



Date: May 23, 2002

TO: Board Members - Parks and Recreation
FROM: General Manager - Parks and Recreation
SUBJECT: Heather Park Dog Off-leash Designation

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the dog off-leash designation be removed from Heather Park

BACKGROUND

The Park Board established a city-wide program of designated park sites for dog off-leash use in December 1998. Heather Park was included. Heather Park is a small neighbourhood park of 2.3 acres at 18th Ave and Heather St. in the Douglas Park neighbourhood. It contains four tennis courts and a children's playground leaving about 1.2 acres of open grass for informal use including dogs off-leash.

A landscape improvement plan, developed through an extensive community process was approved for the park in early 1999 and the first phase of its implementation was completed in May 2000. The second phase has been on hold pending a review of off-leash use in the Park.

When it was first designated as an off-leash site, Heather Park represented a location within a community that had expressed a need for this opportunity because of the number of dogs and owners. However, the site clearly was less than perfect given the criteria for site selection that the Board had adopted.

Our criteria suggests that a suitable off-leash site be of a sufficient size to be able to absorb the increase in use by dogs; that open passive areas without playfields or playgrounds are more appropriate; that the existing intensity of use in a park be considered; that grass surfaces should be suitable for off-leash use minimizing damage from digging and not attracting exceptional maintenance; that off-leash use may not be suitable where there are park areas used by large numbers of children and specialized areas such as sports fields, pools including children's wading pools, flowerbeds, running tracks and golf courses. As we have gained more experience with the Off-Leash Program, our review of potential new sites and consideration of existing sites has reinforced the validity of these criteria.

From the beginning when the park re-opened in the spring of 2000 there were concerns about the site; its size, its proximity to neighbours, the presence of a children's playground in the park and even how it received its designation without local community input.

During the summer of 2000 Park Board staff monitored the use of the site and began to receive an increasing number of complaints. In September, the Douglas Park Community Association requested that a meeting be held to discuss the problems and concerns being raised. This meeting was held in October 2000 and was the first of three different processes within the community to attempt to find neighbourhood solutions to the concerns at Heather Park. The second process occurred through a facilitated workshop in March 2001 and the third through an open house in March 2002 which presented a number of ideas from a small working group attempting to reduce the impact of off-leash use.

At the end of each of the first two processes staff presented the Park Board with recommendations to modify or remove the off-leash designation and add new locations. The Board was firm in its direction to staff to continue to have the community work together toward a solution. The third of the processes has just now been finished and is the subject of this report.

DISCUSSION

Heather Park is one of the smallest of the 30 sites presently designated; has a playground which is extensively used by children (and where conflict between these uses has occurred) and has a central sand-based grassed area. The combination of a small park, many dogs and owners and sand-based turf has resulted in damage by dogs digging and deterioration of grassed area into a mud surface.

Public Input Results and Outcomes

As an outcome of our work with community residents in October 2000 staff proposed a change to the off-leash hours at Heather Park to mornings only and the addition of Queen Elizabeth Park (37th Ave side). Only the Queen Elizabeth site was supported when the Board considered the report in January 2001.

The Board asked staff, when this change in hours was defeated, to create a Task Force to consider the potential alternatives and solutions throughout the Community. In March 2001 a facilitated workshop format was used and confirmed the ongoing concerns about Heather Park:

- off-leash space is inadequate to deal with the volume of use
- overuse impacts the physical amenities
- volume of use creates packs of dogs, safety concerns for children and small dogs
- volume of use displaces other park users
- people are not always responsible and dog waste and dog behaviours are problematic
- that parameters for sharing need to be developed, recognizing the value that has been created for the new community of off-leash users
- any process to resolve concerns should be comprehensive and inclusive

Opportunities and options were also offered:

1. Spread the load and dilute the use to lighten the impact
2. Separate the off-leash use from other users
3. Provide sufficient support and enforcement to maintain the quality of park use experiences

The group participating at the workshop did not identify preferred solutions but requested that staff develop alternatives and review these in the community. Based on the results of the workshop and a community-wide survey, in June 2001 staff recommended the withdrawal of the dog off-leash privileges at Heather Park and the creation of a new location on a one year trial basis at Shaughnessy Park to the Park Board.

The Board heard residents describe the benefits to the community from the greater use of Heather Park for both the socialization of dogs and their owners. They heard also about the interest that a network of dog owners had in assisting with communication on the responsibilities of off-leash use and in helping to deal with damage done to the Park. The Board re-affirmed the off-leash designation and defeated the proposal to add Shaughnessy Park. However, concerns about the decision were presented to the Commissioners almost immediately after from residents concerned about the continuing deterioration of the park, the increasing noise and conflicts and lack of enforcement of the existing rules related to off-leash dogs. The Chair requested staff to continue to monitor the site over the summer and review the issue again in the fall.

Most Recent Public Input Process -

The third process began in September 2001 at the initiation of a group of local residents who wanted to look for common ground and solutions in a community where tensions were on the increase. Commissioner Ledingham acted as Chair of this ad-hoc group of 8-10 residents who represented many sides of the issue in the community. Staff acted as resources for information, design and operational issues. This group met on Sept. 24, Oct. 16, Nov. 20, Dec 12, Jan 15 & 29 and Feb 20/2002 but were not able to reach consensus on a final proposal or solution. However, they generated many ideas that reflected opportunities for compromise, requesting that the broader community have an opportunity to review and comment on these proposals. A “pause” to reduce heightened community emotions and allow time to repair the damage to the park was also implemented in December 2001.

A copy of the ad-hoc group’s ideas and a plan of Heather Park was distributed to residents in an area from 28th Ave in the south to 16th Ave in the north between Oak and Cambie. Residents were invited to an Open House on March 11, 2002 to review these ideas and provide feedback. Feedback was also possible through the Park Board website and by FAX.

Feedback was received from 97 individuals. Of these responses, 85 were from residents living within the Douglas Park Neighbourhood. Attached is a summary of the feedback - Attachment A which continues to demonstrate the division this issue has brought to the community.

The results indicate that the community is split 51% - 49% in favour of Heather Park as a designated off-leash site and shows no great confidence that any of the ideas suggested will be effective to reduce the impacts of off-leash use.

There was also a greater disagreement with the proposals to change the schedule of off-leash hours and the idea to consider Douglas Park as an off-leash site. The community was split 51%-49% as to whether to consider Braemar Park.

Impacts of the Dog Off-Leash Program at Heather Park

Community Issues:

The community remains divided over the use of Heather Park for dog off-leash because there have been positive as well as negative impacts of this program.

Residents have indicated that:

- the use of the park has increased
- there have been expanded feelings of “neighbourhood” among dog owners
- there has been a benefit to having an off-leash site within the community
- owners and their dogs are getting more exercise
- the level of noise from barking dogs and owners calling their animal is such a problem that numerous complaints have been registered
- the separation zone established around the playground is not being respected, increasing conflicts
- several incidents of aggressive dogs intimidating children have been described
- large numbers of dogs using a small space creates an impression of a dog pack which is intimidating to other park users
- some dog owners are not being responsible for cleaning up after or controlling their pets
- animal feces and urine are present creating a health concern and discouraging the use of the park by others

Staff Issues:

As the use of Heather Park by off-leash dogs has increased there have been several impacts on the park that are of concern to staff:

Holes in the Turf:

Holes caused by digging dogs appear throughout the year causing tripping hazards. They represent a safety and a public liability concern. Ongoing repair is required representing a higher standard of maintenance than a typical neighbourhood park.

Wear and Tear on Turf:

The number of off-leash dogs in the park has continued to increase. On occasion at least 20-30 dogs have been observed in the park. During wet weather conditions the large numbers of dogs increase the damage to the sand-based turf so that the grass is worn off and a large area in the centre of the park is a mud field. Continuation of the off-leash use will require closure of the park each spring for a period of time to repair the turf. Staff estimate that this work will cost an additional \$6,500.00 annually.

Closures for Repair:

Most local parks in a neighbourhood rarely require closure for major maintenance, remaining available year round for use by residents. Our experience at Heather Park with dog off-leash use has resulted in two closures for extended periods to permit repair and rejuvenation of the park surface. Off-leash use will continue to require these closures for maintenance reducing the availability of portions of this park to the neighbourhood.

Community Access to Off-Leash Opportunities:

Our Dog Off-Leash Program does not always provide residents with a location within their immediate neighbourhoods. Residents of the Douglas Park neighbourhood presently have access to 3 additional dog off-leash sites at Oak Street and 37th Ave., a site adjacent to Nat Bailey Stadium and Queen Elizabeth Park north of 37th Ave. that are within a reasonable distance.

Because of the staff concerns identified above, the availability of other off-leash sites close by and the ongoing division within this community about the use of Heather Park for dogs off-leash, it is staff's recommendation that the designation at Heather Park be removed.

SUMMARY

Much of the public process has pointed to a community split on the ability of its parks to be used successfully on a shared basis for off-leash use. The parks in the Douglas Park neighbourhood are smaller and have the intensity of use because they represent the only green spaces in a very urban neighbourhood. The community values its Community Centre, its playgrounds, its sports fields and its informal green areas but is divided about the ability of these spaces to be used for off-leash purposes.

Staff have also considered the experience at Heather Park over the last two years and confirm that this intensity of off-leash use in such a small space has damaged the park significantly. Continuing with this intensity will require periodic closures of the park for maintenance and repair far exceeding the norm for a neighbourhood park. Of equal concern is the ongoing conflict between users and the concern about public liability and safety issues related to damage and interactions between dogs and children. For these reasons staff are recommending that the Board reconsider the designation of Heather Park as a dog off-leash site.

The Board also needs to consider the commitment to the community to complete the next phase of landscape improvements to Heather Park which has been on hold since June 2000. The intensity of use that presently exists at Heather and the resulting damage suggests that any new landscaping will also be under pressure and similar damage will likely occur.

The latest results of public feedback have not given the off-leash designation at Heather Park (and some ideas to reduce its impact) any clear support. This neighbourhood has access to alternate dog off-leash locations within a reasonable distance.

Prepared by:

Liane McKenna
Queen Elizabeth District
Board of Parks & Recreation
Vancouver, BC
LM:ci