

# Meeting Summary - Stakeholder Meeting #4

City-Wide Study of Existing Dog Off-Leash Areas

Tuesday, September 15

6:30 – 8:00 pm

Virtual meeting held online and by phone

## OVERVIEW

On Tuesday, September 15, 2020, the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation Division hosted the fourth and final stakeholder meeting for its City-Wide Study of Dog Off-Leash Areas (OLAs). The purpose of the meeting was to share and seek feedback on the Final Draft Recommendations and discuss implementation and next steps. The meeting agenda is included as Attachment A.

Due to COVID-19 the meeting was held virtually. Participants were able to join online and/or by phone. Approximately 20 people attended the meeting, including representatives of Dog Owners Associations, commercial dog walkers, and environmental groups. A full list of the organizations invited and those that attended is included as Attachment B.

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 Michael Tocher (thinc design) on the Final Draft Recommendations. Following the presentation, participants asked questions of clarification and shared feedback.

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. The summary captures feedback shared at the meeting and afterwards by email up until September 22<sup>nd</sup>; it is not intended to serve as a verbatim transcript.

## 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.

### **Many of the proposed recommendations align with what people have been advocating for.**

Participants showed appreciation for the work put forth by the City and project team and said many of the recommendations respond to feedback and needed changes / improvements in Off-Leash Areas across the City.

**Effective and consistent communication is essential.** Participants reiterated interest in seeing communications between the City and OLA representatives as well as OLA representatives and general OLA users improved. There were suggestions to find a way to clarify who the reps are for each OLA and make that information accessible to general OLA users.

**Interest in OLA specific analysis and recommendations.** Participants said that no two OLAs are the same and suggested further work include an examination of each OLA in the City with a set of site-specific recommendations. Participants said a short 1-2 page analysis of each OLA with site-specific recommendations would be a useful tool for people to use when advocating for improvements to specific OLAs.

## QUESTIONS OF CLARIFICATION

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

**With COVID-19 and financial restrictions is the City exploring alternative ways of obtaining funds and install amenities, e.g. Public Private Partnerships?** *COVID-19 has definitely impacted the financial future of the City and this is top of mind for us as well. We can definitely take your ideas as suggestions and consider them.*

**Is there anything the City can do to provide extra space for Off-Leash Areas during COVID-19 to allow for recommended physical distancing; similar to what the City did with patio space?** *This is something the City will have to look at closely to ensure all impacts are considered, including impacts on other park users.*

**What is the deadline for additional feedback after the meeting?** *Tuesday, September 22<sup>nd</sup>.*

**Did this process include an accessibility specific consultant?** *No, we did not have a specific accessibility consultant as part of the team. That said as landscape architects it is our responsibility to be aware of accessibility issues through our work.*

## DETAILED FEEDBACK

Participants shared feedback about the three different categories of recommendations as well process and other feedback. **The summary below includes feedback shared during the meeting as well as feedback shared afterward by email.**

### Feedback about Design

**Suggestions and comments related to accessibility.** Participants shared a few different comments and suggestions related to accessibility including:

- It is important to provide accessible pathways / access to the off-leash areas as well as within the off-leash areas.
- Ensure the location of accessible pathways don't act as a barrier or limit use of a specific site/park.
- Consider retaining an accessibility consultant in the future for site-specific designs. There are several parks that require additional accessibility and would benefit from the expertise of an accessibility consultant.
- Review and upgrade park accessibility on a regular basis, particularly when park revitalization or modifications are being planned.

**Develop site specific recommendations for every Off-Leash Area.** A brief one/two-page assessment with site-specific recommendations would be helpful tool for people to use to advocate for specific improvements with their local Councillor. This write-up could include the current state of the OLA and the top five opportunities for improvement. A good example is provided in Seattle's Parks & Recreation People, Dogs & Parks Plan:  
[http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/ParksAndRecreation/PoliciesPlanning/Plans/Response\\_to\\_SLI\\_69-1-B-1\\_\(Dog\\_Off-Leash\\_Areas\).pdf](http://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/ParksAndRecreation/PoliciesPlanning/Plans/Response_to_SLI_69-1-B-1_(Dog_Off-Leash_Areas).pdf). We would love to have City staff walk through all 73 off-leash areas with a local representative to understand site-specific issues and opportunities.

**Suggestions and comments about small dog areas.** Small dog area specific feedback included:

- Some dogs are very small and can get through the fences around small dog areas. Suggest adding screening to the recommendations for small dog areas to keep very small dogs in.
- Allowing shy or elderly dogs into small dog areas will be difficult to enforce and should be tested before being implemented. People may abuse this rule/recommendation and allow their reactive dog into a Small Dog Area, which could be dangerous for other dogs.
- Small dog areas should have an exterior entrance/exit so that people with small dogs do not have to cross the regular section of the OLA.

**Entrance signage should be friendly and clear.** Existing signs with the code of conduct are important but they are also very technical and can be ignored. It would be great to have friendly signs with pictures that clearly show positive behaviours and the rules. Picture based signs can also be helpful for people who don't speak English.

**Comments and suggestions related to surfacing.** A few specific comments and suggestions related to surfacing were shared, including:

- Multiple surface materials within each OLA is critical and should be stressed in the final report / recommendations.
- Looping trails are beneficial. They can make grass in dog parks work since people will stick to trails when it is damp.
- Synthetic turf should be an option in all sizes of OLAs. There are many examples of synthetic turf working in Canada and the US, including colder climates than ours in Toronto.

**Consider using spring loaded gates with rubber bumpers.** This style of gate, which are used in Halton Hills, do not have latches or make noise and are extremely durable.

**Shelter for dogs should not be overlooked.** People will take their dogs to OLAs in any weather so shelter from wind and cold weather is important. This is especially important in OLAs that are exposed to harsh elements (e.g. Humber Bay West, which is on the lake).

## **Feedback about Operations & Maintenance**

**Suggestions and comments related to natural environment and natural heritage.** It was noted that several of the natural environment considerations and specific recommendations related to the natural environment and natural heritage are making steps in the right direction. It was also noted that much more will need to be done to ensure Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) are protected with increased education and enforcement. Specific comments and suggestions included:

- Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESAs) are already regulated by protection policies and these rules should be implemented fully prior to any other decisions made on existing Off-Leash Areas with an ESA component. It is not about reinventing the wheel. Rather, the existing rules need to be clarified and well understood so that they properly followed and implemented. This clarity should be either included as part of this process or a process immediately following this process.
- Education for dog owners on impacts of dogs on wildlife, water and natural areas will be needed. This should go beyond general signage and could include social media and use of the City's website. Education is also needed about consequences of not paying attention to one's dog when using an OLA.
- Discouraging lighting in or adjacent to ESAs is absolutely needed. Cumulative and induced impacts (i.e. disturbance created by increased light, noise, habitat fragmentation, and dog specific impacts on wildlife) over time cause a decline of biodiversity and degradation.

- OLAs adjacent to ESAs need to be appealing enough so that people voluntarily choose to use them instead of using ESAs. Some existing OLAs near ESAs (e.g. Sir Winston Churchill, Colonel Samuel Smith and Coxwell Ravine) feel like small off-leash pens and do not encourage responsible behaviour.

## Feedback about Administration

**Continue to explore ways to work closely with off-leash area reps and people who use off-leash areas.** Many people use the park on daily basis and can provide lots of information, including how many people are using the off-leash areas on a regular basis. Continue to work with OLA reps to better understand how to resolve issues related to the code of conduct.

**Time restrictions should be discussed with the local community.** Off-leash areas are used at all different times of the day; this needs to be understood before any time restrictions are considered for specific OLAs.

**Off-Leash Area representatives should be known.** Many people don't know who their representative is or how to get in touch with them. The representative is meant to be a liaison between people who use the off-leash areas and the City. If people don't know who their rep is this process can't work. Suggest providing and requiring the OLA rep to have publicly accessible contact information such as a park specific email account.

**Consider creating a forum where off-leash area reps and users can connect.** It would be great to have a way for OLA reps to connect with one another to discuss and share ideas. *It was noted that there is a well-used Facebook group called Toronto Dog Park Community that many people use to connect. A link to the Facebook group is provided here:*

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/TorontoDogParkCommunity/>

**Issue with getting response from the City through the DOLA email account.** A participant said they have been having trouble for over a year now communicating with the City and getting a response to questions. *Please follow-up after the meeting with Swerhun so that the City can ensure we can connect with you. Note added after the meeting: The City followed up with the individual having issues getting a response shortly after the meeting.*

## Process & Other Feedback

**Concern about limited participation at stakeholder meetings.** Find ways to improve/increase communication between the City and Dog Off-Leash Area representatives.

**The results of the second survey should not be read in isolation of other feedback.** All survey questions received high percentages as effective recommendations. No two Off-Leash Areas are the same and certain OLAs have ongoing issues that require perpetual City attention.

**Use consistent terminology to avoid confusion.** Suggest the City stop using the term DOA (Dog Owners Association) and instead consistently use DOLA (Dog Off Leash Areas). Using the two terms interchangeably causes confusing and can inhibit communication between the City and DOLA representatives. *Note added after the meeting: The City clarified that DOLA is not used in an effort to avoid confusion as it refers to "Dog Owners Liability Act".*

**Update the estimated number of dogs in the City.** The current estimate of 300,000 is closer to 500,000 to 600,000. The most recently available survey of Canadian dog ownership (2018, [Canadian Animal Health Institute](#)) notes an increasing dog ownership trend with 41% of households owning at least one dog.

**Consider allowing commercial businesses to rent space in parks to provide training related to improved dog behaviour.** Consider allowing fenced parts of parks or unfenced fields in the largest parks be rented to allow for training classes that encourage good dog behaviour. Income (rental fee and per trainee user fee) could be dedicated to additional fenced areas and maintenance of parks.

**Suggestions related to new parks and OLAs.** There were a few comments and specific suggestions to related to development of new parks and OLAs, including:

- Include a set of guidelines for new “ideal parks” that recommend an appropriately sized OLA (small, medium, large) based the areas dog population. Include estimated cost per hectare for design/construction and ongoing maintenance;
- Consider recommending requests for parkland specifically dedicated to dogs into new development requirements under the Ontario Planning Act; and
- Consider adjusting the Implementation Strategy for the Parks and Recreation Facilities Master Plan to develop additional parks that resolve inequities in park distribution across the City. Specifically, to address areas where social inequities and racialized communities exist and where small to medium sized parks are not available within a 15 – 20-minute walk.

**Visit other dog parks / OLAs to gain a different perspective on dog park designs.** Specific parks/locations and reasons included:

- Leash-Free Halton Hills: Self-closing gates with rubber pads, nice signage, lots of trees, shelter, nice signposts, and a good community vibe;
- Jack Darling Park: long walkable trails, lots of trees, tons of space; and
- Etobicoke Valley Dog Park: wild and natural, dogs mostly stick to the trails because a lot of the bush is too thick.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The City, Swerhun Inc. and thinc design thanked participants for their participation at the meeting and continued participation throughout the process. Swerhun committed to sharing the presentation and agenda the next day. Swerhun also committed to sharing a draft meeting summary in the coming weeks and reminded participants to email any additional feedback after the meeting to [mwheatley@swerhun.com](mailto:mwheatley@swerhun.com) by Tuesday, September 22<sup>nd</sup>. The City explained that they will soon receive the final report from the Consultant team, which will be made publicly available.

## Attachment A. Meeting Agenda

### Stakeholder Meeting #4

City-Wide Study of Existing Dog Off-Leash Areas  
Tuesday, September 15  
6:30 – 8:00 pm  
Virtual meeting held online

#### Workshop Purpose

To share and seek feedback on the Final Recommendations and discuss implementation and next steps.

#### Proposed Workshop Agenda

**6:30 Welcome, introductions, agenda review**

Swerhun Inc.

City of Toronto

**6:40 Presentation - Overview of final recommendations, implementation and next steps**

thinc design  
City of Toronto

*7:00 Questions of Clarification*

**7:10 Discussion**

1. What are your thoughts about the final recommendations? Do you have any suggested refinements?
2. Do you have any other advice?

**7:55 Wrap up and next steps**

**8:00 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**
- **Hideaway 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
- **Canadian Association of**
- **Professional Dog Trainers**
- **Harbourfront Dog Team**
- Park People
- **Protect Nature TO**
- Riverdale Dog Walkers Group
- **Toronto Dog Park Community**
- Toronto Accessible Sports Council