

\$70k worth of upgrades approved for Canine Commons Dog Park

By Brock Weir

Local dog lovers have been long-calling for a higher standard at Canine Commons, Aurora's only leash-free dog park, but now that higher standard is that much closer to reality after a cash infusion from Council.

Council approved a \$72,000 investment into the Industrial Parkway North facility last week, a park which is enjoyed by thousands of dog owners each year.

Volunteers who keep the day-to-day of the park going identified priority improvements to the park last spring, which received a tentative green light from Council but, until last week, the dollars and cents to make it happen were sitting on the backburner.

Among the priorities were overhauling the existing fencing,

re-grading the often muddy parking lot, and replacing the existing wood chip mulch with a new screened wood chip mulch to make frolicking in the park easier on paws.

We are very passionate as dog owners and people who care for our dogs to have a beautiful place to go, said volunteer Helen Clarke earlier this year, making her pitch to Council.

Ms. Clarke has been instrumental in the continued operation of the dog park and had a laundry list of other suggested improvements ranging from lighting to on-site water, but identified these priorities as a good start, keeping the municipal budget in mind.

Yes, we have issues with our park, but it can be made much better than what we have, she said. We have a fence that is 14 years old now and is in need of some improvements. [We have to move wood] chips out, but I think with the support of Council and the Town we will have a nicer park.

Last week, when it came to number crunching, \$45,000 was earmarked for the removal and replacement of the mulch, \$22,000 for the replacement of perimeter fencing, and \$5,000 for the parking lot regrading.

While this money is set to come out of the Parks & Recreation Repair and Replacement Reserve Fund, which has a current balance of \$1.5 million, some Councillors questioned whether there were opportunities for the park and Aurora's pet program to generate revenue.

Building on a delegation made to an early Council budget session at the end of last month by local resident Bob Lepp, who said there is significant revenue to be realised from the municipal pet license program, Councillor Wendy Gaertner questioned whether it would be possible to ensure that all four-legged users of Canine Commons are fully licensed.

That might be a way for us to bring in appropriate money for dogs, she said.

Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Parks and Recreation, said that is coordinated with the Bylaw Service Department and signs could be modified to spell it out to users, but Canine Commons is not part of the regular Bylaw patrol.

What we're more concerned about is informing people of the requirements and it is a bylaw infraction, he said. It would generally be our intent that there would be a regular cycle of staff looking at that, but we could modify the sign. I don't know that it would make that much of a difference, however.

Added Techa van Leeuwen, Aurora's Director of Corporate Services, under which the Bylaw Department falls, We are looking at increasing patrols at the Canine Commons Park going forward to ensure that the animals entering into the park are licensed.

We are just coordinating that effort currently. We would request that they do not enter the park, we would provide them with some information on how to obtain a license and give them an opportunity then to obtain the license and return to the park maybe even the same day. They could attend Town Hall, pay the fee, get the license and go back to the park, but it would be an educational opportunity.

In all, Councillors said the priority improvements and actually making them reality were a long time coming particularly, for Councillor Gaertner, the removal of the existing wood chips.

She questioned, however, whether areas could be set down the road cordoning off an area for small dogs to play apart from the large dogs, and Councillor John Abel expressed his support for a more permanent grading solution for the parking lot.