

Off-leash dog trail considered by Council

If you've enjoyed walking your dog along Aurora's trails but have wished for the chance to let them off leash for a run, you might soon have some options.

Council last week unanimously voted in favour of a motion from Councillor Wendy Gaertner calling on staff to investigate a pilot project designating one trail and park in Aurora as off-leash during designated times.

'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.'

A similar view was offered by Councillor Harold Kim who said communication needs to go hand-in-hand with any future policies for dog-owners and others who use the trails for exercise and recreation respectively.

'I am open to seeing what options staff come back with,' he said.

From a safety perspective, Councillor Michael Thompson raised several issues.

'Every once in a while, we see emails from residents who walk the trails and talk about getting almost runover by bicycles and different incidents happening on the trails,' he said. 'I do have a little bit of a concern with regards to using the trails as off-leash or runway tracks for dogs and other pets. If residents are feeling they are not always safe walking the trails, I would be concerned with the dogs as well. The park is less of an issue for me than the trails, but I want to make that comment in advance [of a report].'

Trails over parks were also more of a concern for Mayor Tom Mrakas who said that dog owners who walk their pets on leashes already experience issues from off-leash pets on trails, regardless of whether or not it is allowed.

'When you're looking at the safety of your own dog, I think there are some concerns,' he said. 'Even from the safety perspective, we have to look at the connectivity of our trails. The thing that makes our trails so amazing is they connect from one end to the other. If we were to take one section and basically remove it for certain periods of time, maybe some people will say, 'I don't want to go in there at that time.' If they walk the trail, they have to move out, walk the roads, and get back into another area to enter back [into the trail system]. You lose that connectivity. I think that is a little bit of a problem, but I would like to see what staff bring back and where they could go with this and see if it can be achieved.'

Staff members didn't wait for a report to weigh in, however, with Director of Operations Al Downey suggesting several factors possibly getting in the way of making an off-leash trail a reality.

'There are numerous complications with regards to this motion that would affect wildlife, so we need to do some consultation,' said

Mr. Downey. 'It's a bylaw issue we need to address and make sure we are compliant with the bylaw or what amendments we would have to make to the bylaw. It's a little more complicated than just picking an area and saying, 'Let's try that out.' Once you allow an animal to leave the trail and go into the woods, we have no idea whether or not that animal is going to be protected, so there are concerns with regards that we do our very best that as long as you are on the trail it is safe.'

Mr. Downey estimated it could take up to three months for a report to come back to Council.

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter