WINNIPEG Network of Dog Owner Groups (WINDOG)

Off-leash Dog Parks in the City of Winnipeg

Executive Policy Committee Meeting - May 21, 2014

On May 12, 2014 the Standing Policy Committee on Protection and Community Services voted to approve new guidelines for Winnipeg dog parks.

Delegates from WINDOG and the Winnipeg Humane Society spoke in opposition to the proposed guidelines, declaring they don't go far enough to create and protect the city's off-leash recreational green space.

Both groups objected to the complete lack of consultation with the Humane Society, dog park users, businesses like professional dog day care service providers and other key stakeholders.

The new guidelines were released to the public on Thursday, May 8, 2014 – four days before the Committee met. Stakeholders did not have sufficient time to review and consider the contents of the seventy-page document, develop presentations and make arrangements to appear before the Committee.

The questions and assurances that the Committee asked of Mr. Sacher indicated that most, if not all of the Councillors, had not had time to review the document either.

Most off-leash area stakeholders only learned of the guidelines after the Committee voted to approve the report.

The Winnipeg Network of Dog Owner Groups (WINDOG) asked the Committee to defer its decision on *Off-leash Dog Parks in the City of Winnipeg.* Now we are asking the Executive Policy Committee do the same.

- WINDOG also requests that the consultation process be re-started to allow the Winnipeg Humane Society and other stakeholders to provide input into the guidelines.
- WINDOG requests that that there be broad public consultation in a forum that allows for dialogue among stakeholder groups.
- WINDOG requests that the City consider the organization’s proposal for Winnipeg’s off-leash dog parks.
- WINDOG requests that any off-leash guidelines clearly articulate the City’s mission, vision and values statements with respect to its dog parks.
- WINDOG requests that the City use the guidelines to develop a comprehensive Off-leash Area Management Plan for Winnipeg.
- WINDOG requests that the deficiencies that WINDOG has identified in the report be addressed.

Analysis of the Report - *Off-leash Dog Parks in the City of Winnipeg*

WINDOG has identified the following inaccuracies and deficiencies in the report the Executive Policy is being asked to approve.

- The author of the report, Landscape Architect Dean Spearman, compares five major prairie cities in terms of their provision of off-leash recreational green space. The consultant claims that Winnipeg, with 11 dog parks, is "in the middle". This is a complete misrepresentation of the facts. His claim is based on the fact that Calgary has 150 off-leash areas, while Edmonton has 49 and Saskatoon and Regina each have six. This analysis is meaningless.
- When 2011 Census population figures are factored in, Saskatoon and Regina, like Calgary and Edmonton, are ahead of Winnipeg in providing quality off-leash recreational space. Winnipeg ranks at the bottom of the list.
- A broader comparison of "western" or "major Canadian" cities that includes Vancouver and Toronto would rank our city even lower.
- The proposed guidelines will do nothing to prevent the re-purposing off-leash areas, as happened at Maple Grove and Little Mountain and Maple Grove, attempts to re-purpose off-leash space at Kilcona and Bourkvale.
- Neither will the guidelines prevent the closure of dog parks like the ones we recently witnessed in Transcona and at Stephen Juba Park, nor the planned closures of Brenda Leipsic and Charleswood.
- The administration retains the right to review and close dog parks if "incompatibility of uses in multi-use areas has become evident" or "if there are changes in usage of adjacent lands".
- The criteria for closing off-leash areas do not appear to have any basis in law. They are excerpted from the old Pound By-law, which was repealed in July 2013. The new Responsible Pet Ownership By-law contains no provisions for closing dog parks, only for creating them.
- The guidelines allow the City to continue to create temporary off-leash areas - like the one that's proposed for the relocation of Brenda Leipsic Park. The City does not own the land; it's a Manitoba Hydro right-of-way. By way of contrast, Calgary insists that land under consideration for an off-leash area be in the Parks inventory or that the City has the option to lease it, and that it is not slated for development for 10 to 20 years. Winnipeg's guidelines have no such provisions.
- WINDOG notes that there are a number of inaccuracies in Off-leash Dog Parks in the City of Winnipeg.
    - The proposed sizes for neighbourhood, community and regional parks in Figure10 on page 24 do not match figures in the text, nor do they match those in the Calgary model.
    - The Figure 8 map on page 22 purports to show the catchment area of existing off-leash parks, using a prescribed radius of 7.5 km. drive for regional parks or a 20 minute drive.

    - The 7.5 km. radius does not correspond to actual park user statistics. Kilcona and Maple Grove's membership databases show much larger catchment areas. Kilcona's catchment area includes eight wards: North Kildonan, Elmwood-East Kildonan, Transcona, St. Boniface, Mynarski, Point Douglas, St. Vital and Fort Rouge – East Fort Garry. Many of our members live outside the city: not only East and West St. Paul as is shown on this map but also Selkirk, Beausejour, St. Andrew, Dugald, Riverton, Anola, Landmark, St. Anne's Niverville and Stony Mountain.
- The second prescribed catchment criterion, a 20 minute drive appears to be just as flawed since the author admits "no attempt has been made to rationalize the catchment area with the street system."
- There is no evidence to substantiate the author's claim that Kilcona Dog Park serves 25% of Winnipeg dog owners. It may be more; it may be less - neither the City nor the consultant has conducted a visitor use study at Kilcona Dog Park.
- The author alleges that dog park users have created the perception "that off-leash areas need to be defended from other uses, lest it be re-designated". The inference is that the perception is a merely an invention of dog owners, motivated by a desire to further their own interests. This assertion is without merit.
- Winnipeg dog owners are losing what little off-leash space they have at an alarming rate. Dog parks are only safe if sports organizations and Active Transportation groups don't want the land – or if the City can't make a profit by renting or selling it.

Comparison of Winnipeg and Calgary Frameworks

What's been left out of the report is just as important as what is included. There is no actual plan for the management of Winnipeg's off-leash areas and the standard framework that underpins Calgary's *Off-leash Area Management Plan* –mission, vision and values statements – are missing from the guidelines.

Mission Statements

- The City of Calgary provides safe, sustainable off-leash opportunities for its citizens.
- Winnipeg's guidelines have no mission statement. On the matter of safety, Winnipeg's position is that "…the use of off-leash areas is a privilege and pet owners are there at their own risk. There may be unforeseen hazards and conditions that pose a risk to people and dogs."

Vision Statements

- Off leash areas enhance the well-being of people and dogs. A successful off-leash dog strategy contributes to Calgary's reputation as a desirable place to live and augments the City's reputation as a leader in open space and responsible pet owner management.
- Winnipeg has no vision statement.

Value Statements

- Calgary
    - Accessibility and outdoor pursuits for all Calgarians.
    - Off-leash dog walking is a legitimate form of recreation
    - Health and safety for people and dogs
    - Stakeholder involvement and volunteer participation
    - Mutual respect demonstrated by Members of Council, Administration and citizens.

- Winnipeg has no values statement.

WINDOG's Concerns with the Off-leash Area Guideline Consultation Process

WINDOG is concerned that the process that was used to develop the guidelines makes a mockery of the principle of public consultation, which is based on the well-established public policy principle that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.

In a Public Works' Administrative Report dated December 6, 2011 the Manager of Parks and Open Space specified that the development of off-leash area guidelines would include "public consultation with community stakeholders".

The May 5, 2014 Administrative Report provides evidence that public consultation did not happen. Consultation was limited to four of the City's own departments – Parks and Open Space, Animal Services, Risk Management, Strategic Parks and the Boards of two dog clubs - Maple Grove and Kilcona. The Administrative Report report indicates the consultant also met with Executive of Little Mountain Park Dog Club but that meeting did not take place. The consultant met with a few Little Mountain dog owners.

Many key off-leash area stakeholders had no opportunity to provide input into the guidelines: the Winnipeg Humane Society; local shelters and rescues; businesses like professional dog day care centres and dog walkers; land developers; dog owners who don't use off-leash areas; disabled dog owners; people with special needs - either for themselves or their dogs, and others.

By way of contrast, Vancouver and Calgary – cities that recently developed guidelines and off-leash area management plans - pro-actively consulted widely and openly. Calgary spent over two years in a dialogue with its citizens.

WINDOG also finds the atmosphere of secrecy surrounding the development of Winnipeg's off-leash area guidelines alarming.

Although the consultant met with the Boards of KPDC and MGPDOA, club members were not permitted to attend these meetings.

Maple Grove, Little Mountain and Kilcona's Boards made a series of requests to Parks administrators, asking for public consultation with a broad range of community

stakeholders, pointing out the development of off-leash area guidelines were of significant public interest. Our requests for public consultations were denied.

The Manager of Parks and Open Space responded that “an extensive public consultation process was not contemplated or considered for this project nor is it being considered”.

At the same time, the consultant advised the Boards of Directors of Maple Grove and Kilcona that the public would not be granted access to the guidelines. Access would be restricted to Winnipeg’s public service. It is difficult to imagine why this was even considered…these are dog park guidelines, not classified national security documents.

The committee of Park Superintendents who managed the contract reviewed the guidelines in January 2013. This raises an important question, “Why was there a fifteen month delay in releasing the guidelines?

Twelve months after the consultant submitted his report to the City, WINDOG asked for access to the guidelines, the Terms of Reference and supporting documentation through Freedom of Information legislation. WINDOG’s request was denied.

WINDOG’s Model for Winnipeg’s Off-leash Dog Parks

WINDOG model for Winnipeg’s off-leash recreational areas is also based on Calgary’s off-leash area management plan. Calgary’s plan is one of the most recent in North America, and draws on best practices and experience from numerous communities.

WINDOG has adopted Calgary’s three-tiered system – neighbourhood, community and regional off-leash areas - increasing in size, levels of service and amenities as you move up through the hierarchy.

WINDOG supports the Calgary model for another important reason. In the 2010 Winnipeg Animal Services Audit Report, the City Auditor noted that dog populations in Calgary and Winnipeg “are estimated to be about the same”.

However, in terms of dedicated off-leash space the picture is very different. Calgary has an abundance of good off leash space - 4000 acres. Winnipeg has set aside slightly less than 260 acres.

Winnipeg has roughly 10,000 acres of parkland and green space. WINDOG wants much more of it dedicated to off-leash use. As a consequence WINDOG’s model goes further than the City’s proposed guidelines.

WINDOG proposes many small neighbourhood dog parks within easy walking distance of resident’s homes.

Almost no Winnipeg neighbourhood has a designated dog park within walking distance, an important consideration for dog owners that don’t own vehicles or don’t have time to drive the distance to the nearest off-leash area. To fill this need, “unofficial” dog parks have sprung up all over the city – in city parks, school grounds, athletic fields, Hydro lines and other pockets of green space.

Many of these “unofficial” dog parks have been used for decades - early in the morning and late at night, and in the winter when no one else is using the space. WINDOG asks

the City to give its residents access to legal neighbourhood off-leash recreation green space.

In addition to neighbourhood parks, the WINDOG model proposes fifteen larger community dog parks - one in each ward; and a large regional off-leash area, the size of Kilcona, in each quadrant of the city.

Offf-leash Dog Parks in the City of Winnipeg notes that “all of Winnipeg’s off-leash areas are ‘mixed use’, best thought of as general use parks where off-leash use is permitted”. WINDOG proposes an alternate approach to multi-use parks, one that is used in many other jurisdictions – public parks that offer visitors choices about the activities they engage in and the places they do them in. For example, in Banff National Park you can hike the back country, ride horses, photograph wildlife, relax in a hot spring, eat in fine restaurants or shop ‘till you drop. You just can’t do all these activities in the same place.

WINDOG proposes the same separation of activities for off-leash areas. Dog parks need to be reserved for the exclusive use of dogs and dog owners, in the same way that Winnipeg’s skateboard parks, toboggan hills, soccer fields, and golf courses are reserved for those activities. With 10,000 acres of parkland, there’s plenty of green space where Winnipeggers can bike, jog, and picnic without sharing the space with off-leash dogs.

For safety, WINDOG proposes that the Winnipeg follow the lead of many North American cities in passing legislation that would prevent unsupervised children from entering an off-leash area.

Finally, the provision of off-leash recreational opportunities in established areas of Winnipeg must be a key consideration in the park planning process and in planning new residential developments.

Recent Loss of Off-Leash Space in Winnipeg

- In 2006 the City reduced Maple Grove’s off-leash area by 20 acres, leasing the land to the Manitoba Organization of Disc Sports to create ultimate disc (Frisbee) sports fields. The City provided MODS with a $63,000 grant to develop the playing fields. The Province provided an additional $42,000.
- In 2011 the City offered to fund Bourkevale Community Centre’s proposal to install a $100,000 boat launch on the Assiniboine River. If the project had proceeded, it would have reduced tiny Bourkevale Dog Park by as much as 50%, leaving a third of an acre of off-leash space.
- In 2012 the City closed Transcona’s only off-leash area, paving it over to create a link in the city’s Active Transportation Corridor network.
- In 2012 Parks significantly reduced Little Mountain’ off-leash area to create rental spaces suitable for large tents and bouncy toys.

- In 2013 Parks proposed reducing Kilcona's off-leash area by as much as 50% to accommodate dragon boat and kayak racing, a zip-line, off-road bike trails, and volleyball courts.
- In 2014 Parks closed Steven Juba Dog Park. The closure leaves downtown Winnipeg without any off-leash space. Is the assumption the owners of the new condos along Waterfront Drive won't have dogs?
- The City will close Charleswood Dog Park to build an extension to the William Clement Freeway.
- Brenda Leipsic is threatened with closure for the development of a rapid transit route through the Parker Wetlands and a new 3000 unit high-density residential subdivision.

There is a lack of transparency in the decision-making process with respect to the closure and/or reduction in size of off-leash areas. This winter, Parks posted a notice on its Fields for Fido website, informing dog owners that their dogs could no long be off-leash at Stephen Juba. The message was that the park's off-leash status was "under review". In January, the fifteen year old dog park quietly disappeared from Parks' Fields for Fido website.

There's no requirement for the City to replace dog parks when it repurposes them.

Winnipeg Off-leash Dog Park Issues

Level of Service

- Most dog parks do not have enough garbage bins. Repeated requests to Parks and Open Space for more have gone unanswered.
- There are no recycling bins in off-leash areas. Tons of recyclable beverage containers are mixed in with dog waste and go directly to Winnipeg landfills.
- Dog parks are not accessible to people with limited mobility.

Health and Safety

- Dog waste is a vector for many diseases and parasites. At Maple Grove, Brenda Leipsic and Little Mountain, Parks insists that dog park volunteers empty and haul away off-leash area garbage bins. Without proper work clothing to protect volunteers against leakage, there have been unpleasant accidents that have left them covered from head to toe in foul, liquid dog feces.
- There is a significant risk of volunteers being injured lifting heavy bins. In 2013 one volunteer was seriously injured trying to lift a heavy bin that was frozen into the ground.
- The City applies gopher poison and toxic herbicides in and adjacent to off-leash areas without notifying dog owners.
- Appendix A of the December 6, 2011 Administrative Report prepared by Parks and Open Space Manager, Dave Domke states "Retention ponds are not safe to swim in

or to drink". In 2013, at a Kilcona Park Master Plan Stakeholder Committee meeting, Parks administrators denied there is a problem with the pond water. However several veterinarians in Kilcona's catchment area have confirmed that dogs have contracted gastrointestinal, urinary tract and pyoderma (a skin disease) after being exposed to Kilcona pond water.

A recent Water and Waste report indicates levels of fecal coliform and E. coli in Kilcona's ponds are very high. The City doesn't don't test for most hazardous substances, including the presence of leachate from Kilcona's capped landfill.

- Active dogs need plenty of water and shade in warm weather.
    - There is no potable water for dogs (or people) in off-leash areas.
    - Most dog parks lack shade and shelter belts.
- Off-leash parks are not fenced to separate dog from trains and vehicle traffic.

Lack of Support Off-Leash Area Stewardship Groups

Some of the best research on off-leash area dog parks comes from the University of California – Davis School of Veterinary Medicine. In *Guidelines for the Establishment and Maintenance of Off-Leash Exercise Areas*, Benjamin L. Hart, DVM, PhD, DACVB states,

> "…an active dog club is important to the success of a park, and the more active the better.
>
> We strongly recommend that these clubs be involved in the planning process...and maintain an ongoing relationship with park management to promptly address issues and profile the benefits of dog parks."

Winnipeg's off-leash area stewardship Boards are frustrated and angered by the lack of support they receive from the administration. One of the most egregious and puzzling examples is an offer Kilcona Park Dog Club recently made to purchase and install dog waste bag dispensers at no cost to the City. The club also offered to supply the City with free bags on an ongoing basis if park employees would refill the dispensers when they empty the garbage cans next to them. Research shows that in parks where bags are supplied, dog waste pick-up compliance increases by 95%.

Parks response to KPDC's proposal put a halt to the project. - "As per Maple Grove who do their own waste collection – and other off leash areas that may supply their own doggy bags, the City has no current resources to monitor and maintain the dispensers with bags. We can't commit to keep these dispensers full."