

Meeting Summary - Stakeholder Meeting #3

City-Wide Study of Existing Dog Off-Leash Areas
Design, Operations, Maintenance & Best Practices
North York Civic Centre – Committee Room #3
Wednesday, October 16, 2019
6:30 – 9:00pm

OVERVIEW

On Wednesday, October 16, 2019, the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division hosted the third stakeholder meeting for its City-Wide Study of Dog Off-Leash Areas (OLAs). The purpose of the meeting was to present and seek feedback on the Study's Preliminary Recommendations, including recommendations about design, operations and maintenance, and administration. Approximately 12 people attended the meeting, including representatives of Dog Owners' Associations and commercial dog walkers.

The meeting included: opening remarks and an update on the study from Sue Wenzl (City of Toronto); introductions and agenda review by Ian Malczewski (Swerhun Inc.); and a presentation from Trish Clarke (thinc design) on the Preliminary Recommendations. Following the presentation, participants asked questions of clarification and engaged in a group discussion about the Preliminary Recommendations.

This meeting summary was prepared by Swerhun Inc., an independent third-party facilitation firm supporting the City of Toronto and thinc design in stakeholder engagement for the City-Wide Study of Existing Dog Off-Leash Areas. A draft of this summary was shared with meeting participants for review before it was finalized.

KEY MESSAGES

These key messages highlight major topics brought forward from meeting participants; they should be read in concert with the more detailed summary of feedback below.

The Preliminary Recommendations are on the right track. Participants were generally happy with the Preliminary Recommendations, saying a number could help address specific issues people and dogs experience in off-leash areas. Participants especially appreciated the Preliminary Recommendations about design that focused on water, fencing, and entrances and gates.

Winter maintenance and communication are key operations, maintenance, and administrative issues. Several times over the course of the meeting, participants said that winter maintenance of OLAs is very important, especially when it comes to clearing snow and ice around gates, between parking lots and OLAs, and using salt vs. other, more dog-friendly materials. They also said that more communication between the City, dog owners, Dog Owner Associations, and Commercial Dog Walkers will be key (and expressed support for recommendations that focused on addressing these communications challenges)

How does implementation work? Several participants said they were interested to learn how the City would be implementing the recommendations, including which recommendations were short-term, medium-term, and long-term.

QUESTIONS OF CLARIFICATION

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

Could you explain what the acronym “DOA” means? *DOA stands for Dog Owners Association. Dog Owners Association representatives are the primary audience for these stakeholder meetings (in addition to Commercial Dog Walkers and parks advocacy groups).*

Why does the location of an OLA in a Hydro corridor influence the recommendations? *Hydro One, the entity that owns the corridors, stipulates what kinds of things the City can and cannot do on their land (for example it has requirements and restrictions around lighting, trees, shade structures, and irrigation. Exactly what can go where depends on the location of the Hydro One / City property line.*

Is there a way to get Sherwood Park added to the Pup Up list? The park has many issues stemming from population growth in the area, the mix of users in the park, and the proximity of the off-leash area to an Environmentally Significant Area. *The Pup Up schedule is finalized as it is based on case study sites that were selected several months ago, and the team cannot add any more at this stage. That said, the sites were selected to ensure that the characteristics of all the City’s OLAs were represented so that the recommendations can apply to OLAs city-wide. High Park, which is one of the case study sites, is likely most similar to Sherwood Park in terms of its proximity to an Environmentally Significant Area. In the meantime, if there are specific issues that you’d like to see addressed, you could consider contacting either Parks Operations or the local Councillor’s office.*

Is one of the Pup Up / case study sites in a rapid growth area (similar to St. Andrews)? *Yes, rapid growth / population density is one of the characteristics that informed the selection of the case study sites, and the site that best represents that characteristic is Allan Gardens.*

Does the Study team have a veterinarian on the team? Vets know what kinds of plants are unhealthy for dogs, for example, and could help inform your recommendations. *The team includes an ecologist and an animal behaviourist who would be able to speak to this kind of issue and will be weighing in on the recommendations.*

Have you taken soil composition into consideration when making recommendations around surfacing? *Yes, we have considered it in our Preliminary Recommendations.*

Will this Study make recommendations about washrooms outside of OLAs? *No, the Study’s scope and its recommendations are focused on what is inside the boundaries of the OLAs.*

DETAILED FEEDBACK

Participants shared feedback about the three different categories of recommendations, summarized below.

Feedback about the Preliminary Design Recommendations

Participants shared feedback about six different types of Design Recommendations, including recommendations about Shade, Surfacing & Drainage, Fencing & Entrances, Amenities, Lighting, and Water.

Shade

Participants liked the recommendations around shade, particularly the recommendation to achieve 20% shade coverage. Suggested refinements to the preliminary recommendations about shade included:

- Consider identifying 20% as a minimum amount of shade coverage

- Where there is a recommendation to install a shade structure, make sure that the structure actually provides shade and can also offer some protection from the elements — some structures have large gaps in their roof which let sunlight (and rain) through. The Study should also recommend good drainage and/or grading around shade structures since water often gathers around the base, surrounding them in a circle of mud. Another way to address this issue might be to recommend connecting rain barrels to shade structures.
- Consider recommending shade structures be spread around an OLA rather than concentrated in a single area. Since people and dogs tend to congregate where there is shade, fights between dogs can occur if everyone is trying to use the same area.

Surfacing & drainage

Participants shared a range of questions about surfacing & drainage, including:

- Why does the recommendation for synthetic turf recommend a maximum of 1,000 square metres? *This recommendation is based largely on cost, since synthetic turf is the costliest surfacing in terms of design and maintenance.*
- Is there a recommendation for every OLA to have drainage underneath the surfacing? *The recommendations are striving to achieve a 2% slope to encourage drainage across all OLAs — the ability to install drainage under the surfacing depends on the existing surfacing, slope and surrounding context.*
- Will the surfacing recommendations impact whether an OLA can have multiple uses? For example, Beresford Park turns into an ice rink in the winter; would this Study change that use? *This Study is not looking at changing any uses; any major changes to a use would need to go through a broader consultation processes so that a range of stakeholders could be involved.*
- Consider changing the “dual surfacing” recommendation to a “multi-surfacing” recommendations since, if an OLA is large enough, it may be possible to have three (or more) types of surfacing.

Fencing & entrances

Participants liked several of the fencing and entrances recommendations, specifically the recommendation to: upgrade/replace latches at gates; ensure there are double gates at main entrances; have a vegetative boundary in non-fenced areas, and; ensure there are at least 2 entry/exit points to each OLA.

Participants shared a range of opinions on the recommendation to increase the height of fences to 5 feet. Some liked this recommendation, saying it would help prevent dogs from jumping in or out of OLAs. Others suggested that it might make sense to have a lower fence on at least one side of an OLA, potentially where a small dog area is, so that parents who in an OLA can still see over the fence if they have children playing in an adjacent playground.

A few participants asked if it would be possible for the City to build a fence where one doesn't exist today, such as Beresford park, where dogs sometimes dangerously run into the street. *thinc design responded that there would need to be a formal consultation process to understand demand before making any decisions about adding or removing fences.*

Finally, participants discussed fencing next to Environmentally Significant Areas (ESAs) at length. Some said that in some parks, like Sherwood Park, dogs have become stuck in the holes in fencing between the OLA and an ESA, so some people have cut the fencing. Others said that they understood a lower fence might be required next to ESAs to allow wildlife to pass. Participants suggested the team look more closely at fencing requirements beside ESAs and proposed a fencing type that doesn't injure people or dogs.

Amenities

Participants generally liked the recommendations about amenities and suggested a few others for the team to consider, including:

- Consider adding specific recommendations around signage, including signage that clearly identifies activities/uses that are not permitted in OLAs (e.g. riding a bike, picnicking, or leaving unaccompanied young children) and signage that includes [illustrations of dog's body language](#) and/or problematic behaviour. *thinc design said it would review examples of illustrations, saying that including signage like this would need to be weighed against the potential to create an expectation that dog owners do not need to understand and/or monitor their dog's behaviour.*
- Consider identifying a “fetching lane” as a type of amenity (similar to a fast lane in swimming pool) and recommending one in OLAs with enough space.
- Consider recommending adding parking to OLAs. *thinc design explained that parking is outside the scope of Study's design recommendations, which are focused on the inside boundaries of OLAs.*

Lighting

Participants liked the lighting recommendations, particularly the recommendations to add lighting on pathways in OLAs where there is an existing electrical connection. They suggested a few tweaks to these recommendations, including suggestions that the team consider: specifying that lighting should point to dark or secluded areas (especially since these are areas dogs often leave feces) and recommending the lighting go on and off via motion sensors and/or light/darkness sensors.

Water

Participants were very enthusiastic about the water recommendations, particularly the recommendation to install multi-tier water fountains where possible. They said the “sprayer attachment” to these water fountains would likely be very popular. Some suggested adding a hand shower to be able to bathe dogs, though others felt bathing dogs shouldn't be encouraged since people might bring in soap that could damage surrounding environments.

A few said that water pressure can be an issue in OLAs — especially when they share a water line with a wading pool — and suggested recommending the addition of a separate water line in these OLAs. There was also a suggestion for the team to share how many OLAs in the City currently have fountains.

Feedback about the Preliminary Operations & Maintenance Recommendations

Questions about the Preliminary Operations & Maintenance Recommendations

- Who would be responsible for general maintenance? *The City would undertake maintenance work in close coordination and communication with each DOA representative.*
- Have you considered recommending closing OLAs when new grass seed is planted to ensure grass is able to grow? *Yes, we have a Preliminary Recommendation to look at periodic closures to ensure grass seed is able to grow.*

Participants also shared feedback about recommendations about temporary closures, surfacing top-ups / maintenance, and winter maintenance.

Temporary closures

Participants liked the recommendation to temporarily close OLAs to support vegetative growth. Suggested tweaks and additions included suggestions to:

- recommend temporary closures for other regular maintenance (not just vegetation growth), since sometimes maintenance work in or near an OLA can create safety issues;

- modify the recommendation to only close half an OLA at any given time (so that dog owners can still use part of the OLA), and;
- draw on the experience at Beresford Park, where dog owners put orange plastic mesh around grass seed, which protected the grass while it grew but still let dogs use the OLA.

Winter maintenance

Much of the discussion of the Preliminary Operations & Maintenance focused on winter maintenance. While participants liked the recommendations to ensure pathways to OLAs are free of ice and snow, some were sceptical, saying many parks are not maintained in the winter at all, so this recommendation might not make much of a difference. *The City said that it does do some winter maintenance in parks, and has to consider a range of factors when deciding which parks it can maintain in winter, including use and cost.*

Other feedback about winter maintenance included suggestions that the Study Team recommend: better snow and ice clearing between parking lots and OLAs; seasonal adjustments of the height of gates so they can still swing over snow (some DOA representatives bring their own tools to do this work today); using alternatives to salt (such as a beet juice mixture) in and near OLAs since salt hurts dogs paws and including this mixture in surfacing bins so dog owners can apply it themselves.

Feedback about the Preliminary Administrative Recommendations

The main topics discussed about the Preliminary Administrative Recommendations were about the recommendations focused on Commercial Dog Walker Permits, the DOA program, and by-law

Commercial Dog Walker Permits

While some like the idea that fees collected from Commercial Dog Walkers permits could be used to improve Commercial Dog Walker parks, a few were concerned that this recommendation (combined with the recommendation to increase by-law) could lead to disproportionate enforcement against Commercial Dog Walkers and/or deter some from getting permits. There was also some discussion about how the City provides permits to Commercial Dog Walkers, with the City explaining that the City does not *licence* the Commercial Dog Walking industry, but rather *issues permits* to Commercial Dog Walkers to allow them to use a publicly funded asset for commercial activity. All agreed that the role the City plays in providing permits to Commercial Dog Walkers could be clearer and the words “permit” and “licence” should not be used interchangeably.

The DOA program

Participants liked the recommendation to improve the Dog Owner Association program, with many saying they don’t understand how it works, have struggled to receive communications from the City through the program, and generally don’t understand the role. Participants liked that this recommendation would aim to improve communications between dog owners and the City. As part of this recommendation, participants suggested the team consider recommending a mechanism for the City to provide regular updates to DOA reps about changes / updates to policies. There was also a suggestion for the team to consider changing the title of Dog Owners Associations to Dog Owners Group (“DOG”).

Improvements to the City website

Participants liked the recommendation for improvements to the City website. They suggested these improvements should also provide an easy way for people to learn about any changes to by-laws. Changes could be posted to the website annually and/or shared with dog owners when they renew their dog license each year.

Other feedback

Participants shared a number of other suggestions about how the City could better accommodate dogs:

- The City should require developers to either pay a fee to improve dog parks near the proposal as part of their development approval process OR they should provide spaces for dogs in the buildings.
- It would be helpful to understand how these recommendations are going to be funded. *The City explained that, as part of the next stage of work, the Preliminary Recommendations will be refined and organized into three buckets: 1, “major changes” that require more than \$50,000 will become a capital project, which must go through the City’s capital planning budget process, 2: “smaller changes,” that require less than \$50,000 and can be done through minor changes to maintenance regimes; where the City may have money to make changes in the shorter term, and 3: “operational issues,” some of which may be able to embedded into existing operational practices and/or minor repairs very quickly. Some “operational issues” may require additional staffing, which would then have to go into the 2021 budget process and vetted against other needs for amenities in parks.*

Feedback shared after the meeting

Additional feedback shared after the meeting (not already reflected in the feedback above) included:

- **Fencing.** Suggestion that the minimum height of fencing be six feet and lower fencing not be explored for Small Dog Areas (since small dogs can still jump over fences, snow build-up effectively decreases the height of fencing, and wildlife that needs to cross fencing near ESAs can still jump high enough to clear it).
- **Maintenance.** Support for the recommendation to temporarily close OLAs (bit by bit) to allow new grass to seed. Suggestion to keep winter maintenance to parking lots and one, main path to “destination” OLAs.
- **Signage.** It’s important that an rules should be printed in large lettering.
- **Amenities.** Play areas (such as fetching lanes) should be separated from the main area since dogs sometimes have aggression issues over toys.
- **Lighting.** Support for adding lighting as it is a safety issue (and should not be seen as a luxury).
- **Water.** Consider exploring “pay as you go” dog washing stations located adjacent to OLAs; these stations could be a source for OLA maintenance revenue. Support for the idea of multi-tier water fountains.

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 to mwheatley@swerhun.com by Wednesday, October 30. The team also encouraged participants to attend one of the upcoming “Pup Ups,” where the City and Swerhun will continue to seek feedback on the Preliminary Recommendations.

Attachment A. Meeting Agenda

Stakeholder Meeting #3

City-Wide Study of Existing Dog Off-Leash Areas
Design, Operations, Maintenance & Best Practices
North York Civic Centre – Committee Room 3
5100 Yonge Street
6:30 – 9:00pm

Workshop Purpose

- To present and seek feedback on the study team's Preliminary Recommendations about: design, operations & maintenance, and administration.

Proposed Workshop Agenda

6:30 Welcome, introductions, agenda review

Swerhun Inc.
City of Toronto

6:40 Overview of the Preliminary Recommendations

thinc design

Questions of Clarification

7:15 Discussion

3 concurrent, rotating, facilitated discussions.

Station 1: Design

Station 2: Operations & Maintenance

Station 3: Administrative

1. What, if anything, do you like about the Preliminary Recommendations? Are there any you think would be particularly helpful in improving OLAs across the City?
2. What, if anything, do you think is missing from the Preliminary Recommendations? What would you suggest adding?

8:35 Report back & plenary discussion

8:55 Wrap up and next steps

9:00 Adjourn

Attachment 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
- 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
- Gerrard Carlaw Parkette
- Grand Manitoba Park
- Grange Park
- **Greenwood Park**
- Hillcrest park
- High Park
- Humber Bay Park West
- Kew Gardens
- King's Mill Park
- L'Amoreaux 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
- Warden Woods Park
- Wildwood Crescent Playground
- Withrow Park
- Woburn Park
- Wychwood Car Barns Park

Other Organizations:

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