

Leash-free dog trails explored by Council

Leash-free trails for dogs and their humans have proved a contentious issue in Aurora, but amid a rising population of four-legged friends in the community, Council has signalled its support in making these greenspaces a reality in select areas.

Council, sitting at the Committee level last week, lent its support to including more leash-free areas in the Town's 10-Year Capital Plan and calling on Mayor Tom Mrakas to include funds for just such a trail within the Highland Gate subdivision in the 2025 Budget.

Notably, municipal staff have indicated there is now the potential to allocate some of the lands within the Hydro Corridor for off-leash areas, a departure from Hydro One's long-standing opposition to use these lands for practical purposes.

Last year's update to Aurora's Parks and Recreation Master Plan estimated there are between 5,000 and 8,000 dogs in Aurora and nearly 50 per cent of residents consulted in the process identified off-leash dog parks as a high priority.

The Town has explored creating off-leash areas in various sites and along shared-use trails in recent years, said staff in a report to Council. Despite a comprehensive evaluation, many of the previously-proposed sites were met with opposition from residents and have not proceeded, with Council directing staff to focus on non-residential areas. Identifying suitable locations for leash-free areas (LFAs) can be challenging due to concerns of conflicting uses, nuisance and perceptions of safety.

Suitably-sized remnant public lands and under-utilized portions of parks that are distanced from sensitive land uses are good candidates to be short-listed for consideration as off-leash areas. Selecting effective sites are critical to their success and maintaining community support. Naturalized lands (excluding sensitive environments) and the Town's hydro corridors may also present opportunities for LFAs.

Lands within the Hydro Corridor, the Town notes, are already used by residents for off-leash activities, even though this is not permitted by Hydro One, but the company is favourable of formalizing these locations for use should the Town pay for fencing and vehicle access gates to the areas and shoulder some of the relevant property taxes.

The potential leash-free space in the Highland Gate development was last before Council in 2019 when it was shelved due to resident opposition, but staff continue to believe it's an ideal option that would serve Aurora's southwest.

Since last week's meeting, Mayor Tom Mrakas has engaged residents online about a potential leash-free area in this part of Aurora and whether he should include it in the 2025 Capital Budget. Residents' feedback at press time remains mixed.

Staff recently met with a resident who suggested an off-leash trail area within the new parkland, said staff in the report. Two fenced areas were proposed alongside the existing park pathway, one for large dogs and one for small dogs. Each area would have two entrances, allowing users to enter from the main trail, walk within the fenced area, and rejoin the main trail through another gate. This design ensures that residents using the main trail can avoid the off-leash dog trail, if desired.

The proposal, including the request that this latter option be included in next year's Capital Budget, was warmly received by Council members, some of whom said this was a long-overdue measure.

I am a little excited we're actually going to have somewhere for our dogs to run, play, expend some energy, said Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, underscoring the rise in the dog population, particularly since the pandemic. I am really in support of moving forward with the leash-free areas. I am also interested if we are going to be looking more in the northwest side as well.

Further consideration, however, should be given to having such dog runs in more local, neighbourhood parks.

?I just don't want those to be forgotten,? she continued. ?I don't think people want to get into their car to walk the dog four times a week; we're encouraging people to walk in their own neighbourhoods and the more areas that we have for pet owners and their dogs to walk off-leash in a safe area the better. I think this is a step in the right direction.?

Support was also offered by Ward 3 Councillor Wendy Gaertner and Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese.

Citing the Town's only current leash-free area ? the Canine Commons dog park at St. John's Sideroad and Industrial Parkway North ? Councillor Weese said expectations need to be clear from the outset.

?One thing that has come to my attention a number of times through residents is a Code of Conduct,? he said, asking for statistics on the present rate of complaints. ?The best time to do that is at the beginning of something. I am hoping we have some codes of conduct and supervision from Bylaw.?

Additional locations considered for future off-leash locations include 14378 Yonge Street, which was identified as a high priority in the staff report; the municipal tree nursery on Industrial Parkway South, and the Engelhard Nursery.

The estimated capital cost for the Highland Gate off-leash run is \$150,000, with \$250,000 estimated for the Hydro Corridor and Nursery options.

The cost for such a run at 14378 Yonge Street has not been projected as it will, should the plans be approved, be considered as part of the development of the entire parkland area.

By Brock Weir