

Meeting Summary - Stakeholder Meeting #1

City-Wide Study of Existing Dog Off-Leash Areas
Design, Operations, Maintenance & Best Practices
Metro Hall - Room 308 / 309, 55 John Street, Toronto
Thursday, June 20, 2019
6:30 – 8:30

OVERVIEW

On Thursday, June 20, 2019, the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation hosted a stakeholder meeting for its City-Wide Study of Dog Off-Leash Areas. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce stakeholders to the Study and to present and seek feedback on: a preliminary best practices review; draft criteria to select case study sites; and a proposed approach to a public-facing survey and Discussion Guide to inform the Study. Approximately 30 people attended the meeting, including members of Dog Owners' Associations, dog walkers' associations, and others.

Sue Wenzl from the City of Toronto and Ian Malczewski from Swerhun Inc. provided an overview of the study, and Michael Tocher and Trish Clarke from thinc design presented initial observations and analysis around dog off-leash area best practices. thinc design also presented draft case study site selection criteria. Questions of clarification, breakout group discussions, and a plenary discussion followed the presentations. Participants also shared written feedback in the meeting and afterwards by email.

This meeting summary was prepared by Swerhun Inc., an independent third-party facilitation firm supporting the City of Toronto and thinc design in stakeholder and community engagement for the City-Wide Study of Existing Dog Off-Leash Areas. This summary captures feedback shared at the meeting and is not intended to serve as a verbatim transcript. A draft of this summary was shared with participants for review before it was finalized.

KEY MESSAGES

These Key Messages highlight major topics brought forward from meeting participants; readers should review them in concert with the more detailed summary of feedback below.

Desire for more communication and a better relationship between dog owners and the City. Participants said they would like to have a better relationship with the City, including being seen as partners rather than as problems. They said that dog owners have a lot of knowledge, expertise, and willingness to help with the maintenance of off-leash areas and would like the City to consider taking advantage.

General support for the Study. Participants were generally happy to see the City undertaking this Study to improve dog off-leash areas.

Strong desire to be consulted regularly in the process. Participants said they would like to be consulted on consistently and at major milestones in the process, including prior to the final selection of the proposed case study sites.

QUESTIONS OF CLARIFICATION

Following the overview presentation, participants asked questions of clarification. Questions and answers are summarized below.

Question: Does the City know the proportion of licensed dogs to all dogs in the City? **Answer:** The percentage of licensed dogs is much lower than the actual dog population. 50,000 – 70,000 dogs are currently licensed, but the City estimates the population to be closer to 300k. The lack of clear data on the number unlicensed dogs makes it difficult for the City to know where dogs are in relation to OLAs. *Note added after the meeting:* The city confirmed that there were 54,202 dogs registered in 2018.

Question: What is the end product of this Study? Who develops, reviews, and approves it? **Answer:** thinc design is the prime consultant responsible for developing the Study, including reviewing best practices, proposing case study sites, and providing recommendations to City staff. thinc will also share information on how to implement recommended improvements. City staff will review, comment on, and ultimately approve the Study. The City will also review its budget to understand what can be implemented, including what kinds of changes could be implemented right away. The Study will not go to Council for approval.

Question: Given that engagement is occurring through to the end of this year, when might Study recommendations be included in the City's budget? **Answer:** The City is preparing its 2020 budget right now, so any budget considerations emerging from this Study will be considered in 2021 budgeting at the earliest. soonest.

Question: What does TRCA stand for? **Answer:** TRCA stands for Toronto and Region Conservation Authority. The TRCA is responsible for ravines and watersheds.

Question: Does City have numbers on the usage of OLAs? **Answer:** No. The City struggles with getting good, accurate data on OLA usage (or the usage of other park amenities), and this gap is something the City considers regularly. The City is able to infer OLA usage by looking at related data, such as the amount of garbage collected in parks.

Question: There is an inconsistency in how the City describes dog facilities in East Lynn Park. The park itself no longer has a dog off-leash area (which was relocated to Merrill Bridge Road Park), but the City's website still describes East Lynn Park as accommodating dogs off leash. Who is the right person to contact about this inconsistency (which could lead to conflicts)?

Answer: The City staff in the room are the right people: they have noted it and will look into it.

Question: K9 turf isn't listed as a surfacing type in the presentation. Why? **Answer:** The list in the presentation is intended to reflect what is on the ground in the City today, and while K9 turf has been approved, it has not yet been installed. That said, the team will be looking at K9 turf as part of this project.

Question: Why won't there won't be any new OLAs as a result of this Study? **Answer:** This Study focuses on the improvement and maintenance of existing OLAs, not creating new ones. That does not mean the City won't build new ones in the future, just that that is not within the scope of this Study.

Question: Are new OLAs only being built or maintained Downtown because of Section 37 money, where a lot of development happens? **Answer:** It's unclear if there is a direct link between Section 37 funds (received from developers in exchange for increased height and density in Planning approvals processes), and the number of OLA areas. That said, Section 37 money could be a mechanism used to fund the development of future OLAs.

Question: In order to be a professional dog-walker, you need 4-6 dogs and a permit that costs \$280.00. Why is this fee not allocated to the annual budget for OLAs? **Answer:** The City has a revenue target, and its current policies and procedures do not allow it to direct fees collected directly into an amenity. *Note added after the meeting:* The city confirmed that revenues from the sale of Commercial Dog Walking Permits flow to an account for general Parks, Forestry and Recreation (PFR) revenues. These revenues are distributed through the PFR operating budget, which supports the maintenance of off-leash areas and administrative costs of issuing the permits.

Question: What is the relationship between the TRCA, Parks, Forestry, and Recreation, and off-leash areas? **Answer:** The TRCA and the City work together regularly on issues where their jurisdictions connect. When the TRCA owns land, they tell the City what it can and cannot do on those lands (such as surface treatments, etc.). The City works closely with them and looks at balancing the needs of the whole community — the needs of the dogs and dog owners are one of many perspectives the City needs to consider when making decisions about how to manage its increasingly limited park space.

Question: Why are there only 8 sites being selected as case studies and how are you selecting them? **Answer:** The City chose the number of sites based on a combination of trying to balance the cost of undertaking the Study with the need to reflect the diverse range of OLAs across Toronto. The design team will be proposing case study site selection criteria and sites to the City for review and approval.

Question: What is the venue to connect with the City if I want to try and help my park if we have the resources to do this? **Answer:** The City has a dedicated email address for dog-off leash areas — dola@toronto.ca — which is the best place to connect.

Question: What will happen for dog parks that don't have representatives at this meeting? What about dog parks that don't have an official representative or group? **Answer:** this is a city-wide Study whose recommendations will apply to all dog parks, so a representative's absence does not mean their park will not be covered by this Study. That said, the team is planning to host future meetings across Toronto in an effort to reach other audiences. These meetings are targeted to people that are knowledgeable about an OLA and/or represent a broader constituency of dog owners. The City's best starting point for this audience is Dog Owner Association representatives, but if any participants know of an individual that knows an OLA well, could speak on behalf of that OLA's user-base. Where there is not an active OLA group, the City would be happy to receive their contact so they can be invited to future meetings.

Question: Will the surveys be online or in-person? **Answer:** They will be online. The team will share the link with stakeholders when it is live and would be grateful if you could distribute it to your network. The City will seek face-to-face feedback from the public at the Pup Ups in the case study site parks.

Question: When will the 8 sites be picked and how will it be communicated? **Answer:** The team will pick the sites in July and will communicate them back with this stakeholder group in the next meeting in the fall.

DETAILED FEEDBACK ABOUT IMPROVING OLAS

Participants shared feedback and advice about issues and opportunities they would like to see considered through the Study. Their advice is organized into four categories below: feedback about design, operations, and maintenance; feedback about communications and information

platforms; feedback about culture change and relationships; and feedback about funding and implementation.

Feedback about Design, Operations, and Maintenance

Participants said they would like to see the following design, operations, and maintenance ideas considered in the Study:

Provide additional seating in and around off-leash areas. Participants said they would like to see more seating both inside OLAs (for dog-walkers) and outside OLAs (for people who don't have a dog but want to come to the park or watch).

Shade and shelter, which are important for both humans and dogs. A few said their parks currently have inadequate covering or trees. Participants felt shelter should be available at all parks, saying it is important year-round to protect from sunlight, wind, and rain.

Play structures for dogs. Participants identified play equipment as an important design consideration to stimulate dogs and provide them with more interaction with the terrain, especially in smaller OLAs. Suggested play-supporting structures and landscaping features included logs, rocks, mounds, and obstacle courses.

Provide access to water features. Participants suggested the team look at adding water features such as drinking fountains and splash pads for dogs, especially in the summer months.

Terrain, surfaces, and fencing. Participants said topography and terrain are very important considerations for the design, operations, and maintenance of off-leash areas. They said they would like the team to consider multi-surfacing in OLAs, such as paved pathways and grassy areas. Participants also suggested exploring adding more fencing in downtown OLAs, saying partially-fenced OLAs can be confusing for both dog-owners and other park users.

Lighting. Participants said lighting is important for safety, especially when days are short, and suggested each park should have at least one well-lit area.

Promoting better maintenance. Participants said that leaving maintenance equipment in parks helps foster stewardship and supports keeping OLAs clean and orderly. They suggested adding more garbage cans, putting green bins in every OLA, and having free waste bag dispensers.

Promoting the Code of Conduct, signage, and increasing by-law enforcement. Participants suggested increasing education around the use of OLAs, particularly with more signage that explains etiquette, rules, and the Code of Conduct. Participants said a clear and present Code of Conduct would empower DOA reps to promote rules and create a safe space for everyone. Some said they wanted to see compliance and enforcement included in the scope of the Study. There was also a suggestion for the City to revisit time-of-use regulations for commercial dog walkers, suggesting that restricting their use of OLAs can lead to underuse of these assets, though others said it's important for OLAs to be primarily operated as assets for public use and benefit, not private, commercial benefit. *Note added after the meeting:* in a post-meeting email, a participant suggested the City consider updating the code of conduct to restrict balls in OLAs (or at least restrict the size of balls to a be "oversized") since there have been incidents of dogs choking on them. Connected to this comment, there was a suggestion for there to be a veterinary clinic that offers scope / extraction services within one kilometre of major OLAs.

Message boards and signage. Participants suggested the City to review the communications strategy in OLAs. Participants suggested each OLA should have a message board that could include important information, updates, reminders, and promotion of the local Dog Owner

Association group, if one exists. Other easy-to-read signage options could assist with OLA compliance such as flagging the safe number of dogs in a park, having “pick up after your pet” signs, or mapping where the OLA is within the greater context of a park.

Enforcement. Participants shared concern about “problem dogs” using OLAs and owners who have an inability to control them. They said they would like to see an effective way of enforcing bylaws to ensure that OLAs are a safe and enjoyable space for everyone.

Feedback about Communications and Information Platforms

Participants suggested the team consider a number of different ideas connected to communications platforms, including:

Online communication. Participants expressed interest in the creation of an online portal or platform that would allow for the exchange of information between OLAs, the City, dog walkers and owners, Dog Owner Association representatives, and other park users. They also suggested developing a smartphone app for Dog Owner Associations to collect usage data.

A website with information about OLAs. Participants suggested the City look into creating a website that provides details about each OLA in the City, including which OLAs have which assets and which OLAs are best-suited to which kinds of dogs.

An online support “ticketing” system. Participants suggested the City create a ticketing system that would allow OLA users to submit requests for maintenance, which would help foster accountability and allow the City and residents to track and monitor issues.

Feedback about Culture Change and Relationships

Highlight positive community impacts. Participants would like to see more attention given to the positive community and social impacts that dogs and OLAs have on social and economic factors in their park and surrounding neighbourhood. Participants said OLAs are important community hubs, which provide space for people and dogs to meet and develop relationships.

Encouraging stewardship. Many participants were interested in partnering with the City, saying Dog Owner Associations or community leaders could provide supplies and support for other dog owner initiatives in their neighbourhoods. They said Dog Owner Associations can help raise awareness and funding, promote compliance, and support community outreach. Participants said they would like a more direct way to connect and provide input to the City.

Work with Dog Owner Associations to expand collaborative relationships. Participants said they would like more opportunities like this stakeholder meeting to connect with the City to discuss ideas and issues related to OLAs. Some participants said they feel they are perceived as a problem by City staff and suggested creating collaborative relationships could help reduce this perception and improve the culture between dog owners and staff.

Increase transparency and coordinate “siloed” agencies. Participants would like more transparency and understanding about the jurisdictional responsibilities between the TRCA and the Parks, Forestry, and Recreation Division. Understanding the different jurisdictions and their mandates will help reduce some of the confusion and frustration of dog owners. Another participant suggested that a thorough explanation of the OLA standards and guidelines, such as the rationale of their size, would be helpful to increase trust and transparency.

Education. Participants would like to see more education around licensing dogs and dog etiquette. One person felt that the City’s Max campaign was ineffective due to brochures and

pamphlets having only been available in community centres and libraries and suggested that they be available in dog parks themselves or in dog license renewal packages.

Create more consistent expectations around community involvement. For example, in some parks, it's okay for residents to contribute resources such as wood chips to maintain the park; in other parks, it's not okay.

Feedback about Funding and Implementation

Explore the full costs of the OLAs. Participants said it will be important to study and reveal the full life-cycle costs of OLA, which goes far beyond maintenance costs. Other costs that are important to explore include materials and building costs.

Sponsorship and private funding. Some participants suggested the City explore sponsorships and/or private funding to help with maintenance costs. Suggested funding models included working with non-profits to raise money, fundraisers, private sponsorship, and donations. There was also a suggestion to use revenue from commercial dog walker's licensing to improve and maintain OLAs.

Additional funding will be needed to respond to climate change. It was noted that climate change impacts (e.g. flooding and intense heat) are impacting parks including OLAs and additional funding will be required to maintain and restore parks and OLAs.

FEEDBACK ABOUT CASE STUDY SITES

Participants shared advice about both the case study site selection criteria and the case study site review process.

Feedback about the case study site selection criteria

Participants agreed with many of the draft site selection criteria thinc design presented. In particular, participants agreed with the criteria focused on ensuring the selected sites included OLAs in densely populated neighbourhoods (e.g. near condos) and in less densely populated neighbourhoods (e.g. near single family homes). They also shared the following advice about additional case study site selection criteria for the team to consider:

OLAs with well-known issues. The selected case study sites should include parks with existing well-known issues. Coxwell Ravine, Colonel Samuel Smith, and Marie Curtis are examples of parks with well-known issues.

OLAs that have a variety of usage. Participants shared a range of perspectives on whether the selected case study sites should reflect a variety of usages. Some said the case study sites should include both lightly used and heavily used OLAs. Others said the team should only focus on well-used OLAs since it will be easier to speak with people at those OLAs to understand issues and opportunities.

OLAs in parks with lots of amenities (and in parks with limited amenities). Participants said both types of OLAs should be reflected in the selected case study sites. Other uses outside of OLAs that should be considered when selecting the case study sites include parks where runners and cyclists pass through the OLA (such as in High Park) or whether the OLA has a children's playground in the vicinity.

OLAS that reflect a range of carrying capacities, including both "high capacity" and "low capacity" OLAs.

Feedback about the case study site review process

Add more case study sites. Some suggested the City add more case study sites, saying 8 was too few to represent the range of OLAs across the City. They suggested 16 sites would be best, but 12 could also work.

Collect basic usage statistics prior to selecting the case study sites, such as the level of park activities and the range of ways users arrive by to the OLA (e.g. by transit, by car, on foot).

Study sites in different times of day and year. Participants suggested the team review the case study sites in both summer and winter conditions. They also suggested the team study the sites in both morning and evening since the users tend to be different.

FEEDBACK ON THE SURVEY, DISCUSSION GUIDE, AND PROCESS

Discussion Guide feedback. Participants generally thought the Discussion Guide would be a useful tool to share information and help promote the study. Specific suggested refinements were:

- Under “Design Considerations,” add shelter and drinking water;
- Under “Operations and Maintenance” considerations, add snow and ice clearing;
- Change the “call to action” to promote visiting the website over the email.

Survey Feedback. Participants suggested the City ask about the following topics on the public survey:

- How non-dog owners use parks;
- Why people are letting their dogs off-leash in undesignated areas; and
- How many dog-owners have rescue dogs.

Consult on draft public survey and OLA site selection. There was interest from the participants to be consulted on the draft public survey before it goes public, potentially as “beta test” users. Participants also suggested the City share its proposed case study site selection criteria (along with the selected case study sites) prior to the final decision.

NEXT STEPS

The City, Swerhun Inc. and thinc design thanked participants for their time and feedback and committed to sharing a draft summary in the coming weeks. Swerhun reminded participants to email any additional feedback after the meeting.

Appendix A. Meeting Agenda

Stakeholder Meeting #1

City-Wide Study of Existing Dog Off-Leash Areas
Design, Operations, Maintenance & Best Practices
Metro Hall - Room 308 / 309
55 John Street, Toronto
6:30 – 8:30

Meeting Purpose

To introduce the City-Wide Study of Existing Dog Off-Leash Areas and to present and seek feedback on: a preliminary best practices review, draft criteria to select case study sites, and a proposed approach to a public-facing survey to inform the Study.

Proposed Meeting Agenda

Time	Item	Lead
6:30	Welcome, introductions, agenda review	Swerhun Inc. and City of Toronto
6:45	Overview of study, best practices review, and draft case study site selection criteria Questions of Clarification	City of Toronto and thinc design
7:10	Discussion: best practices and selection criteria 1. What are your thoughts on the preliminary best practices review? Are there any other best practices or ideas you would like to see considered in this study? 2. What do you think about the draft case study site selection criteria? Are there any other criteria you would like to see considered?	Swerhun Inc.
7:45	Overview of public-facing Discussion Guide & Survey	City of Toronto
8:00	Discussion: Survey, Discussion Guide and other advice 1. What do you think of the proposed approach to the public-facing survey and Discussion Guide? Given the focus and objectives of the study, are there any other themes/topics you'd like to see considered in the Survey or Discussion Guide? 2. Do you have any other advice for the City?	Swerhun Inc.
8:25	Wrap up and next steps	City of Toronto
8:30	Adjourn	City of Toronto

Appendix B. Participant List

The following is a list of organizations that were invited to the Stakeholder Meeting. Those organizations that were represented at the meeting are signified in bold text.

Dog Owner Associations / Off-Leash Area Groups:

- Allan Gardens Dog Owners Association
- Balmy Beach Park Dog Owners Association
- Bayview Arena Park Dog Owners Association
- **Beresford Park**
- Bickford Park
- Bill Johnson Park
- Botany Hill Park
- **Cassels Avenue Playground**
- **Cherry Beach**
- Colonel Danforth Park
- Colonel Sam Smith Park
- **David Crombie Park**
- Don Valley Brick Works
- Earl Bales Park
- **Grand Manitoba Park**
- **Grange Park**
- **Greenwood Park**
- **High Park**
- **Humber Bay Park West**
- **Kew Gardens**
- King's Mill Park
- **Linkwood Lane Park**
- **Marie Curtis Park**
- **Merrill Bridge Road Park**
- **Monarch Park**
- Norwood Park
- Orphan's Green
- **Ramsden Park**
- Regent Park
- Riverdale Park West
- Sandy Bruce Park
- Sherwood Park
- **Sir Winston Churchill Park**
- Sorauren Avenue Park
- South Stanley Park
- **St. Andrew's Playground**
- Stan Wadlow Park
- **Sunnybrook Park**
- Thompson Street Parkette
- Thomson Memorial Park
- Vermont Square
- Wildwood Crescent Playground
- Withrow Park
- **Woburn Park**
- **Wychwood Car Barns Park**

Other Organizations:

- Access TO
- **Canadian Dog Walkers Association**
- **Harbourfront Dog Team**
- Park People
- **Toronto Dog Park Community**
- Toronto Accessible Sports Council