



Date: September 18, 1998

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

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## **RECOMMENDATION**

- A. THAT the Board increase the number of parks with morning and evening off-leash hours, from the present four to a maximum of twenty-five.**
- B. THAT the Board approve the criteria for selecting the expanded off-leash dog sites.**
- C. THAT staff report back on the site locations to be added to off-leash by November 30, 1998.**
- D. THAT staff develop an evaluation process to monitor the expanded sites.**
- E. THAT signage and public education be developed to increase public awareness of the off-leash locations.**
- F. THAT staff conduct a community consultation to consider a limited number of sites for seasonal beach use and full-time off-leash access areas.**

## **BACKGROUND**

In November 1997, the Park Board approved a pilot project at four parks where morning and evening off-leash times for dogs could be tested with a view to implementing a city wide program.

Under the current Animal Control Bylaw and Parks Control Bylaw, Section 9, there is a leash law for dogs in all parks with exceptions being made for the current pilot parks. A dog defecation bylaw is always in effect.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study elements included extensive data collection on park users and dogs, weekly site evaluations of park quality and park user surveys completed on site. A summary of the results are found in Appendix “A”.

The selected parks were varied with respect to size, type and primary user groups. The findings indicated that the number of passive recreational users of most of the parks was surprisingly low over the course of the study. The use and recognition of off-leash parks varied considerably between sites.

Dogs were evident at all parks in the study. There was little difference in the physical impacts of dogs between the pilot and the control parks with some holes and dog waste evident at all parks. Smaller parks showed the greater effects of overuse. A few complaints were received about the noise level of dogs and people. Interactions with user groups such as sports teams were seldom observed. Some complaints were received from sports users about the presence of dogs. The study team did not observe any incidents of wildlife harassment by dogs during the study due in part to the types of parks selected for the study.

Roughly half of the 273 park user surveys were completed by dog owners on location. Both groups strongly supported the protection of wildlife habitat and were sharply divided on the issue of current leash laws and enforcement.

Concerning off-leash preferences, the study concluded that the number of parks with designated off-leash hours should be increased, with additional parks to be located in all parts of the city. More off-leash sites may help to reduce impacts on parks which could be greater if only a limited number of parks were available. The criteria in Appendix “B” will be used to determine the 21 sites that will be added to the expanded program.

Many different program models and options from U.S. and Canadian cities were reviewed for the study. When comparing other cities to Vancouver, it is clear that there is no magic solution to the dog off-leash issue. Each city is dealing with the issue in its own way. Calgary has approximately 300 dog off-leash locations and Seattle has seven.

A further community process involving stakeholders and staff should be established for phasing in secondary options for dog owners. These options could include some seasonal beach access and the creation of a limited number of parks with full-time off-leash privileges.

The resources of the city Pound and enforcement of the bylaws throughout the city is limited. If a number of off-leash areas were created, it would enable the Pound to concentrate limited resources in more selected areas.

In the debate over dogs in parks, the emphasis needs to be changed in our attitudes from “off-leash” issues to ones of “animal control” in which owners are expected to exercise personal responsibility for their animals. Owning a pet, especially a dog, requires a commitment of time and effort. The Vancouver Dog Owners Association and others have indicated that they will work with staff to develop stewardship groups for off-leash parks to ensure cleanliness and help maintain park quality. This “Dog Watch” concept could actually result in improvements to parks. Regular checks could result in less faecal matter and turf damage.

An effective public information and education program about the off-leash parks will be essential if the program is to be successful. Parks will require effective signage, and other forms of advertising should be used to ensure public recognition and acceptance. The cost is estimated at \$250.00 per location to a maximum of \$6000.

## **CONCLUSION**

Dog owners constitute a sizeable number of residents of the city. The off-leash study findings indicate public support for increasing the number of parks where dogs can be allowed off-leash under the control of their owners. This is a reasonable first stage of a public process which may include other options as part of a total plan. The ability to enforce dog bylaws is limited and more off-leash parks will allow for a better overall dog management strategy.

The issue of dogs in parks is often emotional. These recommendations are a first step toward a more enlightened approach in a city where limited park resources must be shared by all citizens.

The acceptance of off-leash areas creates a more relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere for people and dogs but the community of dog owners must accept responsibility for the actions of their pets. The program will require clear definition to ensure respect for the rights of everyone to enjoy parks.

Prepared by:

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BM:hw