

Back to the drawing board on leash-free areas after backlash

Local dog owners looking to exercise their dogs off-leash will have to wait a while longer for further opportunities after Council shelved a pilot project that could have expanded Aurora's leash-free areas.

Council last week rejected two proposals from municipal staff; the first being a pilot to designate a stretch of the Tim Jones Trail near the Newmarket border as a leash-free trail, as well as the so-called Darkwood water detention area off Racheewood Court as a further leash-free amenity.

After concerns were voiced at the previous week's General Committee meeting about how appropriate each space would be for the proposed use including on-street parking and liability concerns Council voted instead to put all plans on hold pending a Town-wide off-leash strategy.

This was a move supported by residents who stated their opposition ahead of the vote.

"We were gobsmacked," area resident David Spencer told Council last week.

Mr. Spencer delegated to local lawmakers on behalf of his neighbours, stating that not only was the Darkwood location inappropriate, but homeowners were not previously notified about the potential pilot.

"I don't think I have seen a matter that is this important to the use and enjoyment of homes by homeowners brought before Council for consideration without any notice or consultation whatsoever with the owners affected," he said. "The manner in which this was handled is not acceptable to us. Council and staff have a fiduciary obligation to provide consultation and notice where they intend and any actions that could profoundly impact the use, enjoyment and value of a person's home."

In asking Council for a six-month notice if the matter is ever revisited, Mr. Spencer made the case on why Darkwood was a less-than-ideal location for an off-leash area.

"The report skims over one critical fact: the open space is already being used for recreational purposes," he continued. "How do residents and their children compete with pets for use of the area? The (staff) report is premised on taking an underutilized Town asset and repurposing it, leaving aside whether the proposed use is appropriate and we do not think that it is. What you're doing is taking away a community asset that is heavily and historically used by residents in the neighbourhood, especially during COVID. People rediscovered the wonderful space and we had soccer games, parents playing baseball and catch with their kids, and volleyball games. This is not taking unused public land and giving it a purpose. This is depriving and displacing a community use of an existing asset."

"As to the merits of the report, I believe it is fundamentally flawed and it is unsupported by any land-use commentary, traffic or parking reports that would normally accompany an application of this impact. Most people would attend the street by car and there are serious traffic concerns here. Our street would be overwhelmed with traffic. We love our street because it is a cul-de-sac with lots of young children who play in the court and the open space. What is being proposed puts these children at risk and deprives them of a play space."

Council members took the delegation to heart and agreed that the Darkwood location would be inappropriate.

"This came to us as an idea, as a location, but we did not approve it," said Councillor Sandra Humfries, pointing out that decisions made at the Committee level are not final until that month's Council meeting. "This evening is asking staff to go back and come up with a place that is appropriate. Obviously, we can tell it is not from a residents' perspective. We had all kinds of concerns."

Similar concerns were outlined by Mayor Tom Mrakas and Councillor Rachel Gilliland.

"We do need dog parks, there's no question about that," said Councillor Gilliland. "We do have a lack in Aurora and this is why we referred it back to staff because we need to look at options that encompass all Aurora [to find out] what the best locations are. I believe we shouldn't be identifying just one option; there should be multiple options and hopefully we will get the right answer at some point because we know this location clearly poses a lot of issues."

"I fully agree with all of your comments," Mayor Mrakas told the delegate. "I don't think a dog park is ideal in a tucked away area within a smaller part of one of our neighbourhoods and I think it is inappropriate to have it in that area, especially, as we all said, without adequate parking, without consultation, but moving forward we're not going to get anything done unless there is consultation."

Consultation with the public was the order of the day, with Councillor Harold Kim stating that anyone impacted should be notified in the future.

"We always talk about partnerships with residents and developers and that was not illustrated in this agenda item," he said.

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: [Communication] is a key component in everything we do with regards to parks, especially with dog parks, as we have seen in the last number of years. I didn't support [the recommendations] last time, I won't support it again this evening, and I am fine with giving ample notice but I would not want to see us revisit the issue [in the Darkwood area], period."

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