

Aurora to consider leash-free dog trail

Aurora's dogs love to run free at Canine Commons, the Town's sole leash-free dog park at the head of Industrial Parkway North and St. John's Sideroad. But local pups could soon have more areas to roam ? at least temporarily.

This week, Council will consider a pilot project that will allow for off-leash stretches in the Town's expansive trails network.

Two areas have been identified for the potential pilot project: the Tim Jones Trail north of the McKenzie Marsh Boardwalk to the bridge connecting the trail with Newmarket, as well as the Darkwood Detention Area, a dry stormwater collection area off Racheewood Court and Loriview Lane.

?The Town recognizes that off-leash areas are important to resident dog owners as they provide social benefits to humans and canines,? says Sara Tienkamp, Aurora's Manager of Parks & Fleet. ?It is also important to balance the needs of the community, impact on natural environment, and the sustainability of the off-leash area, when distinguishing areas.?

In the two suggested locations that will be up for review, several criteria were considered including established uses, impacts to the park's functionality and natural environment, proportion of the park to be taken up by the new leash-free areas, and the characteristics of the surrounding area.

Exclusion zones were established for areas with playgrounds, splash pads, skateboard parks, tennis courts, basketball courts, sports fields, heritage and ceremonial areas, areas around water courses or those with natural vegetation that would be disturbed by foot traffic, and areas that might host natural ice rinks or toboggan hills in the colder months.

The first location, the north end of the Tim Jones Trail, ticked several boxes.

?The off-leash zone is intended to be between the bridge/boardwalk and is approximately 300 metres in length,? said Ms. Tienkamp. ?The boardwalk will not be a part of the off-leash zone. Signage would be placed at the St. John's Sideroad entrance to the trail and in Newmarket on the north side of the bridge to advise of the upcoming off-leash zone, with additional signage as you enter the trail between the north end of the boardwalk and south side of the bridge. If approved, staff would liaise with Newmarket to receive permission to install signage on Newmarket's land to the north of the bridge. It could also provide Newmarket the opportunity to expand the off-leash zone into their trail system should they choose.?

The second potential location, the Darkwood Detention Area, is near the rail line and 12 residential homes. If approved, this off-leash area would be four-acre expanse with signage placed at the Loriview Lane and Racheewood Court entrances.

Leash-free zones will not be considered for the David Tomlinson Nature Reserve.

?During discussions with Bylaw and Parks it was agreed dedicated times in the locations were not ideal, as it could lead to confusion with the public and potential conflicts between users,? Ms. Tienkamp noted. ?Dog activity in the David Tomlinson Wildlife Nature Reserve disturbs wildlife in a park that has been constructed to attract and nurture a diverse ecological landscape. The nature reserve designed by David Tomlinson was modelled after similar parks in Europe which are not intended for dog use. The reserves are wildlife safe havens intended to create optimal habitat that allows for wildlife reintegration in urban centres, increased diversification, and opportunities to promote breeding.?

An off-leash dog trail was last floated at Town Hall by Councillor Wendy Gaertner through a motion last year.

?It has been exceedingly difficult to find land in Aurora to accommodate off-leash dog parks,? said Councillor Gaertner in her motion. ?It may be viable and effective to permit off-leash use of some trails and parks during dedicated times.?

Although her fellow Council members expressed concerns over safety as well as potential environmental impacts moving forward with the vision, they agreed that, at the very least, it was an idea worth exploring.

First out of the gate to support the motion was Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said she "fully supported" off-leash dog park and trail areas, noting this was an issue previously addressed by Council. Councillor Sandra Humfryes also offered her support, stating that some other municipalities have gone down this road and it has proved successful.

"I think the key there is an understanding which trails [are designated so the public] when they walk in there is clear signage and everyone knows what they are walking into," said Councillor Humfryes. "There have to be some real thought processes. Sometimes trails adjoin, there are different sections to take. You have to be careful and have one that will, perhaps, go from one end to the other that doesn't cause any of those surprises or issues of concern."

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