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Town of Aurora
Committee of the Whole Report
No. OPS24-021

Subject: Leash-Free Areas in Aurora

Prepared by: Matthew Volpintesta, Manager, Parks and Fleet

Department: Operational Services

Date: September 3, 2024

Recommendation

1. That Report No. OPS24-021 be received; and
2. That the 10-year capital priority list for future leash-free areas be endorsed and that staff update the 10-year capital plan accordingly as per funding availability; and
3. That the Mayor be requested to include a capital project for the development and construction of an off-leash trail within the Highland Gate Subdivision in the 2025 capital budget.

Executive Summary

The Town of Aurora (The Town) currently operates one leash-free dog park, Canine Commons located on Industrial Parkway North. The COVID-19 Pandemic saw an increase in popularity of pet ownership, specifically dogs, and as a result, the demand for additional leash-free dog areas also increased. This report aims to propose additional locations for consideration of future leash-free areas (LFAs) and includes a list of evaluation criteria and design considerations for future implementation.

- The 2023 update to the Town's Parks and Recreation Master Plan (PRMP) includes recommendations in developing future LFAs with a focus on southwest Aurora locations.
- Proposed off-leash areas have not been historically well received in Aurora; however, demand for locations remains high with residents.
- 2023 data from the Animal Service Division provides insight into the number of active dog licences and complaints.

- Best practice guidelines offer clear criteria to help staff and Council decide on new off-leash park and trail locations.
- Recommendations for potential additional LFAs based on new land acquisitions, potential partnerships and current parkland.
- By-law and Animal Services will serve an essential role in supporting the LFA program by providing education and enforcement.

Background

In 2024, LFAs are commonplace in Ontario, driven by rising pet ownership, lack of private amenity space, desire for social interaction among pet owners, and a growing number of persons that may be unable to walk their pets a lengthy distance due to age or disability. As a result, there is a growing demand for facilities that meet the needs of these demographics, most notably in urbanized cities with high dog ownership rates.

The 2023 update to the Town's Parks and Recreation Master Plan (PRMP) includes recommendations in developing future LFAs with a focus on southwest Aurora locations.

The Town's 2023 PRMP estimates that there may be between 5,000-8,000 dogs in Aurora. This would mean that 37 per cent of Aurora households have dogs. Through a community survey collected during the development of the 2023 PRMP, responses indicated nearly one-half identified off-leash dog parks as a high priority.

As per PRMP recommendation #23, staff are tasked with developing an off-leash strategy that identifies procedures and design criteria for establishing new dog parks:

"Develop an off-leash strategy that identifies procedures and design criteria for establishing new dog parks. At minimum, continue to pursue the development of an off-leash dog park in south Aurora in the short-term (Engelhard Drive) and undertake assessments of sites within west Aurora in the longer-term based on established criteria and public consultation."

There is presently only one LFA in Aurora (Canine Commons) established in 2003 with additional dog parks being evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Municipalities commonly adopt criteria to evaluate potential off-leash dog park sites, including (but not limited to):

- Ability to maintain public safety for users and non-users, including animals
- Minimum size, appropriate configuration, and site characteristics
- Land ownership and cost

- Walkability and access
- Compatible and non-compatible adjacent uses, such as buffering from highly populated residential areas, busy sports parks, and environmentally significant areas
- Consideration of fencing, on-site parking, water and shade
- Community input and support from neighbours
- Interest from a volunteer committee to act as park stewards
- Performance measures to monitor and evaluate facility conditions and operation

Proposed off-leash areas have not been historically well received in Aurora; however, demand for locations remains high with residents.

The Town has explored creating off-leash areas in various sites and along shared-use trails in recent years. 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 LFAs can be challenging due to concerns of conflicting uses, nuisance, and perceptions of safety. Suitably sized remnant public lands and under-utilized portion 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. Sponsorships with volunteer organizations for site stewardship can be helpful in maintaining this support.

Naturalized lands (excluding sensitive environments) and the Town's hydro corridors may also present opportunities for LFAs. Communities such as Toronto, Ottawa, Oakville, Guelph and others have had success in establishing agreements for public use of their hydro corridors with municipalities absorbing a portion of the land tax payments. In researching trends elsewhere, most municipalities begin by creating larger destination spaces supported by parking such as Aurora's Canine Commons. As referenced in the PRMP, with a destination LFA already in Aurora, walkable spaces are more convenient and better lend themselves to community building, local recreation, and improved health and wellness.

2023 data from the Animal Service Division provides insight into the number of active dog licences and complaints:

- Dogs running at large (122)
- Pro-active licensing (557)
- Pro-active compliance (489)
- Dog bites (34)

- Poop and scoop (32)
- Barking complaint (94)

As mentioned above, it is estimated that there are between 5,000-8,000 dogs in Aurora.

Analysis

The Parks Division has recently undertaken a service level needs assessment of LFAs in Aurora, coupled with an analysis of dog licensing and population density. Staff have also considered any overlap of Animal Services inquiries regarding leash-free enforcement and related service requests. Attachment 1 – Needs Assessment Data Mapping shows the correlation of heat mapped concentrations of the above-mentioned data, representing a suggested a direct relationship between service-related calls and density and provides meaningful data when proposing future additional LFAs.

Based on the GIS data interpretation, there is indeed alignment with the recommendations within the PRMP, representing a need in the most densely populated area of Town, toward the south-west quadrant, and north-east, also showing a strong relationship between dog related Animal Services calls.

Best practice guidelines offer clear criteria to help staff and Council decide on new off-leash park and trail locations.

As part of the study process, staff conducted a best practice review of municipal policy for siting LFAs, which will be kept as a handbook for staff when designing new LFAs, considering layout, features, accessibility and overall site selection. Detailed within the handbook are specific requirements related to:

- Location attributes
- Proximity limitations
- Site design attributes including materials, fencing, features
- Setbacks
- Accessibility
- Signage and rules
- Prohibited planting lists
- Minimum requirements
- Dog Park Type (Community, Neighbourhood, Nature-Trail)

Attachment 2 Leash Free Areas Handbook lists the handbook details which are recommendations applicable to new installations, or replacements (exceptions will be considered).

Recommendations for potential additional LFAs based on new land acquisitions, potential partnerships and current parkland.

Staff have recently explored several new options and revisited considerations of previously presented sites for future additional LFAs.

Below, are key points and factors which contribute to the decision-making process. A prioritized strategic target list shown below in Table 1 identifies short term and long-term targets looking ahead to the 10-Year Capital Budget:

Hydro Corridor (Wellington St E to St John's Sideroad, corridor west of Bayview Avenue):

This option presents a very suitable site overall for a local Neighbourhood LFA connective trail as illustrated in Attachment 3 - Hydro Corridor Proposed Site Aerial Map of block locations with potential to be connected by one main trail or isolated for one smaller off-leash area; however, it is situated in northeast Aurora. These blocks are currently used regularly by residents for off-leash activity and connectivity, though such activity is not formally permitted by Hydro One. Staff have engaged in initial discussions with Hydro One and they are favourable of formalizing these locations for use. There are some considerations presented by Hydro One staff including, initial review fee of \$12,000, of which \$10,000 is refundable at the end of the agreed term. The Town would also need to erect mandatory fencing and vehicle access gates meeting hydro specifications around the towers. Further, the Town would be responsible for covering 50 per cent of the annual property tax rates to York Region, which would be approximately \$21,135, paid annually. There are also additional costs for perimeter fencing, double entrance gates, an accessible gravel pathway, benching, installation of a dog waste container, turf maintenance and operational costs. It is important to note, the Town currently leases lands in this area from Hydro One; including a portion of Queen's Diamond Jubilee Park and Hamilton Park, which may offset some of the initial review fees, and result in lesser tax fees, if the LFA would overlap with any boundaries within these parks.

14378 Yonge Street: While plans for this site are still very premature, early conceptual designs show viability for a Community LFA which would be comprised of on-site parking, be accessible, and accommodate large and small dogs. Alternatively, there is also feasibility for a LFA trail option. As no budget is proposed in 2025 for this site, full feasibility and due diligence will not be conducted in the short-term. Staff will consider

this site a priority for future LFA area at the community scale, as it would alleviate a service gap in the south-west portion of Town.

Highland Gate Trail: Presented to Council as a viable option for consideration but was ultimately put aside due to public opposition in 2019. It is the opinion of staff that this does remain an ideal option to achieve the service level recommendations within the PRMP in the short-term, as a 'local' LFA which serves the south-west area of Town.

Staff recently met with a resident who suggested an off-leash trail area within the new parkland. 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 those residents using the main trail can avoid the off-leash dog trail, if desired. Attachment 4 - Highland Gate Proposed Site Aerial Map shows the aerial outline of the proposal.

In addition, there is dense natural buffer of trees that screen the rear yards, which could be enhanced in some locations with some further planting between the residences and main spine trail. It was suggested to staff that the residents adjacent to this area were supportive but would require further investigation and outreach by staff to ensure this was a viable option.

Staff request that the Mayor includes this location in the 2025 Capital Budget.

115 George Street: While most recent site concept plans do not show a LFA at the newly acquired former George Street School, staff understand there is a desire within the community to establish one in this location. A small leash-free area could be considered in its place and would certainly fill a local gap but would not accommodate on-site parking and would likely be limited in size to less than 0.5 acre. This area is also identified in the PRMP as being underserviced with playgrounds and courts as there are no immediate neighbourhood parks in this area, with the closest parks on the opposite side of Yonge (Town Park) and Wellington St W (Fleury Park).

Engelhard Tree Nursery: The Engelhard Tree Nursery location is a large parcel of land (10.1 hectares) with a tree nursery currently occupying approximately 0.20 hectares of the available land. The land includes varied terrain, made up of grassland, woodlot and several slopes. This potential LFA would be left natural with mowed trails and wood chip footpath through the woodlot.

Staff previously suggested this as a potential location and the area was endorsed by Council; however, there are significant accessibility issues with the site due to the

terrain. One of the biggest complaints regarding the current Canine Commons site is that it is not accessible. As such, staff would like to focus on creating a new off-leash area in one of the alternate locations that would be fully accessible to the public.

The Engelhard site will remain on the capital list for future development and would be a good template for a Natural Heritage System LFA as it is along the Town trail system and very pedestrian friendly. While it cannot facilitate a parking lot, one of the potential access points is very close (150 metres) to the Hallmark Lands Park and parking lot.

Industrial Parkway South Nursery: This site (adjacent to the current Community Garden) serves as a well-situated opportunity to relieve a need in the south and southwestern areas of Aurora, and could accommodate a fully accessible site, with parking, serving as a community scale LFA. As the trees currently present within the nursery have almost reached full viability for transplant, the lifecycle of the Tree Program should soon be reviewed, potentially accommodating a new LFA area in the long-term.

The Table 1 indicates prioritized sites for the 10-year outlook and will be considered in order, when funds are available:

Table 1: 10-Year Capital Priority Locations

| Locations | Priority | Estimated Capital Cost |
|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| 1. Highland Gate | First priority for neighbourhood scale, short-term | \$150,000 |
| 2. 14378 Yonge Street | Top priority, long-term for community scale site | \$TBD as part full parkland development |
| 3. Hydro Corridor | Second priority, short-term, neighbourhood scale | \$250,000 |
| 4. Industrial Parkway South Nursery | Long-term for community scale | \$250,000 |
| 5. Engelhard Nursery | Long-term for trail development | \$250,000 |
| 6. 115 George Street | Not a priority | N/A |

By-law and Animal Services will serve an essential role in supporting the LFA program by providing education and enforcement.

By-law and Animal Services are important partners in supporting the LFA program initiative with Parks, as education and enforcement will be essential. Park and trail patrons will need to clearly know where they can/cannot walk their dogs off-leash as any confusion will result in challenges educating and enforcing members of the public on the by-law(s).

Clear and concise signage will be posted, advising these locations will be leash free zones at all times of day, patrons need to be always in control of their dogs, responsible for picking up pet waste etc.

By-law and Animal Services will play an active role in monitoring sites, educating users and providing enforcement. With the additional LFA, an increased demand on staff resources is expected, which should be addressed in future; however, staff anticipate the additional LFA could also reduce the number of Animal Services calls.

Advisory Committee Review

None.

Legal Considerations

The implementation of off-leash dog areas in fenced areas or a less controlled environment carries additional risk. It is reasonably foreseeable that an incident causing injury could happen, despite the Town taking steps to mitigate the risk. While there is legislation that requires dog owners to maintain control of their animals at all times, by permitting off-leash zones in its public spaces, the Town may be held liable in the event of an incident.

Where off-leash zones are approved, the Town has a duty to implement controls to mitigate risk. Appropriate risk controls would include signage, user education and rules governing the use of the off-leash zones. Legal Services will be consulted on the development of risk management measures and signage.

Financial Implications

Should Council endorse the proposed 10-year Capital Plan for leash-free amenities, these project's will be inserted into the Town's future 10-year capital plan subject to funding availability for Council's consideration. The funding source for these projects would typically consist of Parks & Recreation development charges and/or the Growth & New Reserve.

Communications Considerations

If future off-leash area locations are selected, Communications will undergo an awareness and education campaign as they become available to inform residents and educate users on by-laws and responsibilities in using these spaces. Communications will include on-site signage, updates on website, e-newsletters, digital ads, social media etc.

Climate Change Considerations

The recommendations from this report do not immediately impact greenhouse gas emissions or impact climate change adaptation. However, during detailed design, green infrastructure for storm water, soft landscape, building design and green procurement were considered and implemented where feasible. They all play an important roll mitigating the impacts of a changing climate, from air quality, stormwater management to counteracting the effects of the heat island.

Link to Strategic Plan

Leash-Free Park facilities support the Strategic Plan Goal of Supporting an Exceptional Quality of Life for All, by encouraging an active and healthy lifestyle.

Develop a long-term needs assessment for recreation programs, services, and operations to match the evolving needs of the growing and changing population.

Alternative(s) to the Recommendation

1. Other options as directed by Council.

Conclusions

In alignment with the PRMP, this report reviews long-term and short-term priorities for 10-year capital budget planning for future leash-free areas. Additionally, the included guiding principles regarding site applicability, design criteria and minimum standards, provide a core resource for staff and Council to implement positively impactful future LFA spaces for users and dogs alike. Staff recommend the Highland Gate Park site be approved as a short-term priority for the next LFA in Aurora.

Attachments

Attachment 1 – Needs Assessment Data Mapping

Attachment 2 – Leash Free Areas Handbook

Attachment 3 – Hydro Corridor Proposed Site Aerial Map

Attachment 4 – Highland Gate Proposed Site Aerial Map

Previous Reports

OPS22-010, Off-Leash Dog Park and Trail Pilot Program, May 17, 2022

OPS21-013, Future Off-Leash Dog Park Locations, June 1, 2021

OPS20-007, Off-Leash Dog Park in Highland Park, May 5, 2020

Pre-submission Review

Agenda Management Team review on August 14, 2024

Approvals

Approved by Sara Tienkamp, Director, Operational Services

Approved by Doug Nadorozny, Chief Administrative Officer