



Date: May 1, 2003

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

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| <p>A. THAT the Board approve \$20,000 for a public opinion survey and research on the extent of dog off-leash use of designated and non-designated sites.</p> <p>B. THAT a report on dog management in parks and any proposed changes to the Off-Leash Program be brought back to the Board in the Fall 2003.</p> |
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BACKGROUND

The dog population in Vancouver is estimated at 60,000 and the most popular locations for owners to exercise and socialize their animals are parks. In particular, parks in high density neighbourhoods have seen the most use by owners and their animals over the years. In 1998 a staff survey of park use indicated that 65% of daily park users were dog owners and their pets.

The Park Board has been receiving requests for dog off-leash opportunities for many years. In July 1997 the Board encouraged public input on this issue, receiving 500 written submissions and hearing from over 400 people who attended a public meeting. A variety of perspectives were shared however many in the community appeared polarized either against or for off-leash opportunities.

In response to the public, the Dog Off-leash Program began in 1997 as a pilot at 4 sites around the city. This program was further developed in 1998 on the basis of research of successful programs in other cities, our experience from the pilot sites, input from the public and in response to local issues and needs. At that time a set of criteria was approved to designate an off-leash site and a total of 29 sites were designated. The majority of sites have off-leash hours during the morning and evening and 4 locations have all day use.

The Dog Off-leash Program is based on a number of principles:

- that park space is for everyone
- that people should be able to do the right thing
- that the locations be neighbourhood based
- that the sites can be shared at different times of the day or season
- that sports fields, environmental areas and playgrounds are to be 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 program changes include a process of public consultation

Today's program includes 29 sites, however new sites have been added at Queen Elizabeth Park (2001) and Nat Bailey Stadium Park (1999) while Heather Park was removed as an off-leash site in 2002.

Balaclava Park's designation was modified in 2000 to exclude off-leash use of sports fields during April, May and June and the designated area at Charleson Park (2001) was clarified and expanded to include the area east of the duck pond.

The Board also has, over the life of the program encouraged City-wide groups such as VanDog to assist with awareness raising and problem solving, supported the need for increased enforcement resources in 2000 and reconfirmed site selection criteria that were to be used in establishing new sites.

However, the Dog Off-leash Program has now been in place for over five years and an evaluation of the program has been initiated and will be discussed in this report.

DISCUSSION

Our initial evaluation of the program includes comments on our experience since the program's inception, anecdotal feedback on its success and an analysis of turf conditions done at designated off-leash sites in March 2003.

Organizational Experience

Public Awareness

Communication of the off-leash opportunities around the city has been extensive through signage on designated sites, brochures defining the program including a code of conduct and a map of locations, information on the Park Board website and paid advertising in local community newspapers. Many of our community centres also included information on the program in either dog obedience classes or during events promoting dogs in parks.

Our continued connections with Animal Control staff also featured an educational component around the new program when the officers were in parks, providing information on the responsibilities of pet owners using the off-leash sites.

Monitoring of Sites

During the first two years of the program operations staff who visited parks regularly did some informal monitoring of the response to the program. The public generally complied but several sites emerged as problems.

A more structured but random monitoring program was conducted by park rangers during the summer of 2000. This monitoring of designated sites indicated a shift from the public's use of off-leash sites during permitted hours at the beginning of the season to increasing use outside of those hours by late summer and early fall.

The number of problem sites remained small but respect for operating hours, control and cleanup overall appeared to deteriorate.

Co-ordination Activities

In addition to the connections with interested residents and groups in local communities, staff have worked closely with other municipalities and the GVRD on emerging strategies for dog management. Much of what was included in our Vancouver program appears to be leading the way for others. However while we have the largest number of off-leash locations and have promoted the sharing of park sites between all users, conflicts remain.

City-wide Evaluation

Anecdotal information has been gathered from staff and the public primarily focused on issues that have been raised over the life of the program. In summary, the Dog Off-leash Program:

- is working well at most sites based on the low level of complaints
- has used criteria to select sites which are acceptable, only one site has been removed
- requires the support of adjacent residents and a community process to resolve problems
- has acknowledged that dogs off-leash sites on sportsfields, particularly sand based ones are not appropriate
- continues to require enforcement in addition to education
- has changed people's perceptions over the life of the program, more people appear to accept the presence of off-leash dogs on designated sites but many people now perceive an entitlement to use other non-designated sites for off-leash use. Complaints associated with these sites are on the rise.

Turf Condition Assessment - March 2003

Dog off-leash use and the concentration of animals that is often created, has impacted the condition of the turf on designated sites to varying degrees. Staff evaluated each of these sites and the results can be summarized as follows:

- 62% (18 sites) are showing light wear
- 21% (6 sites) show light to moderate turf wear with some holes
- 17% (5 sites) show moderate to heavy wear with worn-out sections and holes

The sites with moderate to heavy wear are Nelson, Balaclava, Charleson, Trout Lake and Nat Bailey Stadium Parks.

Deterioration of the turf condition will require additional maintenance, takes away some of the enjoyment of other park users and may lead to public safety and liability concerns.

Problem Sites

During the early years of the Program, locations in high density neighbourhoods such as Nelson Park in the West End, Vanier Park in Kitsilano and Heather Park and Trout Lake generated many complaints and follow-up work on enforcement and community consultation looking for solutions.

In the case of Heather Park both the lack of consensus in the neighbourhood and the concerns about the deterioration of the site resulted in the designation of the site being removed. Trout Lake and Nelson Park each have unique aspects that both make them successful as off-leash sites and problematic. Nelson Park, one of the few park sites in the West End with space for off-leash use, shares the city block with an elementary school. Many park users are transients with their pets who have not always recognized the hours for off-leash use or been diligent about cleaning up after their pets. Concerns from the school about interactions between children and off-leash dogs, and from local residents about excessive barking and uncontrolled dogs have been raised. Many local residents have identified that they no longer use the park.

At Trout Lake, a site for off-leash use is available and is well used, however areas of the park such as the lake, the bathing beach area and the lake path where off-leash dogs are not permitted, are used constantly. The environmental concerns, complaints about user conflicts and the ongoing need for enforcement have been the identified problems at this location.

More recently concerns about spillover use by off-leash dogs on the seawalks adjacent to Charleson and Coopers Parks have emerged. Off-leash use competing with joggers, walkers, rollerbladers and cyclists have resulting in increasing conflicts at these two designated locations.

Non-designated Hot Spots

Several other parks where off-leash use has increased to the detriment of other park users are now becoming hot spots.

Stanley Park - On trails and on the seawall, off-leash use has created additional conflicts in what are already congested areas. Complaints have increased and concerns about public safety and liability continue.

David Lam and Connaught Parks - Both of these sites are surrounded by medium to high density communities and have a number of sportsfields. Staff have received increasing complaints about damage to the fields and the potential hazards for sportsfield users. Turf conditions generally are also deteriorating and user conflicts are increasing.

Everett Crowley Park - Although this is a large park site, there are areas of environmental sensitivity that dogs and their owners have been using. Concern about protection of these areas has been raised by staff, residents in the area and the local park committee. Other sections of the park have also been used for off-leash activities and some user conflicts have been reported.

Kits Beach Park - The number of park users and the variety of activities in this very busy location are often in conflict with dog owners and off-leash dogs. Although this site is not designated for off-leash use, education and enforcement have not reduced these conflicts. This site remains problematic particularly in the spring, early summer and in the fall.

Next Steps

Although staff have evaluated the program in this report on the basis of anecdotal information and the assessment of the turf condition of the existing sites, we do not have research data on the public's view of the success of this Program or specific information on the use of either designated or non-designated sites for the off-leash activity. This information will assist the Board in determining if and how the off-leash program would be modified, to reduce complaints about user conflict, to encourage greater compliance and/or to expand enforcement and increase public awareness.

Public Opinion Survey

Staff and the Board have heard from parts of the community who are adamantly opposed to off-leash sites as well as those whose support significantly expanding the Off-leash Program. We have not asked others in the community to provide their views on the use of parks for off-leash dogs or the success of the program in place today. Comments and suggestions on how the program can be improved would be sought. It is proposed that this information be obtained through a random but scientifically valid survey tool developed by expert resources over the next several months and the results available for the Board's review in the fall. The cost of this survey is estimated at \$7,500.

Use of Designated and Non-Designated Sites

Other than our monitoring of designated sites in 2000, there is little specific information on the extent of use of designated sites and no information on the amount of off-leash use occurring elsewhere in the park system. Staff are proposing to establish more detailed counts of off-leash site use, concentrating on designated sites and those hot spots which are presently not designated. Random counts on other parks in the system will also be done to provide base line information for considering program changes in the future.

Staff propose that this data will be collected between June and September and will be available for consideration in conjunction with the results of the public opinion survey in the Fall. This work will cost \$12,500. A budget of \$20,000 for both tasks has been identified as a 2003 NNR request which will also be before the Board for consideration on May 12/03.

Further Report - Fall 2003

There are many alternatives to manage the dog off-leash use in parks, but these alternatives need to be developed in the context of broader public opinion and an understanding of the public's use of the parks in their community.

Staff propose that a report be presented to the Board in the Fall of 2003 to outline further dog management alternatives and any proposed changes to the Dog Off-leash Program. It will consider, among other things, the number of sites, potential changes to support for dogs on these sites, the levels of enforcement required and their cost and the options for community groups becoming more directly involved in the Off-leash Program. This report may also suggest an implementation strategy for any changes proposed.

Strategy for Summer/Fall 2003

While the opinion survey and the data collection phases are being completed, staff will continue with our communications to the public on the program locations and their responsibilities at these off-leash sites. We will also continue to work with Animal Control staff to target enforcement to problem sites. Turf conditions will be monitored and any public safety hazards corrected.

SUMMARY

The Dog Off-leash Program has been in existence since the late 1990's and a preliminary evaluation of its success has been done by staff on the basis of turf conditions, levels of complaints and anecdotal feedback. While it appears that most sites are working well, several are experiencing increased user conflicts and damage to park turf. New hot spots are appearing at sites that are not designated for off-leash use.

Staff believe that alternatives to managing dog off-leash issues in parks are available but providing proposals to the Board for changes to the Program will require better information on the public's view of the program and actual use of both designated and non-designated sites. These activities require a budget of \$20,000 and are proposed to be included in the 2003 NNR budget.

Staff propose to complete these tasks by Fall of 2003 and develop a report to the Board on proposed changes to the Program for their consideration.

Throughout this Spring and Summer, staff will continue to manage the program with existing resources and support for communication enforcement and maintenance.

Prepared by:

Queen Elizabeth District
Board of Parks & Recreation
Vancouver, BC