

Aurora goes back to drawing board on leash-free spaces

Local dog-lovers looking for new places in Aurora to let their pups roam free will have to wait a little while longer to know what the future holds as Council takes another look at leash-free spaces, including trails.

Council tasked staff last week with taking another look at any and all opportunities in the community for leash-free spaces after rejecting a proposal to include just such a trail in the park at the heart of the Highland Gate community.

Local lawmakers nixed the Highland Gate idea after several area residents came to the podium last week to voice their opposition, with many stating that proceeding with the trail would violate terms of settlement reached between the Town and Highland Gate developers.

The open space plan specified requirements, including identifying natural areas and areas that would be used for recreation and amenities, said resident Mike Bryan. In April of 2017, a public information session was held to present the park plans to the public and to invite their feedback. To allay neighbours' concerns about potential noise and disturbance, the area was promised to be restored and naturalized and remain predominantly passive in nature.

A similar sentiment was offered by neighbour Gordon Weir who said the Highland Gate Ratepayers Association worked very hard to develop a consensus and agreement with stakeholders to specify just what is entailed in a passive park. He said the plan would see this agreement somewhat betrayed.

Perhaps equally important to notice is that there was no consultation whatsoever with respect to the residents that are affected by this idea, said Weir. Council, therefore, proceeded based on incomplete and inaccurate information, set out in a staff report dated September 3, 2024. It is not a viable option. It's an environmentally sensitive area and it was deemed to be unsuitable for structures no matter how small by the [Lake] Simcoe Conservation Authority. We already mentioned traffic and parking, there are all sorts of other concerns which I am not going to be repeat, but for all of those reasons we petition Council to get rid of this proposal.

Resident Mike Kennedy agreed that consultation was inadequate and called for further investigation and outreach.

I can let you know that I have not received any outreach from anyone and would welcome that opportunity, he said, adding his concerns ranged from the environmental sensitivity of the land to the noise that could be generated by dogs in the space. From a noise perspective, dogs are noisy. 80 to 90 decibels, we're told. If we want to equate that to something, it would be equivalent to humans shouting. I would ask you to think what it would be like to be sitting in your backyard with men and women shouting at each other, at nothing in general, sporadically and the disruption that might cause. I think you might find that would actually be in contravention of my understanding of the bylaw that currently exists around dogs.

The Highland Gate proposal was not the first related to bringing further off-leash areas to the Aurora Community. Expansion of such spaces has often been an issue at Council, and some expressed a degree of frustration.

Voting in favour of a motion to reject the Highland Gate plan while also tasking staff to take another look at proposed locations, the motion also included the provision that public consultation on any potential locations be complete before they're next before Council to make sure they have a full picture before them.

Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, a long-time proponent of further off-leash areas, reiterated her position last week, emphasizing to Council and staff that she believed more spaces are needed on the Town's west side.

We are at a massive deficit of this type of passive use on the west side of Town, she said, asking if a future report could give multiple options in this geographic area.

Sara Tienkamp, Aurora's Director of Operational Services, said a prime location might be found in new parklands set to be developed in the Town's south end, but said she was "leery" about coming back with additional locations "because I think we will be in the same situation you're probably finding yourselves in this evening," she told Councillors.

"Staff's recommendation would be to look at the property down off Yonge Street near the pet cemetery - it's unplanned and unprogrammed at this point," she said. "There's viability to have it as a community park, there's an off-leash trail option down in that location, and it can be further developed out in the years to come."

Council agreed that whatever locations ultimately come back that the public's views should be known and reflected in any further reports.

"I am all for off-leash parks and in the right areas, but communication and these things are key because they are significant enough that they affect the day to day lives of people who are living in that area and it's important to have everyone on board," said Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo.

Agreed Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson: "We need to do a better job engaging and communicating with residents prior to the report being written and it brought back to Council so the reception within the communities is known as part of that deciding fact."

"We need to hear from the public," added Mayor Tom Mrakas. "I am glad that the residents reached out to us and we came to this conclusion. I have never been in favour of a leash-free area within the Highland Gate area. I believe that is one of those areas that we've made a decision of what that area is going to look like, and we should stick with that. We shouldn't be making alterations to that area and to that park. That's always been my thoughts on that park, but I am glad we're having this discussion and we're going to come to a conclusion here this evening."

By Brock Weir