

Date: November 30, 2007



TO: Board Members – Vancouver Park Board
FROM: General Manager – Parks and Recreation
SUBJECT: Dog Strategy Task Force - Summary Report

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Board receive this summary report of the Dog Strategy Task Force for Information.

POLICY

The Vancouver Charter (section 489 (1) (a)) states that “the Board shall have power to provide for constructing, acquiring, maintaining, equipping, operating, supervising, and controlling such buildings, structures, and facilities as may be required for the recreation, comfort, and enjoyment of the public while within the parks”.

The “Parks Control By-Law” (section 9) identifies three designations with regard to dogs in parks: areas where dogs are prohibited; areas where dogs are allowed as long as they are leashed; and areas where dogs are allowed off-leash.

The “Parks Removal of Animal Manure, Dung, Refuse and Waste By-law” and the City’s “Animal Control By-Law” outline responsible dog ownership behaviour (including the licensing of dogs, leashing of dogs in public places, and picking up dog excrement in public places), and the enforcement of by-law provisions (including fines).

BACKGROUND

On May 29, 2006, the Park Board approved the creation of a “Dog Strategy Task Force”, a six member panel charged with the role of hearing from the community about dogs in the urban environment and presenting the Park Board with recommendations for a strategy to balance the needs of all park users.

On September 11, 2006, the Park Board appointed six people plus one alternate member to the Task Force. One member resigned in November 2006 and was replaced by the alternate. The Task Force included three non-dog owners and three dog owners.

The Task Force met a total of 17 times between September 2006 and June 2007. The Task Force also hosted three public meetings in December 2006 and received hundreds of emails and letters. The Task Force had planned to meet again in August 2007, but this was not possible due to the civic strike (July 23rd to October 10th).

On October 29, 2007, the Park Board decided to conclude the work of the Task Force, with thanks, and requested staff to prepare a summary report as soon as possible on findings to date.

DISCUSSION

Information gathering

The Task Force invited guest speakers from Park Board, School Board, Mountain View Cemetery, Animal Control Services, Police Services, and Permits and Licenses Office. Task Force members also collected information from other cities in Greater Vancouver, North America and Europe.

Key messages from the public

Based on the three public meetings and the emails and letters received, the Task Force agreed on the following key messages from the public:

a) Comments from dog owners and non-dog owners:

- The current dog off-leash program in parks (design, time allocations, signage, etc.) creates problems for all. The current situation has led to conflicts between dog owners and non-dog owners. Each group feels it is not well understood by the other group.
- The behaviour of ‘problem dog owners’ and their dog(s) is a concern for all.
- Dog owners who don’t pick up after their dog are a problem.
- Some dog owners are aggressive toward City employees and other park users, when they are asked to comply with City by-laws.
- There is general support for areas in parks where dogs (whether on or off-leash) are not allowed.

b) Comments from non-dog owners:

- Non-dog owners are saying/feeling:
 - “I’ve lost my park.”
 - “I don’t want to be disturbed by dogs.”
 - “My safety or my child’s safety is at risk.”
 - “My recreational/leisure experience is being eroded by off-leash dogs.”
 - “My park is unsanitary because of dogs peeing and pooing (even if dog owners pick up).”
 - “Human rights outweigh dog rights.”
 - “Dog owners appear to have a sense of entitlement.”
- Non-dog owners want the existing bylaws to be enforced.
- Pockets of conflicts (some very serious) may not always be apparent (e.g. dogs chasing birds).

c) *Comments from dog owners:*

- Dog owners want more space close to home.
- Dog owners are saying/feeling: “I have rights” and “my needs are not being met”.
- Dog owners want appropriate enforcement. The majority of dog owners admit they break the rules (although they admit being responsible citizens).
- There are a number of dog owners who want to assist to make the dog off-leash program better (e.g. volunteer dog watch program).

Shared vision

With the help of a facilitator, the Task Force developed the following shared vision, focusing on “where do we want to be” as opposed to “how to get there”:

- Parks are for everyone.
- Parks are safe and joyous places to be.
- There are special places for people.
- There’s a place to enjoy and appreciate dogs in parks.
- Dogs have a place in building community.
- Dog owners are an important part of the solution.
- We live in a caring community in which people respect each other.
- People are behaving responsibly and obeying the law.
- Animal Control Services serves the community as a strong and effective resource.
- We’re leading the way in protecting the environment.

Strategic actions

The Task Force had thorough discussions about strategic actions to improve the current situation, but did not arrive at a consensus by the end of their last meeting in June 2007. The model for strategic actions revolved around three spheres:

• **Improved enforcement**

Improved enforcement involves actions to increase compliance with existing by-laws, e.g. licensing of dogs, not allowing dogs off-leash in on-leash areas, not allowing dogs in dog-free areas, and picking up dog excrement in public places. Specific actions discussed include applying for ‘special constable’ status for Animal Control Officers, and focusing enforcement on unlicensed dogs, dog owners who do not pick up dog waste, and leash rules at trouble spots in parks, at sites near dog off-leash areas, and during summer.

• **Improved infrastructure**

Improved infrastructure involves actions to change the way the park system is organized and the way parks are designed, e.g. the number and geographic distribution of dog off-leash areas, the design of dog off-leash areas (e.g. fencing, amenities for dogs and dog owners), and the number and geographic distribution of dog-free areas.

• **Improved management**

Improved management involves actions to be more effective with educational programs, to form partnership agreements with the dog community, and to secure ongoing funding (both public and private) for physical improvements to dog off-leash areas.

There were differences of opinion amongst Task Force members with regard to whether all three spheres (infrastructure, enforcement, management) should be given equal priority in terms of guiding short to medium term actions by the Park Board and other civic agencies.

Although all Task Force members understood the value in presenting a balanced strategy for moving forward, some favoured improvements to the enforcement system as the main focus, while others put the priority on improvements to park infrastructure and management.

Task Force members favouring enforcement improvements as the key priority believe that dog owner behaviour will only improve if dog owners truly understand that there are clear and immediate consequences (e.g. fines, impounding of their dog) when they break the law (e.g. allowing a dog off-leash in an on-leash area). These members believe that changes to park infrastructure (e.g. putting fences around dog off-leash areas) or management (e.g. creating partnership with the dog community) will not materially change dog owner behaviour.

Task Force members favouring infrastructure and management improvements as the key priorities believe that fewer conflicts will occur between dog owners and non-dog owners if the park system is better organized and managed to meet the daily needs of dog owners (e.g. more dog off-leash areas closer to where dog owners live, improved design and amenities at the dog off-leash areas). They believe that these changes would lead to greater numbers of dog owners taking their dogs to the dog off-leash areas (and thus fewer dog owners letting their dog off-leash in on-leash or prohibited areas). These members are concerned that a significant increase in enforcement is inappropriate when the park system is not well structured to accommodate the needs of dog owners.

In addition to these philosophical differences, Task Force members did not achieve consensus on specific actions by their last meeting in June 2007. Although they had agreement on 11 of the 16 proposed strategic actions, their agreement on these individual items was conditional until consensus was achieved on all strategic actions.

Outstanding items

On May 15, 2006, the Board requested that the Task Force review the following site-specific proposals:

- Extending the hours of the dog off-leash areas at CRAB Park at Portside from morning (6 am to 10 am) and evening (5 pm to 10 pm) to all day (6 am to 10 pm);
- Designating a new dog off-leash area at Creekside Park;
- Designating a new dog off-leash area at Devonian Harbour Park; and
- Designating a new dog off-leash area in Stanley Park (east of Second Beach).

The Task Force did not discuss these specific proposals by their last meeting in June 2007.

SUMMARY

The Dog Strategy Task Force, which consisted of dog owners and non-dog owners, unfortunately did not achieve consensus by its last meeting in June 2007. Although it succeeded in agreeing on key messages heard from the public and developing a long-term vision, the Task Force did not manage to finalize a list of strategic actions to guide Park Board and other civic agencies in the short to medium term.

Prepared by:

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