Importance of Single Use Off Leash Areas

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Representing: A Dog Park for Rover

I introduce myself as a dog owner, teacher, artist, resident of Point Douglas, a member of the Point Douglas Residents' Committee and as a representative of a group who is working to get a designated off leash area within Point Douglas. I live solo in a fairly big house. But, like many people in the older areas of Winnipeg, I don't have a large yard. I choose to own a dog for many reasons: for companionship, for exercise, and for security among others. I really wouldn't consider living in a house by myself in any neighborhood without a dog. Therefore, as a dog owner and off leash area advocate, I am well aware that most of the green space in the city is either no dogs allowed or dogs permitted but on a leash only. This is great for things like quiet walks or dog free activities such cycling but it does put some serious constraints on where and when I can take my dog to get some exercise.

Please allow me to use my own dog as an example for a moment. Carter is a greyhound cross who was rescued from rural Ohio at about three months of age. There he was kept outdoors on a short chain without blanket or house. There was little food and only a large plastic tub of dirty water. He didn't even have a name. Obviously no one trained him. He had not had much exposure to people or other dogs. Brought to Winnipeg by Hi-Speed Hounds, he had already been through six foster homes in the three months before I got him. He was a difficult dog -- constantly trying to escape, he also nipped people, chewed through every leash or harness I put him in, had separation anxiety and way too much nervous energy. I tell you all of this because this is but one example of the type of dog that **needs** a dedicated, single use dog park. Carter is very fast, very energetic, and needs a large area to run in. He cannot be where there are bikes to chase not because he is a bad dog but because he loves to run and bikes are something to chase. He needs a fence because, in spite of four years of hard work, sometimes he still tries to escape. He is an example of a dog that needs a fenced, protected, single use dog park. While he is not dangerous, I would also be hesitant to have him around adults who don't understand dog body language. There is too much potential for misunderstandings. This doesn't mean he is a bad dog, or I am an irresponsible owner. Dogs have different needs and behaviours than people. Sometimes those needs and behaviours don't mesh well with those of all humans. But this doesn't mean we should stop rescuing dogs or keeping them in our homes. This means that we need to formally recognize the importance of dogs in our lives and in our cities and as such we should have areas where people can bring their dogs to be what they are – dogs without the constant worry of whether they will do something they shouldn't.

The city currently has numerous examples of single use green spaces including such things as golf courses, ultimate fields, soccer fields, baseball diamonds, skateboard parks, splash pads, municipal pools and playgrounds – all in recognition of the fact that in certain spaces we engage in specialized activities that are incompatible with other uses. For example we don't hike around soccer or ultimate fields during games, these are fenced areas and there is a recognition that to do so would likely result in disruption of the game and injury to players and public alike. We don't bike on splash pads for the same reasons. These examples do not constitute conflicts between irresponsible people but rather are examples of the use of space which are fundamentally incompatible with other kinds of use. Dog parks are no different.

The importance of a dedicated space for dogs is many fold.

1) Off leash areas allow dogs to socialize and exercise in safe, protected, areas with other dogs and other humans. This is healthy for both dogs and people.

2) This is helps keeps dogs and people in separate areas which is also healthier for those who dislike or fear dogs. These individuals have then have the choice to avoid areas for dogs and have less chance of encountering them on the streets.

3) This is also healthier for those folks who don't have dogs but still love to be around them. Seniors and students can go to a dedicated dog park like the one at Bonnycastle, and socialize with dogs. This is healthy for seniors or any person who lives in circumstances that don't permit dog ownership.

4) Areas of the city that might otherwise be unsightly lots or underutilized green space can become wonderful gathering spaces, building friendships and a sense of community.

5) Many green spaces with associated dog parks -- Kilcona, Maple Grove, and Little Mountain for example – also permit a mixed bag of uses such as hiking, tobogganing, cycling, and ball or Frisbee sports. This is a recipe for conflict. Dogs have a prey drive. Therefore they like to chase. Dogs like to chase other dogs, people, objects like balls, prey and sometimes they like to chase joggers, cyclists, and toboggans. This is not dogs being bad. This is dogs being dogs. Yet this carries a heavy fine for the owner.

Dogs are dogs. We have a very long, fruitful relationship with dogs for very good reasons. Dogs do what they are supposed to do -- protect us, hunt for us, herd for us, keep us safe and in return we give them food, a home and companionship. They run, they bark, they dig, and they hunt. They are not going to stop doing these things just

because someone has said the area they are in is “multi use”. This means that cyclists, ball sports, Frisbee sports and small children are not compatible with an area where dogs are running off leash. Even a dog with the best recall might go after a cyclist or a baseball. What dog can resist a Frisbee? So, who is at fault here? Is the dog, for doing what dogs are supposed to be doing? Is it the person using the area for sports? Is it the owner at fault for taking their dog to an area they have been told they may bring their dog and allow it to run off leash?

Single use dog parks offer protection for everyone. And they offer both great recreation opportunities and community gathering places for those who do love dogs. These areas protect people who are afraid of dogs by keeping them contained in a properly identified, single use area. It protects those using recreational spaces from unwanted encounters with dogs. These areas also help protect all of us from poorly socialized dogs with too much energy by helping them get out of the house, get properly exercised and properly socialized.

In this I would like to offer you an example of a recent encounter in Point Douglas. We had a dog in a fenced area that was tied up. A man walked his dog past the house in question; the restrained dog broke free of both fence and tether and attacked the other dog who was calmly walking with owner down the street. No one was being intentionally irresponsible here. Of course perhaps the tether was weak and the gate should have been more thoroughly closed. These things happen. But the result is the same: a guilty dog owner, a frightened man and a badly injured dog. These things are far less likely to occur when dogs are properly exercised and properly socialized. An exercised dog is more relaxed and happy and far less likely to be aggressive. A properly socialized dog is far less likely to treat other dogs as a threat.

We have many dogs in this city; we have many responsible dog owners. Point Douglas is no exception. We also have many responsible dog owners who do not own cars or have large yards. You talk of the need to densify Winnipeg. I don’t disagree with you. However, densification is a more complicated proposition than shoving larger units on to corner lots. For densification to succeed it needs to be driven in tandem with serious and creative consideration of other aspects of urban living. Walkability, safety, active transport, services such as grocery stores, bakeries, retail and coffee shops are all part of this equation otherwise you aren’t densifying you are slumifying. Recreation and the presence of attractive usable green space is on aspect of densification that requires serious consideration. Those of us who choose to live in urban areas often choose to do so for some very good reasons. We may like the convenience of being able to walk to the store. We may prefer a short daily commute. We may enjoy the proximity of our neighbors or the sense of community that emerges in a tight knit urban area. Many of us choose to go carless for environmental or financial reasons. We also choose to own dogs. If the densification of Winnipeg is to precede this needs to be executed with care, consideration and sensitivity. We are a city with many great assets such as trees, heritage buildings, lovely green spaces and a vibrant arts scene. Without sensitivity

to what makes communities vibrant, livable spaces densification will fail and the inner portions of the city will decay as those with the financial resources to do so continue to flee for the relative comfort and reduced tax burdens of our bedroom communities outside the perimeter. Dog parks are a wonderful benefit of urban living. Single use, dedicated god parks are a great use of some of the spaces that could use an upgrade. They enhance the community, raise real estate values, build a sense of community and keep dogs and their owners exercised and happy.