

Potential off-leash dog trail subject to further review, study

Plans for a pilot project that would see two sections of Aurora's trails system designated as off-leash areas for dogs and their humans were put on hold at last week's General Committee meeting.

Council members voted to delay a final decision on a plan to designate a section of the Tim Jones Trail near the Town's border with Newmarket, as well as a second stretch at the Darkwood Detention area near Racheewood Court and Loriview Lane, in favour of a Town-wide off-leash strategy to determine the best locations.

Pushing to pump the brakes on the pilot was Councillor Michael Thompson who said he had several concerns with the report before Council, including potential parking issues in the designated areas and the staff-admitted fact that area residents have not been formally notified of the Town's intentions.

"Parking and public notification are the two concerns I have with this specific area because every time we go down this path, there has been pushback with regards to it and I would rather get in front of it than be reactive to it and I would rather get the sense from the residents in this area whether or not they are open for that rather than deal with the fallout afterwards," said Councillor Thompson on the Darkwood proposal.

As for the stretch of the Tim Jones Trail, Councillor Thompson said he was concerned about liability the Town might face if a dog were to bite a trail user.

"I prefer [the alternative in the report] where it speaks more so to the development of an off-leash strategy first [before] the launch of a pilot program," he continued. "I would like to see us have a strategy in place on how we're going to deal with this on a bigger scale than the pilot project itself."

Councillor John Gallo said he shared some of these concerns, adding that "communication is going to be a huge part of this" and it needs to be done as soon as possible.

"There are a lot of homes around there and it needs to happen as soon as we possibly can," he said.

Council members did not say they were opposed to the idea generally, but largely agreed more information was needed before proceeding.

"Many residents were looking forward to having a leashless [trail]," said Councillor Sandra Humfries. "I don't want to put a program out there that is dangerous. Overall, I like the program, I thought this was going to be very exciting, but I don't want to have more risk than benefit at the end of the day. I would like to see this implemented, but with safety at the forefront, for sure."

Councillor Harold Kim said he was supportive of off-leash facilities "in principle" but questioned what staff would use to measure the success of a pilot project when moving forward.

"We know many people want off-leash parks," added Councillor Wendy Gaertner. "We may have a lot of people in that area (Darkwood) and parking on the streets and, to Councillor Thompson's point, I would rather come out ahead of the complaints. I would much rather wait [for a strategy] but I foresee this as a very big problem. With respect to the Tim Jones Trail, I honestly don't see how that would work [regarding] safety. If Council decides to go ahead with this, I think we need to do some consulting with residents. As a resident, I wouldn't like this just to be dropped in my area; I might want it, but with no consultation at all? I would be very unhappy with my Council."

While Councillor Rachel Gilliland said she was supportive of moving ahead with the pilot project, she questioned what holding off until the completion of a strategy would ultimately achieve.

She said she was 'frustrated' on the 'back and forth' debate on off-leash areas in Aurora and previous referrals back to staff left Council 'coming up empty-handed.'

'What do we have to direct staff to do in order to get a fulsome view of what our options are?' she asked, noting there is a 'huge' deficit in dog parks, particularly on Aurora's west side. 'What is (that study) going to entail? I want to see some action. I don't want to see this put off for another year, another season? let's do something about this. We want a fulsome report with all the recommendations, all the possible locations in Aurora that are available? I prefer not to wait for a consultant to tell us where we have open land. I prefer not to wait for [the Parks and Recreation] Master Plan. I think staff is capable in identifying those spaces.'

Mayor Tom Mrakas noted his preference was for the pilot and strategy to be done in conjunction with the Master Plan. That, he said, was his 'ideal scenario.'

The development of a formal off-leash strategy will be up for Council's further consideration this week.

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