functioning and welcoming OLA network, but also contributes to a positive and respectful relationship with all park users and community members. While most dog owners are responsible pet owners, public engagement and 311 data revealed ongoing concerns with some dog owners, especially around picking up pet waste and leashing outside of designated OLAs.

To support responsible dog ownership at OLAs, the City uses a combination of public education and enforcement efforts, including: signage in parks; online information; education campaigns; and Bylaw Enforcement Officers (BEOs). Both the Parks and Recreation (P&R) and Municipal Licensing and Standards (MLS) Divisions play important roles in promoting responsible dog ownership. P&R ensures parks have proper signage and information, and both divisions have webpages and conduct public education campaigns related to responsible dog ownership. Additionally, MLS's BEOs visit parks to educate dog owners and work to gain compliance with City bylaws, when necessary.

Bylaw compliance is best achieved through a combination of communication, education, and enforcement. To enhance communication and education the City will:

- Consolidate and communicate a simplified set of "Rules of the Run" that reinforce bylaws in Chapter 349 (Animals) and Chapter 608 (Parks) of the Toronto Municipal Code and includes the off-leash area user exclusions from the 2010 Off-leash Policy. Based on stakeholder feedback, the City will update and replace current signage with refreshed signs at every OLA entrance and exit, to convey simplified rules in a consistent, clear, and welcoming way informed by the 2021 Study and stakeholder

engagement which identified ways in which OLA signage could be improved.
- Augment and maintain an OLA information hub at toronto.ca/dogs, that includes a directory of OLAs and their attributes, upcoming OLA projects, volunteer groups, and comprehensive information about using OLAs, including relevant bylaws and responsible dog ownership guidance.
- Continue to promote responsible dog ownership, dog safety, and public awareness of relevant bylaws concerning dogs, through partnerships and public education campaigns, including working with other City Divisions and external organizations.

The City will continue to enforce bylaws and OLA 'Rules of the Run' using a data-driven approach that deploys Bylaw Enforcement Officers (BEOs) to priority parks that have persistent and problematic bylaw compliance issues. The City takes an education-first approach to gain bylaw compliance and may also take enforcement action, when appropriate, by laying charges. In addition, BEOs may engage with Toronto Police Services and Provincial Conservation Officers to address dog-related issues where additional support will better facilitate compliance, for example to address safety concerns or interactions with wildlife in Environmentally Significant Areas.

Finally, the City will establish and communicate consistent hours of operation for new OLAs. Noting setbacks from residential areas with new OLAs, aligning their operating hours with park hours (5:30 am to midnight) also aligns an OLA with use of other unpermitted park amenities (e.g. a playground).

Existing OLAs will maintain their current hours of operations, including sites with time-of-use or seasonal restrictions, however, moving forward, the City will avoid new sites with these types of hours. Identified issues will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, using 311 data and in consultation with the Ward Councillor and community, to determine if any changes to the OLA hours will help alleviate the issue and are appropriate. In addition, hours of operation will be reviewed during park development projects to see if there are opportunities to align with park hours. This is similar to the approach successfully used by Vancouver to reduce the number of sites with time-of-use restrictions due to issues with compliance and user conflict.

Goal 7. Commercial Dog Walker Access

Implement guidance to support CDW access to OLAs and help to mitigate concerns, where needed.

Support Commercial Dog Walker (CDW) access to OLAs by implementing guidance at new OLAs that accounts for nearby residences and capacity of OLAs.

Commercial Dog Walkers (CDW) perform a valuable service walking, exercising, and socializing dogs for community members, including at OLAs. Under Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 608, CDWs are permitted to walk and have control of 4 to 6 dogs at a time in a park. Currently, CDWs can access 50 of the City's 81 OLAs, and the City has no criteria for determining OLA access for CDWs.

In response to City Council direction staff reviewed CDW access to OLAs informed by a public survey, stakeholder workshop, jurisdictional scan, and review of 311 data. The engagement identified that:

- Most respondents (74 per cent) had no concerns with CDW use of OLAs and about half (51 per cent) said CDWs should be allowed to use every OLA without restrictions.
- Just over a third (37 per cent) said CDWs should have access to an OLA whenever it is open; just under a third (29 per cent) preferred a designated timeslot for CDWs, between 10 am to 4 pm.
- CDWs ranked size (24 per cent), proximity to their home or business (21 per cent), and fencing (20 per cent) as important features to them when choosing a dogs off-leash area.
- In deciding if an off-leash area is suitable for CDW use, fencing (30 per cent) and size of an OLA (30 per cent) were identified as the top considerations.
- Some workshop participants noted the importance of OLA size and setback from residential properties when considering criteria for CDW access to OLAs, due to crowding and noise.

Among the fourteen cities reviewed, only four (Calgary, Vaughan, Mississauga, and District of North Vancouver) had any policies or regulations related to professional dog walker use of OLAs. In cities without policies or regulations related to professional dog walkers, professional dog walkers were subject to the same rules regarding dogs and OLA use as residents, including how many dogs they can walk at once. In cities with policies or regulations, no clear best practices emerged.

The review of 311 data related to complaints about CDWs in parks also did not reveal any major issues or trends attributable to CDW use of these spaces.

However, while the engagement revealed that most park users did not have concerns with CDW use of OLAs, consideration of noise and overcrowding at OLAs have been identified. Noise was identified as an issue at some OLAs due to the close proximity to residential properties and the impact of one person entering the OLA with up to six dogs. At small OLAs, the general capacity for dogs may be low and one person entering the OLA with up to six dogs can dominate the space.

In response, the City has developed guidance to support CDW access to OLAs with four to six dogs.

Under the proposed guidance, new OLAs:

- Over 1,000 square metres will allow CDW access.
- 1,000 square metres or under will not allow CDW access.

The guidance is intended to support CDW access to OLAs while mitigating against overcrowding at small sized OLAs where needed. Under the proposed design guidance, noise concerns will be addressed through setbacks from residential properties.

Existing sites that allow CDW access will continue to allow CDW access as currently posted. Where there is a need to review CDW access, it will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis using the CDW guidance above, 311 data, CDW usage patterns, and working with the Ward Councillor and in consultation with the community and CDWs to determine any changes.

In accordance with the proposed guidance, nine existing OLA sites that currently do not allow CDW access and are larger than 1,000 square metres and set back from residential properties have been identified to allow access to CDWs. Applying this approach will increase CDW access to OLAs from 50 to 59 OLAs.

To implement any changes, the City will post advance notice at each of sites and communicate the change to CDWs, OLA users, and City Councillors. The changes will then be implemented by installing updated signage and updating the City's website. As part of implementation, the City will continue to monitor these sites using 311 data to identify any issues with the changes.

Conclusion

Toronto's Dog Off-Leash Strategy is intended to be used as a decision-making and planning framework to guide the City's expansion and improvement of the OLA network, in balance with other park amenities and community priorities. The Strategy gives direction and sets out processes for:

- Expanding the OLA network over the long term to provide convenient access for more people and dogs;
- Continued engagement of residents including OLA users in local planning and design considerations and in supporting the implementation of the Strategy;
- Designing and building welcoming spaces for people and dogs, that are compatible with neighbours, surrounding land uses, and the natural environment;
- Ensuring OLAs are maintained to a high and consistent standard;
- Supporting responsible dog ownership and positive behaviors at OLAs;
- Ensuring the value of Toronto's OLA network for years to come; and
- Supporting Commercial Dog Walker access to OLAs.

Working with residents and stakeholders to implement this Strategy, the City of Toronto will continue to be an effective OLA leader in Canada and across North America, delivering well-designed, well-maintained, and well-loved spaces of enjoyment for people and dogs.

Acknowledgments

Toronto's Dog Off-Leash Areas Strategy was developed in with the strategic input, advice and insights of thousands of anonymous Torontonians who participated in survey responses, diverse individuals and stakeholders who attended focus group and workshop sessions, Members of Toronto City Council, and cities who participated in the jurisdictional review.

A special thanks and acknowledgment to the many staff across many Divisions and agencies who contributed to the development of the Strategy.

Appendix A:

Updated Community Engagement Process for New OLA Development, Improvements, and Communication Protocol

Appendix A – Updated Community Engagement Process for New OLA Development, Improvements, and Communication Protocol

The City has updated its engagement processes for new OLA builds and improvements to ensure alignment with approach to community engagement used for other important park amenities, ensuring that each process is responsive to the specific needs of the project, aligned with broader Parks and Recreation facilities planning, and provides the opportunities for public input. Formalized and standardised consultation processes for off-leash areas (OLAs) will establish a consistent experience for residents across the city, promote equity, and ensure appropriate consultation. Community input is critical during new OLA location and design, and current OLA improvements. Engagement needs to balance the importance of public input in shaping decisions and quality projects that meet public needs with operational requirements, and available options.

The engagement process will be informed by the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)'s Spectrum of Public Participation[1] to ensure the OLA designs and decisions reflect local needs and site-specific considerations. Consultation for OLAs will follow high-level engagement principles including:

- Accessible and respectful engagement process;
- Transparent and accountable engagement process;
- Evidence-based decision-making; and
- Digital-forward engagement.

<u>Engagement Process for New OLA Development</u>

OLA development can be initiated in several ways including: through the implementation of the Parks and Recreation Facilities Plan; new park creation; major park redevelopment or expansions; and Councillor or community identified opportunities, such as through Participatory Budgeting.

Regardless of how OLA development is initiated, the engagement process consists of three phases, each with a unique objective and engagement tactics.

1. **Pre-engagement to establish location:** During this phase, the objective is to evaluate potential OLA locations identified based on factors such as: established location criteria, and neighbourhood and park characteristics and uses. Engagement represents an opportunity for the community to identify any needs and concerns, or to confirm suitability of a potential OLA location in cases where only one option is possible. Engagement tactics during this phase may include:
    a. Online survey;
    b. Digital mapping exercise; and
    c. Site walk-through.

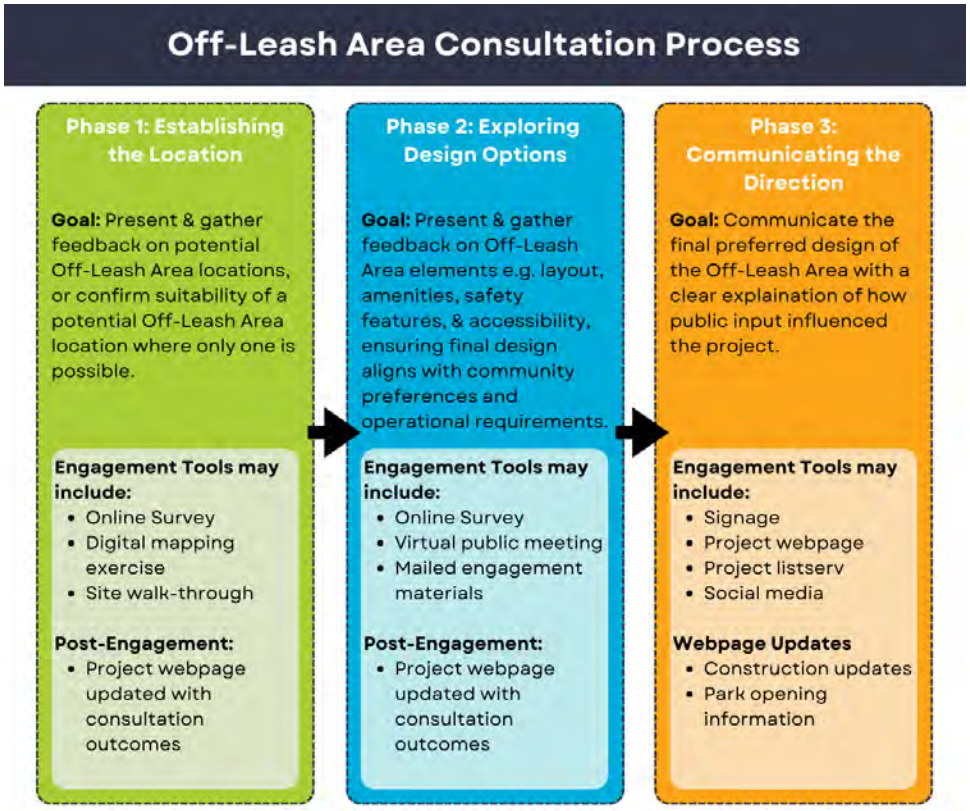
2. **Exploring Design Options**: During this phase, the objective is to give residents opportunities to provide feedback on elements such as layout, amenities, safety features, and accessibility, ensuring that the final design aligns with both

[1] IAP2. (2024). *IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation*. https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.iap2.org/resource/resmgr/pillars/iap2_spectrum_2024.pdf

community preferences and operational requirements. Engagement tactics during this phase may include:

a. Online survey;
b. Virtual public meeting; and
c. Mailed engagement materials.

3. **Communicating the Direction**: This phase is explicitly for communicating the final preferred design of the OLA. The preferred OLA design will be shared with the community, accompanied by a clear explanation of how public input influenced the final design. The project webpage will serve as the primary platform for sharing the design and rationale, ensuring transparency and accessibility for all stakeholders.



<u>Standard OLA Communications Protocol for Improvement Projects and Changes</u>
Each OLA project, including OLA improvements, follows a defined communications protocol:

- On-site signage installed at the OLA to notify residents about planned improvements and direct them to a dedicated project webpage.
- Dedicated project webpage to provide comprehensive information, including the project timeline, site map, engagement opportunities, regular updates, and a subscription option to receive email notifications from the project team.
- Social media posts and promotion with engagement opportunities and information about planned improvements through the P&R's social media channels.

Any major changes at OLAs will similarly be communicated through onsite signage and information on the City's website, with opportunities for feedback and engagement, depending on the nature of the change.

Appendix B:

Location Criteria and Design Guidance for Toronto Dogs Off-Leash Areas

Location Criteria and Design Guidance for Dogs Off-Leash Areas Citywide

March 2025

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Executive Summary

This document outlines comprehensive criteria and guidance for the location, design and maintenance of off-leash areas (OLAs) within the City, informed by the current 2010 Off-leash policy and the 2021 Study of City of Toronto Existing Dogs Off-Leash Areas. The objective is to create safe, accessible and enjoyable spaces for dogs and their owners.

Part A: Location Criteria outlines six considerations:

Size:
In general, larger OLAs are preferred and better suited for dogs and users. However, increasing urban density may require smaller OLAs in certain parks.

- OLAs should have a minimum size of 200 m^2
- Larger OLAs are recommended in parks with sufficient space and amenities
- OLAs that are 1,500 m^2 or larger can use grass surfacing
- OLAs larger than 6,000 m^2 should include features like walking paths and different surface types including grass

Configuration:
- OLAs should be fully fenced
- OLAs should be irregularly shaped to create diverse activity zones
- OLAs should incorporate natural refuges and pathways to encourage owner movement

Relationship with Adjacent Amenities:
- OLAs should have adequate separation and fencing from roads, parking, play areas and pathways to prevent conflicts and ensure safety

Recommended Setbacks:
- OLAs should have specific setback distances from adjacent uses to ensure minimal disruption and enhance safety.
- Where recommended setbacks are not achievable, mitigation measures are recommended

Availability of Services:
- OLAs should consider proximity to water, hydro, storm and sanitary services to reduce construction and maintenance costs
- Sub drainage is to be managed on site through daylighting, a soakaway pit, and low impact development (LID) techniques whenever feasible
- If necessary, connect required subdrainage system to existing below ground sanitary or stormwater infrastructure within the park property or ROW, if feasible

Part B: Design Guidance are organized into primary and optional features. Mandatory requirements include:

- **Topography and Drainage:** OLAs are ideally flat, well-drained sites to minimize maintenance and improve user experience. Where appropriate subdrainage system should be considered to achieve this design intent
- **Surfacing:** Larger OLAs should use grass, while small to medium OLAs should use engineered wood chips and small sites should use K9 turf
- **Fences and Barriers** should be a minimum 1.5 m height and corrosion-

resistant, with gaps no larger than 75 mm and designed to prevent digging and climbing

- **Entrances** should be located away from high-traffic areas and designed as double-gated entries
- **Signage** should be clear, concise and accessible
- **Seating** should include accessible benches installed on concrete pads, with half located in shaded locations if possible
- **Accessibility** should prioritize barrier-free routes to and within OLAs
- **Shade** should be distributed throughout the site with trees planted outside the fenced perimeter

Optional amenities include:

- **Water,** such as bottle fillers with pet bowls, water taps for cleaning and mandatory water access for K9 turf maintenance
- **Lighting,** using City standard dark-sky compliant lighting at entrances and outside the perimeter for safety and extended use
- **Planting,** including trees and shrubs for shade and screening planted outside the fence to minimize maintenance
- **Parking,** including accessible routes from the parking area to the OLA and screening from parking areas
- **Other Amenities,** such as small dog areas and play elements to enhance the user experience

Figure 1.1. Sir Casimir Gzowski Off-Leash Area

Introduction

Toronto has 81 off-leash areas (OLAs) in parks throughout the city. Most wards have OLAs, which vary in size, design amenities, condition and usage. With an estimated dog population of 600,000 or more, OLAs have become an important park amenity for dog owners.

This document provides location criteria and design guidance for constructing OLAs in City parks. It builds on recommendations from the 2010 Off-leash Areas policy, the 2017 Facilities Master Plan, the 2019 Implementation Strategy for Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan and the 2021 report: City-Wide Study for Existing City of Toronto Dogs-Off- Leash Areas.

Process

In October 2023, City Council directed the Parks and Recreation division to review and update the City's approach to OLAs. As part of this review, a series of consultation activities with a variety of stakeholders, including OLA users, the general public and stakeholder groups were conducted as well as interviews with City Councillors.

Many of the recommendations contained in this report were considered through these consultations. In addition, City staff were consulted throughout the process including representatives from various sections in Parks and Recreation, including staff from Policy and Strategic Planning, Parks Planning & Strategic Initiatives, Capital Projects Design and Delivery, Standards and Innovation, and Parks Operations as well as Urban Forestry in the Environment, Climate and Forestry division.

Existing OLAs

The focus of this document is to provide location criteria and design guidelines, including design details and specifications for constructing new off-leash areas.

Where possible, OLAs undergoing significant renovations should apply these recommendations to improve safety, user experience, and ease of maintenance.

How to Use This Document

This document is organized into three parts.

Part A: Location Criteria details six primary considerations when locating a new off-leash area. These include size, configuration, relationship with adjacent amenities, setbacks, availability of services and proximity to other (existing or planned) off-leash areas.

Part B: Design Guidance addresses the essential design elements of an OLA including topography, drainage, surfacing, fencing, entrances, signage, seating and shade, as well as amenities like water and lighting to enhance the user experience.

This guidance intends to create consistency and predictability in OLA designs to improve user satisfaction, safety, and maintenance efficiency.

Appendix A contains information on Common Plant Species Toxic to Dogs and Suitable for OLAs.

Part A: Location Criteria

There are six primary considerations when locating an off-leash area:

- Size
- Configuration
- Relationship with Adjacent Amenities
- Setbacks
- Availability of Services
- Proximity to Existing Off-leash Areas

Size

OLAs should be as spacious as feasible, considering space limitations and the cost to build and maintain them.

- Larger OLAs are recommended in parks with sufficient space and amenities to provide sufficient space for dogs, their owners and associated amenities
- OLAs greater than 6,000 m^2 provide the opportunity to design features that encourage owners to walk with the dogs; however, these types of extra-large OLAs may require large available land area and resources
- There is a direct correlation between OLA size and appropriate surface type:
    - OLAs over 1,500 m^2 typically support grass surfacing that will accommodate periodic/seasonal closing of a portion of the OLA to allow for rejuvenation of the grass as required
    - OLAs between 500 and 1,500 m^2 typically will not support grass and therefore should use engineered wood chips
    - In some areas, such as more densely populated/urban areas with limited park space, OLAs may be between 200 and 500 m^2. These will require using an alternative surface material (e.g., engineered wood chips or K9 artificial turf)
- For smaller OLAs, focus on using robust materials and unique design features and providing more amenities to support users
- OLAs under 200 m^2 are not recommended as it will not serve the intended use of an OLA (i.e. exercise for dogs)

Configuration

The shape and configuration of an OLA is influenced by the site's characteristics.

- All new OLAs are recommended to be fully fenced
- Irregular shapes are preferred to wide open rectangles as they allow the OLA to be informally divided into a variety of spaces with points of refuge away from higher energy dogs or the main flow of activity
- OLA fence lines should be configured with rounded corners whenever possible to facilitate easier maintenance
- Activity zones can be made by using earth mounding, fencing or vegetation (outside the OLA) to create visual barriers within the park to interrupt dogs from running towards each other

- Spaces of natural refuge should be provided where dogs can get away for “time outs”
- Large OLAs should incorporate walking paths and trails within the space to encourage dog owners to walk with their dogs rather than stand still

Relationship with Adjacent Amenities

The placement of an off-leash area within a park should be considered on a case-by-case basis along with site-specific mitigation measures. Typical amenities to consider when placing a new OLA include:

- Roads
- Parking
- Play areas
- Pathways
- Trees and vegetation

Roads

- Provide appropriate separation and OLA fencing design (e.g., height) to help avoid inadvertent vehicle and dog interactions should a dog accidentally leave the OLA off-leash
- Consider access for both periodic and seasonal maintenance and more frequent maintenance
- As reactive dogs may be triggered by road activity, consider screening roads and access routes to minimize barking
- Provide a direct accessible route from the sidewalk to the OLA for accessibility

Parking

Access to existing parking may be an appropriate consideration to support use from outside the immediate community. Key considerations may include:

- Provide an accessible route that connects the accessible parking stalls to the OLA
- On-street parking may substitute or augment off-street parking if deemed appropriate
- Provide an appropriate setback from the OLA for safety
- Screen the OLA from the parking lot if parking is close to the OLA, to discourage owners from sitting in their car while observing their dogs

Play Areas

- Provide appropriate separation and fencing to help avoid inadvertent interactions should a dog accidentally leave the OLA off-leash
- Strategically locate tree planting and landform (i.e., berms) outside of the OLA to help visually screen play areas from reactive dogs
- Ensure the OLA’s entrance(s) are oriented away from play areas to discourage OLA users from walking their dog(s) through play areas or near locations where children may gather

Pathways

- Ensure pathways and pedestrian circulation routes to and from the OLA avoid creating pinch points between OLA users and other park users
- Avoid placing OLA entrances that open directly onto adjacent primary pedestrian routes
- Avoid placing OLA entrances in close proximity to general park entrances to mitigate conflicts with general park

users and discourage OLA users from letting their dog(s) off-leash before entering the OLA

Existing Trees and Vegetation

- Install fencing a minimum of 3 m from any tree or outside of the tree protection zone as defined by Urban Forestry (whichever is greater)
- All design and implementation will be in accordance with Article VII of Chapter 608
- Any healthy mature tree cannot be removed and must be protected by fencing, as approved by Urban Forestry
- Preference is for fencing to not create an island but rather a extend around groups of trees
- Where fencing encloses trees a swing gate of at least 3 m in width is required to accommodate equipment for maintaining the tree(s)
- Ensure trees and shrubs within and adjacent to the OLA are not toxic to dogs

Setbacks

OLAs should be set back from adjacent uses to reduce noise and odours, minimize disruption, and enhance safety. Setbacks should consider usage levels and the park setting.

Table 1.1 provides recommendations on the distance an OLA should be set back from its adjacent use. Where recommended setbacks are not achievable, the following mitigation measures should be considered:

- place entrances to the OLA away from adjacent uses

Table 1.1. Recommended Setbacks

Adjacent Use	Minimum Setback (metres)[1]
Ravines and Natural Features [3]	10 [4]
Watercourse [3]	10 [4]
Natural Area (ESA)[3]	10 [4]
Playground	15
Pools, wading pools and splash pads	20
Sports Field	15
Sports Courts and Tennis Courts	15
Commercial	10
Industrial	10
Residential	20
Cultural or historical feature	25
School Yard[2]/Childcare Centre	50
Road/right-of-way	5
Parking	5
Pedestrian pathway/ sidewalk	5

Notes:

1. Where there are multiple uses, the more stringent setback should be applied
2. School Yard is defined as the building and paved area immediately surrounding the school
3. Environmentally Significant Area (ESA), ravine and watercourse setback distances are mandatory and are to be confirmed in consultation with City of Toronto Urban Forestry
4. Setback measured from the limit of the Toronto Municipal Code Chapter 658 Ravine and Natural Protection By-law as shown in the City's iView mapping system

Figure 1.2. Existing Trees in Toronto OLAs (left: L'Amoreaux Park, trees within OLA have died; right: Sir Casimir Gzowski Park trees fenced off from OLA)

- use berms and landforms
- install solid (acoustic) fence panels and screens
- integrate planting to provide a screen

These measures should be used strategically while preserving visibility for safety. Cost should also be a consideration when budgeting for the overall design and construction of the OLA.

New off leash areas should not be established within the following areas as identified in the 2010 Off-leash policy and aligned with recommended setbacks:

- playgrounds, splash pads and wading pools horticultural display areas or ornamental gardens
- skateboard bowls, tennis courts and other sports pads
- sportsfields and stadiums
- artificial or natural ice rinks, toboggan hills
- animal display areas
- campgrounds
- designated heritage, memorial, commemorative and ceremonial areas
- burial grounds
- areas posted prohibiting dogs
- swimming beaches, with the exception of Kew-Balmy and Woodbine beaches from November 1st to March 31st below snow fence line only
- natural environment areas:
  - areas protected by Municipal Code Chapter 658, Ravine and Natural Features Protection.
  - areas protected by Ontario Regulation 166/06 and lands owned by Toronto and Region Conservation Authority (TRCA) must be approved

by TRCA. Criteria reviewed include but are not limited to assessment of site in relation to hydraulic floodways, conservation of land, protection of watercourses / fish, habitat / groundwater and recharge / discharge zones.
- areas that have undergone tree/ shrub/wildflower planting or where plans exist for such planting to occur
- natural shorelines with natural vegetation that would be disturbed by compaction and foot / paw traffic.
- areas containing species of concern, including local or regionally uncommon, rare, threatened or endangered species.
- Environmentally Significant Areas, as defined by the City of Toronto.

Services

Water, hydro, storm, sanitary

Although on site management of run-off using low impact development (LID) and other passive infiltration techniques is encouraged, the proximity to water, hydro, storm and sanitary services may be an important consideration when selecting an OLA location especially for OLAs intending to use K9 surfacing.

The cost of construction may increase if one or more of these desired utilities are missing. Even if the service(s) is available within a park, the distance from the service must also be factored into the site evaluation process. For smaller OLA sites proposing engineered wood chips or K9 Turf for surfacing, an outlet is required to connect the subdrainage system and ensure run-off can be collected. If daylighting, a soakaway pit or low-impact development (LID) techniques are not feasible, connecting to existing below ground sanitary or stormwater infrastructure within the park property, or right-of-way may need to be investigated. Engage Toronto Water early in the site selection and design development process to determine feasibility and cost implications.

In addition, for maintenance of K9 turf, a water service for permanent irrigation may be required for regular cleaning. Consult with supplier, Toronto Water, Toronto Public Health and the Parks Operations and Maintenance Staff as needed. Determine if review and approval from Toronto Public Health and Toronto Water may be required.

Part B: Design Guidance

Overview

The following section describes the specific considerations associated with the design, operations and maintenance of off-leash areas. These are organized into two types: mandatory requirements and optional amenities.

Mandatory requirements include:

- Topography and Drainage
- Surfacing
- Fences and Barriers
- Entrances
- Signage
- Seating
- Accessibility
- Shade

Optional amenities are value-added features that are nice to have but are not required. These include but are not limited to:

- Water
- Lighting
- Planting
- Parking
- Other amenities (e.g., small dog area, play elements)

The intent is to create consistency and predictability in the design and materials used in all new off-leash areas (OLAs) within the city. The goal is to raise the bar on OLAs' design to improve user satisfaction; dog and owner health and safety; and efficiency in operations, repairs, and maintenance; and to promote consistency in design and predictable construction costs.

Primary Requirements

Topography and Drainage

There is a direct correlation between topography (slope), a site's drainage characteristics and the performance of an OLA. Generally, relatively flat, well-drained OLAs are preferred. However, alternative conditions may be suitable given appropriate design and material considerations.

- A relatively flat site with slopes between two and four percent will allow for any number of surfacing materials to be used requiring less maintenance than variable terrain
- While grass can be established and maintained on variable terrain with slopes up to 25 percent (for mowing), a flatter site with consistent drainage will help to minimize isolated muddy areas
- Engineered wood chips must be installed on flatter sites. When wood chips are installed on slopes, the wood chips will migrate and collect at the bottom of the slope, necessitating regular re-distribution (i.e., maintenance)
- Uniformly graded sites will help to minimize the potential for pooling of water and/or the migration of engineered wood chip surfacing. This should reduce the need for maintenance due to muddy conditions

- Runoff or drainage to the city storm and sewer system is discouraged. Storm water should be managed on site where feasible using low-impact development (LID) techniques (i.e. bioswales). For any consideration regarding connections to existing or new below ground Toronto Water infrastructure Toronto Water must be consulted.

Surfacing

The type of surface material is unique to each OLA with consideration of the site's size, slope and frequency of use. While existing OLAs use a variety of material type, new OLAs should only use one of the three types of material:

- grass
- engineered wood chips
- K9 (artificial) turf

Table 1.3 highlights the advantages and disadvantages of each surface type and when it should be used.

It is recommended that larger OLAs use a variety of surfaces to address variable conditions where it may be insufficient to use one type of surface throughout the site. For example, grassed OLAs may require the strategic use of engineered wood chips near entrances to address seasonally muddy areas.

Operations and Maintenance Considerations:

Turf (grass)

- Requires inspection, mowing, fertilization, aeration, overseeding and repair of bare spots
- Must have access to water for irrigation to aid in repairs and establishment of new turf
- Recommended seasonal partial closing on a rotating basis to allow for repair and regeneration of turf
- Recommend providing permanent fencing to organize OLA into multiple management areas to facilitate partial closure and seasonal regeneration of grassed areas
- Use Engineered Wood Chips to cover seasonally muddy areas

Engineered Wood Chips (EWC)

- Requires inspection, raking, and top-up
- EWC must be replaced (as required)

K9 (artificial) Turf

- Requires inspection and repair of surface
- Must have water access for regular maintenance/cleaning

Sub-drainage

An engineered sub-drainage system is required for OLAs using engineered wood chips and K9 (artificial) turf surfaces. Depending on costing, sub-drainage may also be considered on a case-by-case basis for irrigated turf (grass) surfaced OLAs. This system would include:

- Perforated 150 diametre drainage tile in a 450 mm clear stone trench around the perimeter of the OLA and in all low areas
- Drainage infrastructure (pipes and stone trench) buried at least 450 below ground level for engineered wood chip surfaces, to prevent damage due to exposure from digging

Table 1.2. Comparison of Surfacing Types

Mandatory Criteria	Advantages	Disadvantages	Application
Turf (grass)	• Natural • Soft on paws • Accessible	• Can be muddy • Not suitable for small sites • Challenging to maintain	• Medium to large OLAs (>1,500 m²) • Seed mix resilient to wear, drought and dog urine • Design OLA to allow for rotating closure for turf restoration
Engineered Wood Chips	• Less mud and dust • Easy to install • Relatively soft on paws	• Relatively flat sites only (<4%) • Difficult to clean • Degrades over time • Requires regular maintenance (raking and top-ups) • Odour problems • Pathway for accessibility • Requires access to outlet subdrains, and/or room for soakaway, and/or access to storm or sanitary, as required based on existing site conditions	• Small to medium OLAs (approximately 500 to 3,000 m²) • 300 mm minimum depth
K9 (artificial) Turf	• Excellent drainage • Durable • Easy to clean • Accessible	• High cost • Requires irrigation and frequent maintenance • Can get very hot • Requires connection to sanitary and/or storm	• Small sites (approximately <500 to 1,000 m²) with access to water and sanitary and/or storm

- Drainage tile network to be daylighted, connected to a low impact development (LID) feature, soakaway pit, sanitary or storm
- Clear stone provided throughout K9 (artificial) turf areas, and perforated drainage tile at regular intervals as per manufacturer's recommendation
- Minimizing the use of filter fabric to separate clear stone from engineered wood chips, as this will be exposed and ripped by dogs

Fencing and Barriers

Fencing is required to contain dogs, while strategically placed barriers and screens should be used to help reduce visual distractions from outside the OLA that may trigger reactive dogs (i.e., cause barking). The following are key considerations:

- Ensure a minimum fence height of 1.5 m
- Consider a taller fence (up to 1.8 m) where containment is absolutely imperative (i.e., near playgrounds, splash pads, school yards or adjacent to busy roads)

- Fence type, desired level of screening and aesthetic preference can vary based on context, but should meet the following requirements:
  - Materials must be resistant to corrosion from dog urine
  - Design should prevent dogs from digging underneath
  - A smooth finished top will avoid injury in case of climbing or dogs trying to jump over fence
  - There should be no protruding sharp edges or wires that may injure dogs
  - There should be no gaps between gates, fencing or posts greater than 75 mm
- In more natural environments, can install post and paddle fencing with welded wire mesh installed at least 250 mm below finished grade
- In more urban environments, can use a black steel/metal fence
- Where appropriate, consider surface mounting the fence on a concrete curb to protect the bottom from excessive damage from dog urine
- Consider providing a poured concrete curb under the fence line to prevent weed and dendrite growth through the fence and to prevent dogs from digging underneath
- Where possible, integrate low berms, coniferous tree screens or low planting (grasses and shrubs under 1.2 m) around the outside perimeter of the fence to help screen dogs' views inside and outside of the OLA
- Consider screening strategically on a case-by-case basis, while preserving sightlines for user safety

Entrances

Well-designed and durable entrances are an integral part of an OLA. Key considerations include:

Figure 1.3. Maintenance Access at Sunnybrook Off-Leash Area

Placement

- Locate away from high traffic/activity areas (e.g., playgrounds, splash pads, multi-use pathways)
- Provide at least two entrance and exit points, when site conditions permit, to address user safety
- Allow room outside of the OLA for waste receptacle placement and collection and for dog owners' ease of use
- Provide at least on locked double gated access point for maintenance (suggest 3 metres wide)

Configuration

- Provide a double-gated entry with transition (corral) area between gates
- Ensure entrance corral area is a minimum of 3.5 by 3.5 m^2
- Install entrance corral on hard surface (i.e., concrete) to prevent pooling of water and mud
- Install gates over hard surface to prevent small dogs from digging or slipping under the gate
- Provide planting to help screen the view of dogs inside and outside of the OLA to help reduce barking from reactive dogs and to stop dogs from rushing the entrance
- Continue hard surface pathway from gate into OLA for accessibility and to help prevent entrance area from becoming muddy during wet weather

Gate Design

- Install a quiet and durable closing latch with rubber or silicone to help with sound isolation
- Ensure latch allows for easy one-handed operation at a height operable by a person using a mobility device (i.e., no greater than 1 m)
- Ensure gates swing into OLA to help push dog back into enclosure

Figure 1.5. Entrance Corral at L'Amoreaux Off-Leash Area

Figure 1.4. Urine Corrosion at Allan Gardens Off-Leash Area

Signage

Informational signs are crucial for ensuring clear communication, safety and accessibility. Each panel should display relevant details specific to each OLA including name, hours of operation, commercial dog walker status and fence design. Supporting signs can be used to mitigate behaviour based on the OLA.

Sign Placement

- Entrance signs should be placed along the main pathway leading to the entrance, facing approaching users. If the entrance is significantly set back from the path, road or trail, consider placing one information sign at the entrance and another at the pathway, roadway or trail
- Where entrance signs cannot be placed along the pathway, roadway or trail, they may be placed at the gate
- Exit signs should be placed at the gate facing exiting users

Sign Material and Size

- Signage should be 4mm dibond (1/4 may be used if material is not available) and non-reflective vinyl
- Sign panel size should not differ from the properties established by the City's

Other Guidance

- Where signs are placed at the gate, rubber washers can be used to reduce the noise cause by the gate opening and closing
- Suggest to place signs no less than 5 m away from stairs, steep slops or other unprotected drop offs

Accessibility

Creating a barrier-free environment for all users is an important component of OLAs' design. This includes providing a barrier-free route to and from the OLA as well as a barrier-free route within the OLA, and giving consideration to seating and gate design.

Pathway to/from Off-Leash Area

- Provide an accessible route to/from the OLA from the park's main pathway, public sidewalk or parking lot
- Ensure walkway is at least 2.1 m wide to allow for sufficient space for a mobility device with a dog on-leash
- Consider widening pathways to 3 m where site conditions allow for waste collection if bins are located on a pathway
- Where feasible, place new OLA entrances adjacent to City sidewalks to increase accessibility

Accessible Route within OLA

- Provide an accessible route from the main entrance into the OLA
- Ensure route is at least 2.1 m wide
- In grass and engineered wood chip surfaced OLAs, ensure paved concrete route extends at least 8 m beyond the gate to a bench to help prevent the congregation of owners and pets at the entrance
- In larger OLAs, consider extending around the OLA's perimeter to provide more access and encourage owners to move with their dog

Seating

Although seating may encourage a lack of owner interaction with their dogs, users often spend 30 minutes at an off-leash area. Therefore, it is important to provide adequate seating from a user comfort, experience and accessibility perspective.

- Provide one bench for each 500 m^2 of surface area in all OLAs over 500 m^2
- Install benches on concrete pads with space for a wheelchair or scooter on one side
- Meet the City's Accessibility Design Guidelines in regards to percentage of accessible benches
- Locate at least 50 percent of all benches (including 50 percent of all accessible benches) in shade
- In larger OLAs:
    - Locate benches at least 8 m from any entry or exit gates
    - Space benches at least 8 m apart to avoid creating conversation nodes, which may distract owners
    - Provide at least one bench in association with the accessible route, ideally at least 8 m from the entrance and exit
- Place benches at least 2 m from the fence to prevent dogs from using the bench to jump over fence
- Avoid providing picnic tables, as these can encourage people to bring food and drinks inside the OLA

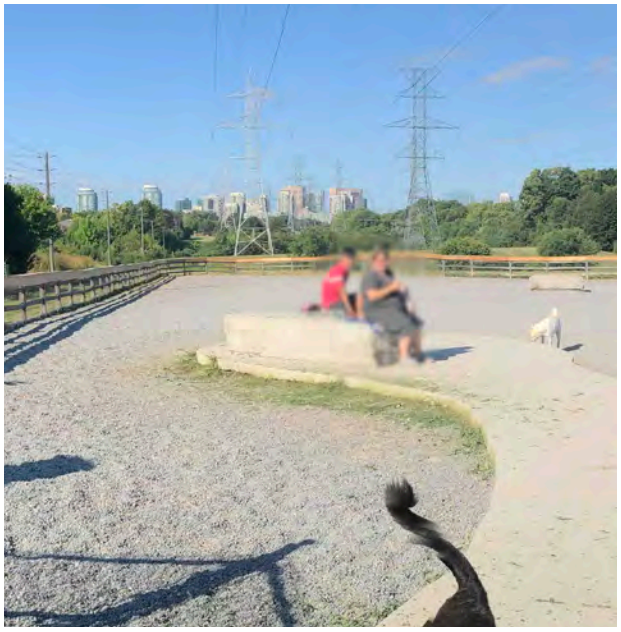

Figure 1.6. Accessible Route to Seating at Bayview Park Off-Leash Area

Gate Design

Gate design and configuration needs to consider accessibility in regards to users with mobility devices. This includes:

- Gate width
- Gate operation
- One-handed latch operation
- Latch height to accommodate users in a seated position

Shade

Providing shade within OLAs is important for both owners' and dogs' comfort.

- Try to distribute shade throughout the site to avoid OLA users from congregating in one location
- Strategically plant trees at least 3.0 m beyond the OLA's fence line to provide shaded locations within the enclosed area
- Look for innovative ways to incorporate vegetation for shade around the outside of the fenced perimeter without relying on trees in the middle of the OLA, as maintenance of trees within OLAs can be challenging and tree protection

zones take up limited space, especially in smaller OLAs

- If a shade structure is provided, it must be open sided
- Footings should be either located outside of the OLA (with the structure cantilevered over the fence) or be exposed with the top of the concrete at least 450 mm above grade to minimize corrosion from dog urine
- Shade sails or temporary structures are not permitted

Optional Features

Water

While water is a highly desired feature in OLAs, incorporating it is not always feasible from an operations or budget perspective. The decision to include water assets should be made in consultation with the community and consider:

- Introducing a bottle filler with a pet bowl feature when an existing park water service and connection to sanitary is available. The bottle filler with pet bowl should be located outside of the OLA at least 8 m from the entrance and fence line
- Any water feature for use inside the OLA should be installed as a line post on the fence so that it can be serviced from outside the OLA fence line
- Access to water is required where K9 (artificial turf) surface is proposed, to facilitate regular cleaning of the surface
- Any water service feature (e.g., spray hose, bottle filler, tap) must be mounted to a concrete pad a minimum of 1.5 by 1.5 m diameter to help minimize

Figure 1.7. Shade at Sir Casimir Gzowski Off-Leash Area

puddling and creation of mud around the water source

Lighting

Lighting increases safety and extends OLA hours of operation. However, lighting can contribute to light pollution affecting nearby residents and wildlife. It may also be impractical due to operations or budget constraints, particularly if electrical services are not readily available.

- Consider introducing lighting when an existing park electrical service is available
- Consider lighting to support evening and early morning use in alignment with the park's hours of operation
- Consider lighting at entrances and outside of the perimeter fence only to avoid potential damage to light poles from dog urine and to facilitate ease of servicing using a bucket truck
- Use the City's guidelines for lighting, and direct lighting away from adjacent residential properties
- Consider timers and/or automatic activation where appropriate
- While solar lighting can be considered, it typically does not provide sufficient illumination

Planting

Incorporating trees and shrubs into OLA design may provide shade and/or screen the OLA to help minimize barking from reactive dogs. However, the use of plants should only be considered in consultation with Urban Forestry and used strategically to avoid an unnecessary maintenance or operational burden. In most instances, planting should be done outside of the OLA fence to help minimize dogs' impact (i.e., urine) and provide easy access

for maintenance. Planting for screening should be used strategically to block views of adjacent facilities and walkways (not around the entire perimeter). Some considerations include:

- Strategically provide tree planting outside the OLA's perimeter to provide shade
- Strategically place coniferous evergreen trees around the perimeter to help screen views into and out of OLA to address reactive dogs
- Plant trees at least 3.0 m from the fence line to allow turf maintenance equipment to safely pass between trees and the fence
- Consider low planting under 1.2 m to screen OLA views and help mitigate reactivity between dogs
- Select plants that are non-toxic to dogs as well as plants that don't drop fruit or seeds (see Appendix A)
- Plant species that are tolerant of soils high in nitrogen and other salts to minimize the impact of dog urine (see Appendix A)
- Although discouraged in most cases, any trees proposed in the OLA must be enclosed with 3 m by 3 m fencing (from the centre of the tree) with 10 gauge wire
- Avoid planting close to corral entrance and exit to minimize damage from dog urine

Parking

- Provide appropriate separation and fencing to help avoid inadvertent vehicle and dog interactions

- Consider access for both periodic and seasonal maintenance and more frequent maintenance
- Screen parking and provide sufficient setbacks to discourage owners from sitting in their car to watch their dogs
- Provide a direct accessible route from the parking lot to the OLA for accessibility

Other Amenities

Other amenities to consider in OLA design include:

- Small Dog Area
- Play Elements
- Fetching Lanes

Small Dog Area

Many jurisdictions provide small dog areas with clearly defined weight restrictions to prevent injury to small dogs due to boisterous play, bullying behaviour or predatory behaviour.

- In consultation with the community, consider providing a separate small dog area
- A small dog area should be at least 600 m^2 or 30 percent of the total OLA
- When possible, a separate double-gated entrance should be provided so that small dogs do not need to go through the main OLA entrance
- If there is community interest, consider a pilot project to include shy dogs as being permitted in the small dog area

Figure 1.8. Plant Screening at Wychwood Off-Leash Area

Play Elements

Adding play elements may not be appropriate for all OLAs given space requirements, costs for other OLA features (limited budget) and community interest. Furthermore, without proper training, some obstacles can be dangerous, especially for young dogs. Play elements should be limited to beginner-type or low-impact obstacles.

- In consultation with the community, consider incorporating informal play features in the off-leash area to allow dogs to practice their natural skills
- Incorporate features such as boulders to help enrich a dog's experience
- High-impact formal agility equipment including jumps, ladders, and A-frames can pose a safety problem if dogs and their owners that are not trained in their proper use
- Play elements should be located at least 3 m from perimeter fencing and be no taller than 600 mm

Fetching Lane

Providing separate zones for more active play can help to minimize conflicts between different users. Features such as a fetching lane – a designated area for playing fetch – may be considered in consultation with the community when space exists.

- Similar to a fast lane in a swimming pool, a fetching lane is only suitable for OLAs with adequate space free of obstructions and outside the regular flow of activity
- A fetching lane should not consume more than 10 percent of the total OLA area
- The recommended minimum size for a fetching lane is 5 m by 25 m

Figure 1.9. Logs at High Park Off-Leash Area

Appendix A:

List of Common Plant Species Toxic to Dogs and Suitable for OLAs

Common Outdoor Plants Toxic to Dogs in Ontario

There are many commonly found plants toxic to dogs in Toronto. The following list is of the most common toxic perennials, shrubs and trees. Also included are some trees that are considered problematic for dogs as they drop food and nuts that can be choking hazards. However it should be noted that all significant litter-producing trees can cause conflict because of

the perceived danger of dogs ingesting unknown seeds, nuts and fruit. Therefore the planting of any potential problematic trees should be avoided as much as possible in the vicinity of an off-leash area.

Perennials

- Asclepias
- Chrysanthemum
- Colchicum
- Convallaria
- Digitalis
- Helleborus
- Hosta
- Iris
- Narcissus
- Paeonia
- Rheum
- Tulipa

Shrubs

- Buxus
- Euonymus
- Hydrangea
- Ilex
- Kalmia
- Ligustrum
- Nerium oleander
- Rhododendron
- Taxus

Trees

- Aesculus
- Gymnocladus
- Juglans
- Prunus
- Robinia

There are a significant number of additional species found in Ontario that are toxic to dogs. For a full list consult the ASPCA's Toxic and Non-Toxic Plant List - Dogs at: https://www.aspca.org/pet-care/animal-poison-control/dogs-plant-list

Plants Suitable for Planting Near OLAs

Plants growing in urban areas can experience very challenging conditions including soil compaction, insufficient soil volume and exposure to salt and other pollutants. Dog urine is harmful to plants due to high amounts of nitrogen and salts. This overabundance in the soil affects a plant's ability to uptake water. Like the effects of fertilizer burn or de-icing salts, water is pulled away from soil microbes and plant roots, causing dehydration.

Most research and discussion available online about plants and dog urine is focused on lawn care. The best practice for dog owners who are concerned with limiting lawn damage is to dilute the pee spot with water after the dog has finished its business. This can also be done on a larger scale using an irrigation system.

There are also species of turf grass known to be more tolerant of dog urine such as fescue and perennial ryegrass.

Unfortunately, no research-based information compares the relative tolerance (to dog urine) of different species of trees, shrubs and perennials in Ontario or nearby regions. In a 2022 trial study, 10 different species of native shrubs were used in eight public gardens in the northeast, including Madison Square Park Conservancy in Manhattan. Dog owners were asked to have their dog pee on the plants. Unfortunately, the findings of this study are unavailable online and it is unknown if the trial was successfully completed.

It is recommended that plants used near OLAs be salt-tolerant and drought-tolerant. With these criteria, the recommended plants would be similar to those chosen for high salt, low soil volume conditions such as those around parking lots and streetscapes.

Native plants with salt tolerance and drought tolerance include but are not limited to the following:

Perennials and Grasses

- Common Yarrow (Achillea millefolium)
- Silver Sagebrush (Artemisia Ludoviciana)
- Spotted Bee Balm (Monarda punctata)
- Culver's Root (Veronicastrum virginicum)
- Blanket Flower (Gaillardia aristate)
- Broom Sedge (Andropogon virginicus)
- Tufted Hair Grass (Deschampsia cespitosa)
- Little Blue Stem (Schizachyrium Scoparium)
- Indian Grass (Sorghastrum nutans)

Shrubs and Small Trees:

- Sweet Fern (Comptonia peregrina)
- Bush Honeysuckle (Diervilla Lonicera)
- Silverberry (Elaeagnus commutata)
- Shrubby St. John's Wort (Hypericum prolificum)
- Staghorn Sumac (Rhus typhina)
- Snowberry (Symphoricarpos albus)

Trees:

- Bur Oak (Quercus macrocarpa)
- Red Oak (Quercus rubra)
- Paper Birch (Betula papyrifera)
- Hackberry (Celtis occidentalis)
- Eastern Red Cedar (Juniperus virginiana)