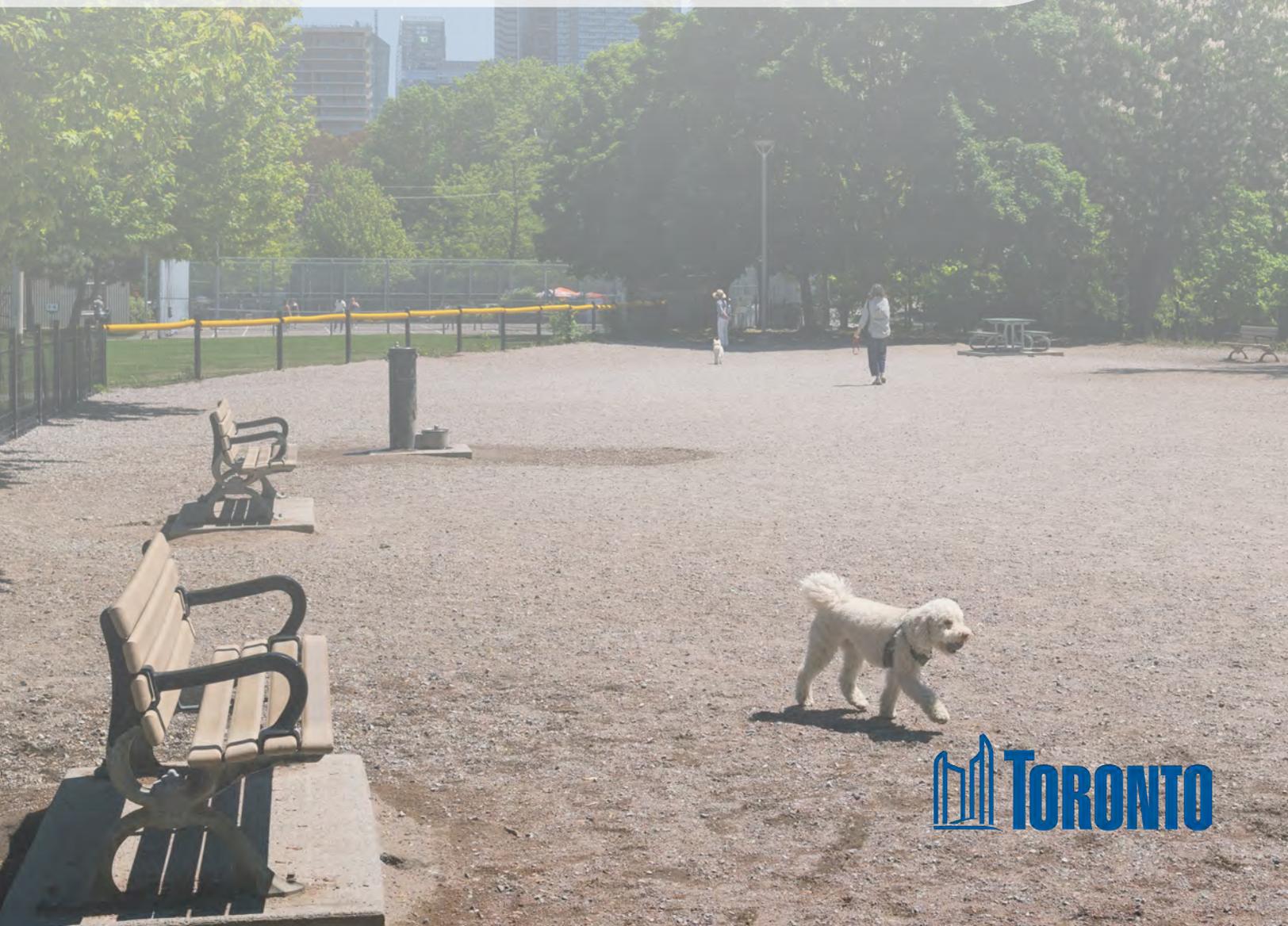


CITY OF TORONTO'S DOG OFF-LEASH STRATEGY:

A Citywide Approach to Dogs Off-Leash Areas

September 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/>

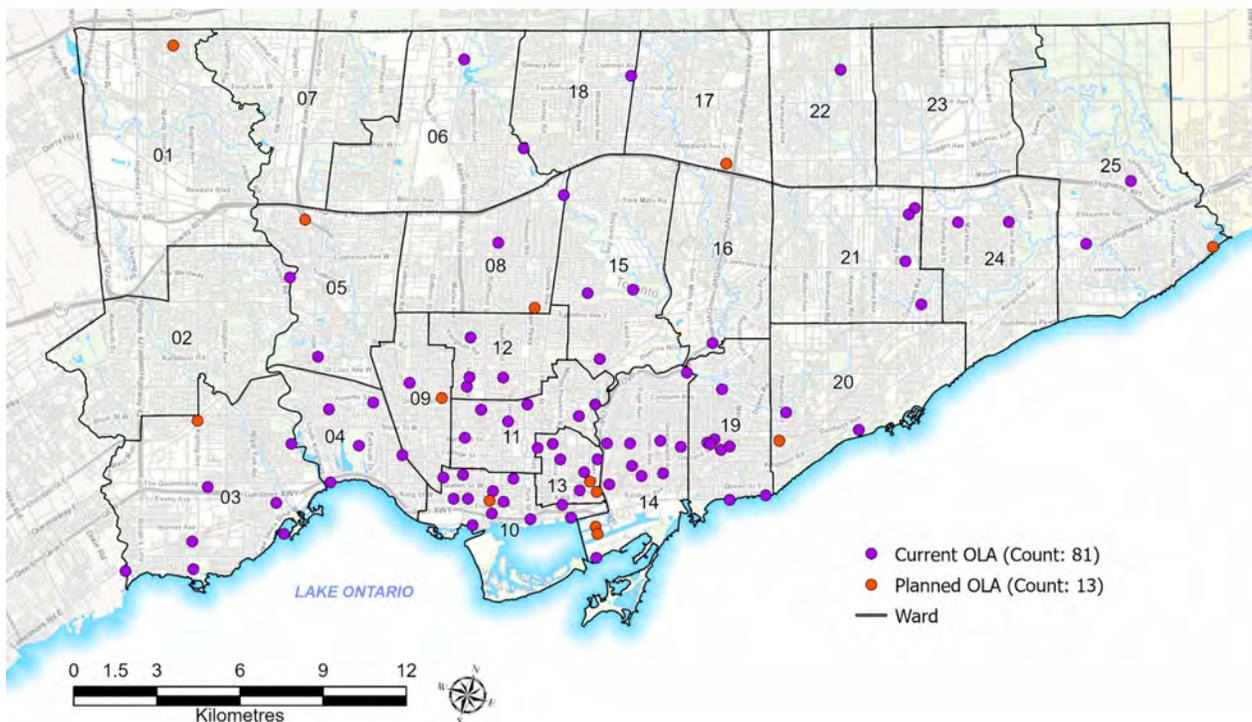
4 For example: Kramer, C. K., Mehmood, S., & Suen, R. S. (2019, October). Dog Ownership and Survival. *Circulation, Cardiovascular Quality and Outcomes*, (12)10. <https://doi.org/10.1161/CIRCOUTCOMES.119.005554>; Wood, L., Martin, K., Christian, H., Houghton, S., Kawachi, I., Vallesi, S., & McCune, S. (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

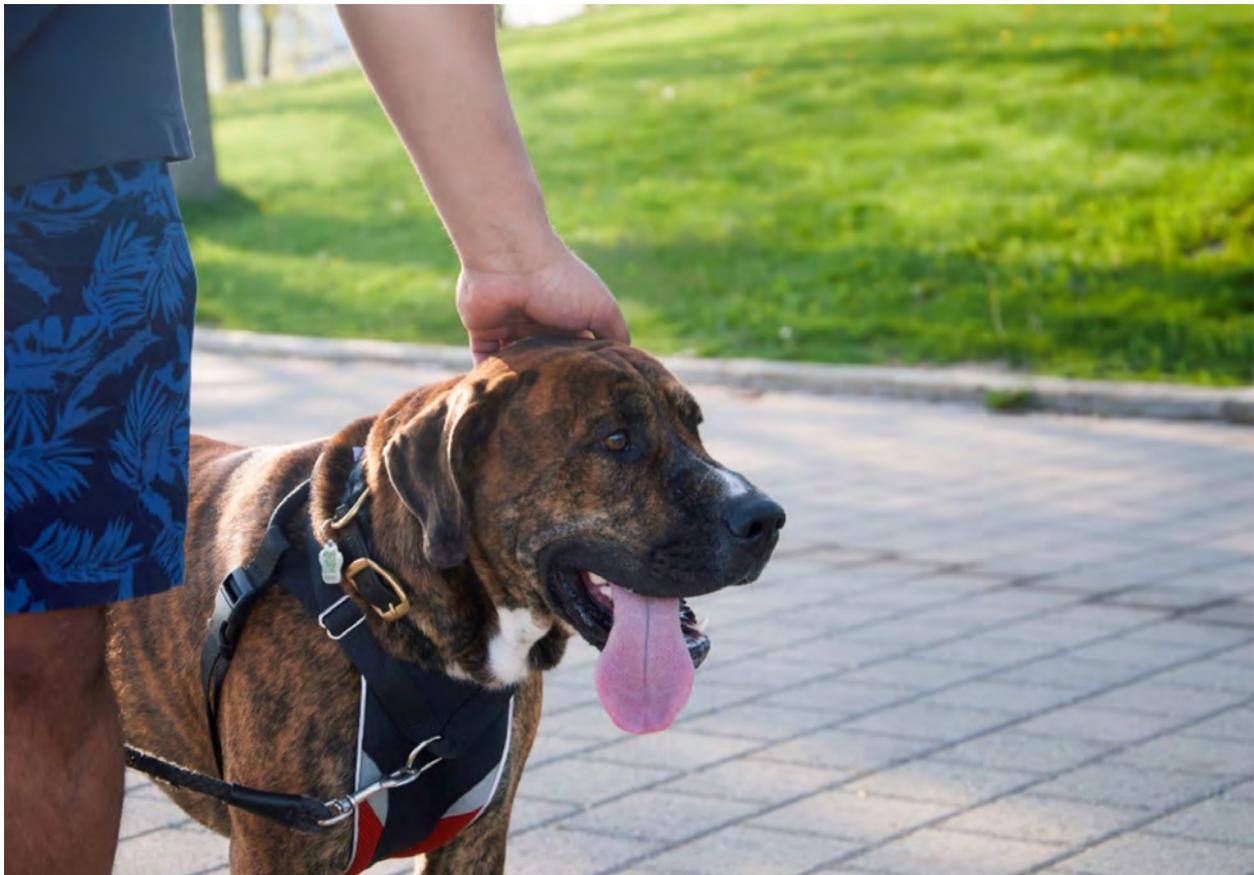
- Cities used a variety of methods for OLA bylaw education including signage at OLAs, online information, public education campaigns, and social media.
- Most cities had standard hours of operation for all their OLAs and consistent rules posted on signage at OLAs.

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

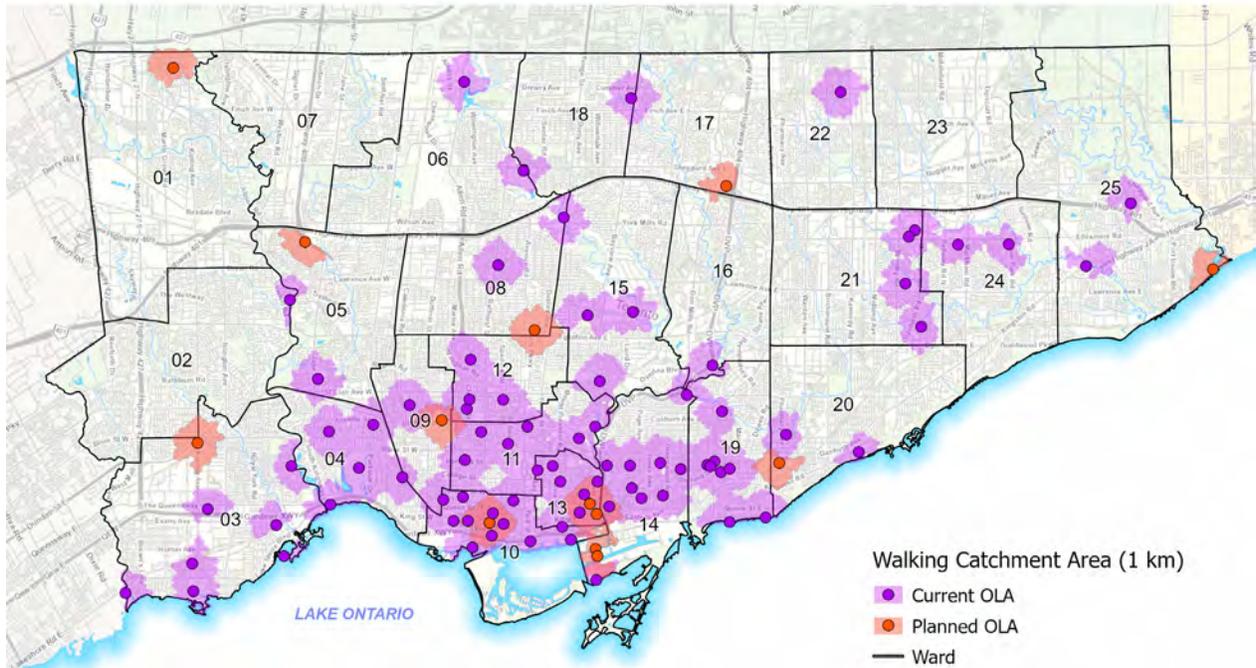
There are opportunities for OLA development outside of City-owned parkland, such as hydro corridors. This supports the addition of new OLAs into the network without added pressure on limited parkland. The City will encourage

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.

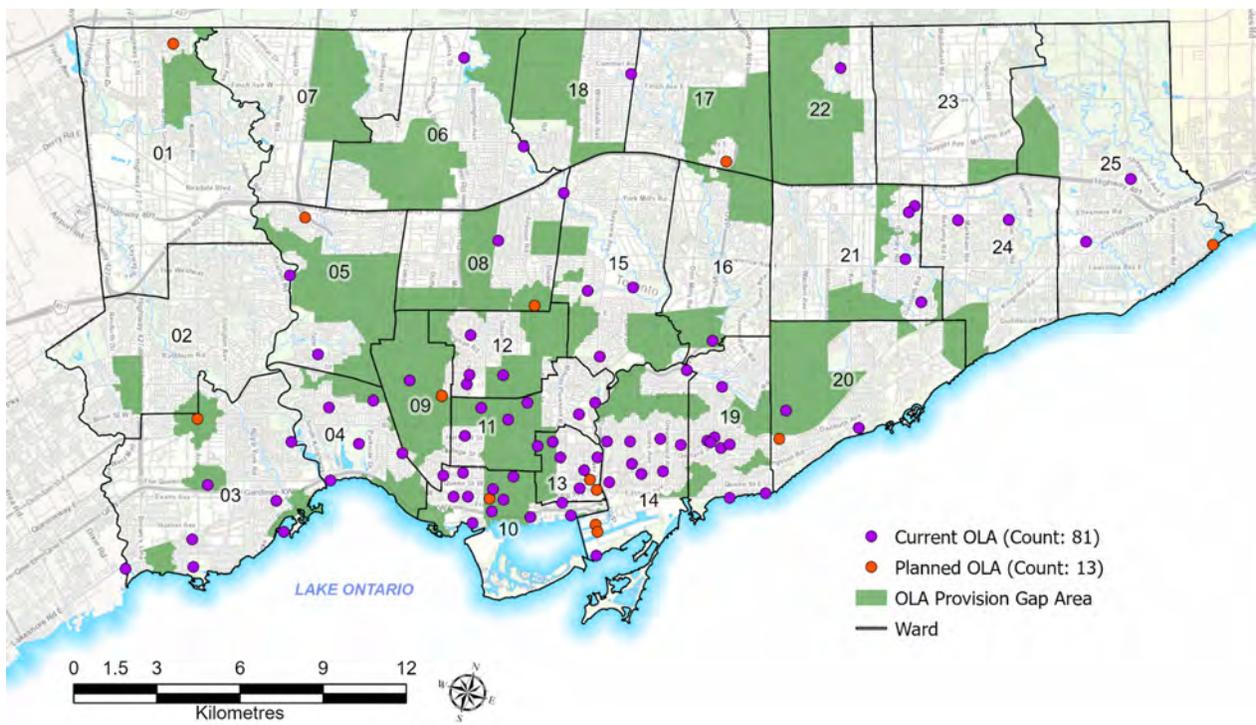
Removal of Dog Owners' Association Requirement

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 m²) 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 m², 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 m²
- 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

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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 B:

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

Attachment 2:

**Public and Stakeholder
Engagement Results (Surveys,
Stakeholder Focus Groups,
and Commercial Dog Walker
Engagement)**

Attachment 3:

Jurisdictional Review: Off- Leash Areas

