



Date: January 27, 2004

TO: Board Members - Parks and Recreation
FROM: General Manager - Parks and Recreation
SUBJECT: DOGS IN PARKS

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *THAT the Board approve the following strategies to enhance the Dog Off-Leash Program:*
 - A. *Extend dog off-leash hours to “all day” at the following sites: Balaclava, Musqueam, Sunset, Vanier, 37th & Oak, Locarno and Quilchena Parks after consultation with adjacent residents to determine their support.*
 - B. *Add Trillium, Everett Crowley and Angus Parks to the list of approved dog off-leash locations after consultation with the neighbouring community and key stakeholders to determine their support.*
 - C. *Undertake the following improvements:*
 1. *Add bag dispensers to all designated sites;*
 2. *Introduce dog activity equipment to Nat Bailey Stadium Park site on a trial basis;*
 3. *Include air photos on signage at all partially designated sites;*
 4. *Install natural boundary markers at Trout Lake to identify limits of off-leash area adjacent to the bog.*
 - D. *Encourage a range of events in communities that focus on responsible dog ownership and activities for owners and their pets.*
 - E. *Continue collaboration with the dog community and its many organizations.*
2. *THAT costs identified in this report for improvements and expansion to the Dog Off-Leash Program be considered during the 2004 Budget process.*

BACKGROUND

The Park Board's Dog Off-Leash Program began in 1997 with four dog off-leash pilot sites around the city. After evaluating the pilot sites a set of criteria was approved for designating appropriate sites for off-leash consideration. To-date there are a total of 29 sites where dogs can be off-leash during certain times of the day. The majority of sites have off-leash hours during the morning and evening and four locations have all day use.

The current Dog Off-Leash Program is based on the following principles:

- that park space is for everyone;
- that locations are neighbourhood-based;
- that sports fields, environmental areas and playgrounds are avoided;
- that the public be aware of the locations and the responsibilities related to off-leash use;
- that enforcement be focused at problem sites;
- that proposed changes include a process of public consultation.

Since the beginning of the Program there have been a variety of often polarized perspectives on its success. Given the high degree of sensitivity around the dog off-leash issues the Park Board asked staff to review the existing program, test public opinion and report back with recommendations on how the program could be improved.

In June 2003 a survey measuring public opinion on the Dog Off-Leash Program was completed. The results are included as Attachment A. During the months of June and July 2003 an evaluation was also done to compare the dog off-leash activity at designated and non-designated park sites.

Staff also reviewed turf conditions during the Spring 2003 and identified that all sites were showing some level of wear from light to heavy.

DISCUSSION

Public Opinion Survey

The purpose of the public opinion survey was to determine public views on the Dog Off-Leash Program in Vancouver parks. The objectives of the study were:

- To verify the proportion of dog owners in the City of Vancouver and determine what percentage of dog owners exercise their dogs in parks;
- To determine the extent to which conflicts between off-leash dogs and other park users have occurred;
- To measure the awareness levels of the Dog Off-Leash Program; and
- To measure support for the Program and levels of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the existing Program.

Summary of Survey Results

- Estimated dog population in Vancouver is 44,000
- 59% of dog owners say they use existing off-leash sites
- 73% of residents had visited a park in the previous week
- 67% of residents were aware of the Dog Off-Leash Program through newspapers and signs in the park
- 74% somewhat or strongly support the off-leash program
- 52% have found off-leash dogs in 'non-designated' parks
- 21% have been bothered by off-leash dogs
- 71% support designated parks with designated times for off-leash dogs
- only 6% support off-leash at any time
- 3% support keeping enforcement at current levels
- 9% support increased enforcement

Evaluation of Designated and Non-Designated Sites

This evaluation took place over an 11 day period in June and July 2003 with 1,872 inspections being made (47 sites were evaluated - 29 designated sites and 18 non-designated sites). The evaluation assessed:

- 1) Whether pet owners cleaned up after their animals
- 2) Frequency of dogs
 - a) digging
 - b) running through flower or shrub beds
 - c) bothering people
 - d) present in children's playground
- 3) Extent of use
- 4) Respect for designated hours and boundaries

Summary of the Evaluation Results

- 1) Pick up - 79% of people picked up in designated areas
- 80% picked up in non-designated area

2)

<u>Problem</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
Digging	9%
Running through Flower or Shrub Beds	<1%
Bothering People	4%
In Children's Playground Areas	6.5%

3) Extent of Use

Designated Sites with Highest Population of Off-leash Dogs

- 1. Trout Lake - 686
- 2. Spanish Banks - 658
- 3. Vanier - 472
- 4. Fraser River - 363
- 5. Balaclava - 278
- 6. Charleson - 198
- 7. Nelson - 198

Non-Designated Sites with Highest Population of Off-leash Dogs

- 1. Kits Beach - 381
- 2. Jericho - 361
- 3. Connaught - 276
- 4. Everett Crowley - 216
- 5. David Lam - 208
- 6. Stanley Park - 155
- 7. McBride - 132

4) Respect for designated hours and boundaries:

- 27 of the 29 designated sites received a compliance rating of 50% or less for respecting designated hours.
- 88% of people observed showed respect for designated boundaries. The least respect occurred at Coopers Park and Sunset Beach.

Additional Input

Groups like the Vancouver Dog Owners Association are advocates for making it easy for dog owners to do the right thing. In the fall of 2003 the Vancouver Dog Owners Association provided their input for Park Board consideration. In summary they would like:

- 1) All parks to be off-leash dog locations
- 2) All dog off-leash locations to be upgraded
- 3) Expanded dog off-leash hours
- 4) All new park development to include a dog off-leash location

While the results from the public opinion survey do not support all of the requests from the Vancouver Dog Owners Association (only 6% of the population think dogs should be allowed off-leash at any location) there is support for making ongoing improvements to our existing Dog Off-Leash Program.

ANALYSIS, SYNTHESIS AND STRATEGIES

All of the research data (including the turf assessment) and the anecdotal feedback that has been received over the last year has been analyzed and subsequently synthesized into the following key areas with associated strategies:

Off-leash Opportunities are Popular

Numbers of off-leash dogs observed at designated sites suggest that these sites are being well used. Combining this with a strong support for the program and a high awareness level, indicates that the Program is a success. However, off-leash use is also apparent at many other parks contrary to the rules of the program. Many sites that are not designated are more widely used than some designated sites, particularly when these sites are near high density communities or are large park areas. Specific examples of this are Kits Beach, Everett Crowley, David Lam and Stanley Park.

Our analysis of the turf conditions also confirms the popularity of some designated sites, indicating moderate to heavy wear on many of the sites that were observed to have a greater amount of off-leash use. Trout Lake, Nelson, Balaclava and Charleson Parks are in this category.

Based on observed use and the resulting turf impacts, strategies for improvement to the Program could include a dilution of use on existing sites based on a greater distribution of off-leash opportunities and improvements to some locations to increase their attractiveness.

The distribution of potential new sites would be focused on providing a small number of opportunities in different sections of the City, both to understand whether there are improvements to the use of existing sites and community support for the new locations.

Where improvements are considered, these may include play activity equipment for pets and some enhancements for dog owners.

Strategies

- Add 3 new off-leash locations to the Dog Off-Leash Program: Trillium, Angus and Everett Crowley, ensuring that any proposed changes to the existing Dog Off-Leash Program go through a public consultation process
- On a trial basis introduce dog activity equipment at the Nat Bailey site
- Include benches and water when designated sites are developed or renovated

Designated Times are not Respected

Although the designated times at off-leash sites are well used, almost all sites are used throughout the day. Where the use during the day was highest these parks are adjacent to high density areas as well as community parks that are larger and include other recreation opportunities.

Changing some designated sites to all day use will assist with compliance but will also be used to evaluate the benefits or the drawbacks of this approach. Sites considered will attempt to reflect those most often used during the day and distribute these opportunities where overall off-leash use is the greatest.

Strategy

- Extend the off-leash hours to “all day” at 7 sites: Balaclava, Musqueam, Sunset, Vanier, 37th & Oak, Locarno and Quilchena, ensuring that any proposed changes to the existing Dog Off-Leash Program go through a public consultation process.

Most Anticipated Problems Happen Infrequently

At the outset of the Dog Off-Leash Program there was concern that dogs would have an impact on park sites specifically related to digging, running through flowerbeds and shrub beds and interfering with children using playgrounds. While there have been observations of this occurring, the extent of the problem appears to be relatively small.

However, the fact that these problems have been observed suggests that there has been an impact of the off-leash dogs at these sites that needs to be addressed. When dogs are under the control of their owners and owners take responsibility for their animal’s actions, many of these problems are avoided.

Interest in programs educating the public about responsible pet ownership have been increasing. Organizations such as the SPCA and the City’s Animal Control are collaborating on new initiatives and staff will continue to be involved. Other park focused initiatives and programs such as “Dog Day Afternoon” at John Hendry Park combine education and awareness for owners with activities for dogs.

Strategies

- Collaborate with Animal Control, SPCA and other organizations on a Responsible Dog Ownership Campaign
- Participate in a range of community events where increased educational activities would be piloted (Connaught & McSpadden Parks are ideal candidates for this)
- Expand contacts with the dog community to discuss collaboration on events, workshops and volunteer opportunities

Key Areas of Concern Remain

Both direct observations and survey results confirm that two key problems with off-leash use are occurring.

Owners are not cleaning up after their pets

Although the compliance rate is between 75-80%, failing to pick up 20-25% of the time impacts other users of the park. Considering that many dog owners are responsible, it may be appropriate to assist those who aren't with bag dispensers. In many parks these would be associated with existing garbage containers.

Strategy

- Add dispensers at all designated sites

Problem Interactions between People and Dogs

Sharing of park space among a variety of users requires respect for others and particularly for dog owners, responsibility for their pets. The survey data, observations and anecdotal feedback suggests that between 16%-21% of the time off-leash dogs bother adults or children. Anecdotally these interactions, range in scale from injuries to individuals to frightening or interfering with park users. Statistics indicate that this problem has also been experienced in non-designated sites.

No single solution is possible since the problem is related to the responsibility of the dog owner. However, the issue may require both an education and an enforcement component. The public concerned about interactions with off-leash dogs needs to be assured that the rules for parks where there are no off-leash opportunities are being obeyed. In this case, enforcement is essential.

Statistically the support for the existing level of enforcement is only slightly greater (43%) than the additional 39% of those surveyed who wanted enforcement increased. Often we have heard that the specific problems encountered on off-leash sites relate more to the attitudes of some dog owners who believe that they are "entitled" to use these park sites without respecting the needs of others.

The enforcement of the bylaws with respect to dogs in parks comes under the auspices of the City of Vancouver, Animal Control who also cover dog issues across the city. We have worked collaboratively with these staff on problem sites when we are made aware; however resourcing to support all our needs is not presently available.

Staff believe that managing dog issues at problem sites requires both education and enforcement activities. We are presently working together with Animal Control, SPCA and other agencies on a “Responsible Pet Ownership Program” that reinforces the pet owners’ role in ensuring that use of parks for their pets is positive for them and other park users.

We are also working with Animal Control on options for a focused approach to enforcement. These options may also require some support from our Park Rangers, ensuring that education and enforcement are linked. Animal Control have developed a Strategic Plan that will set new directions for their organization. It will be considered by Council within the next few months.

Enforcement, in the past, when targeted and focused on problem sites has been successful. Discussions on enforcement alternatives and strategies needed to improve this program continue, but at a time when resources are limited. Connections between education and compliance are also being explored.

Strategy

- Continue to work with Animal Control on establishing an enforcement program

Public Awareness is High

Feedback through the survey indicates that the awareness of the program is relatively high. The use of publications and signage to confirm locations and rules are mentioned most often, as the ways the public becomes aware. However, there were observation of off-leash dogs in areas of partially designated parks indicating that publicity and signage need improvement.

To enhance the success of use of the partially designated sites better signage, including aerial photography to illustrate the off-leash areas and boundary markers to assist the public’s understanding of the limits of off-leash use, should be installed. This may be an opportunity to use natural elements such as a willow fence at a site to identify limits to the off-leash use

Strategies

- Improve the signage at sites that are partially designated (include air photos on site signage)
- Establish boundaries for off-leash areas - ie. Willow fence at Trout Lake to keep dogs out of the bog

COST ESTIMATES FOR IMPROVING DOG OFF-LEASH PROGRAM

The strategies identified above will require funding based on the following cost estimates:

Public Involvement	
Extending hours	- \$2,000
New Sites	- \$5,000
Signage Changes	- \$5,000
Bag Dispensers	- \$7,000
Park Improvements	
Boundary Markers	- \$3,000
Dog Activity Equipment	- \$3,000
Responsible Dog	
Ownership Program	- \$5,000
(contribution)	
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	\$30,000

SUMMARY

Our continuing research indicates that the Dog Off-Leash Program is supported in the community but the level of demand and the rate of compliance remain problematic. Staff are proposing the broadening of the program to include a small number of new sites and a number of locations of extended hours. These proposed changes will be reviewed in the local community for the input of residents.

Improvements to existing designated sites including play equipment for dogs at a trial site, bag dispensers, better signage and tests of natural barriers are also proposed.

Expanded education and enforcement require collaboration with other organizations. Discussions with the City of Vancouver and SPCA are continuing.

Prepared by:

Queen Elizabeth District
Vancouver Park Board