

Leash-free dog park to be improved to ?a higher standard?

By Brock Weir

Aurora is a community that loves its dogs and soon Aurora will be showing a little bit more love to the Town's popular leash-free dog park.

Council last week approved a recommendation from the Town's Parks, Recreation & Culture Advisory Committee calling for the Town to initiate a series of improvements to the volunteer-run gathering space, Canine Commons, with a particular emphasis on paving its Industrial Parkway North parking lot and replacing its fencing and gate in 2017.

Additional upgrades and requirements for the park will continue to be examined for inclusion in the Town's 2018 budget.

?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, who has been instrumental in the continued operation of the dog park. ?Yes, we have issues with our park, but it can be made much better than what we have. 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.

?I love our park and have worked hard with our park, worked hard with (Parks and Recreation Director) Al Downey and the Parks team. Do we have more work to do? Yes, we do. Would it be helpful for us to actually have a maintenance schedule? Yes, it would and these are all things that were brought forward. Dog owners are generally more laid back than other people and we appreciate the space. We like the space to run our dogs. Would we like it clean? Yes, we would. Would we like a nice parking lot? Yes, we would. Would we like lighting? Yes, we would. Would we like water? Yes. But we're also well aware of the budget constraints. If we could put a little bit of money over time we would have a beautiful park.?

This was a view shared by the majority of Council as well. Despite some debate over the two identified priorities ? the paved parking lot, in particular ? they agreed giving the park an added infusion of both funds and attention was long-overdue.

?You're long overdue for us to respond in kind for something there,? said Councillor John Abel, addressing Ms. Clarke, ?some lights, and maybe \$30,000 to \$40,000 considering that you have done all the work for the first 14 or 15 years. We certainly owe it to our residents.?

?We missed the target on helping as much as we could have, but I am encouraged by you coming forward,? added Councillor Sandra Humfries. ?Parks and Rec has this under control. We're going to work on adding those things that you need to make it even more enjoyable. I want to have a great park.?

Part of the recommendations stemming from Committee was to keep the operation of the park status-quo; that is volunteer-run. This was contrary to the feelings expressed by Aurora resident Bob Lepp, who delegated to Council on Tuesday night to speak to the recommendations.

?The park design is broken,? he contended. ?The idea that you can take a full list of volunteers and run a park has failed three times and there has been three cycles. We're at the end of another cycle.?

Aurora's pet licensing program ? another ?failure? cited by Mr. Lepp ? should be used to finance the park.

?It won't [work] with a volunteer group, it won't work with professional dog walkers being the only people interested in running that dog park. You need the Town to run the park. We deserve it. We pay taxes for it, we're rich enough?we have something you would be embarrassed to take your dog to.?

Not so, says Ms. Clarke, who said people come from far and wide to use the park as it stands.

While Council expressed its enthusiasm for the park, there was one small hiccup in last week's proceedings when Councillor Abel suggested the recommendations be sent back to the volunteers operating Canine Commons to come up with a priority list before final approval, particularly when it came to paving. Alternatives to traditional paving could be examined, he said, but the deferral failed to gain any traction.

?I think referring it will just waste time and everyone is looking to move forward,? said Tom Mrakas.

Added Councillor Thompson: ?They helped point out those two items, but part of that recommendation is to continue the ongoing discussion with them with regards to their priorities and try to address these little by little, year by year, to bring the park back to a higher standard.?

Councillor Harold Kim was of a similar view, noting if Council waited until the next budget cycle, nothing would be in place until the following year.