



Report to: Development Services Committee

Meeting Date: April 8, 2025

SUBJECT: Off Leash Dog Area Policy

PREPARED BY: Jyoti Pathak, Project Manager, Parks Planning, Ext.2034
Lorne Hellreich, Senior Planner, Parks Planning, Ext.5790

REVIEWED BY: Richard Fournier, Senior Manager, Parks Planning,
Design & Construction, Ext.2120

RECOMMENDATION:

- 1) THAT the April 8, 2025, report titled, “Off Leash Dog Area Policy”, be received;
- 2) THAT the April 8, 2025, presentation titled, ‘Off-Leash Dog Area Policy’, be received;
- 3) THAT Council approve the ‘Off Leash Dog Area Policy’ attached as ‘Attachment 1’;
- 4) THAT Council approve the ‘Off Leash Dog Area Guidelines’ attached as ‘Attachment 2’
- 5) THAT Council approve a permanent Off-Leash Dog Area at Ada Mackenzie Park in Ward 8;
- 6) AND THAT Staff be authorized and directed to do all things necessary to give effect to this resolution.

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this report is to seek council approval and adoption of ‘The Off-leash Dog Area Policy’ and the related ‘Off-Leash Dog Area Guidelines’ (Attachments 1 and 2). Upon approval of the Off-Leash Dog Area Policy, staff will proceed to develop an Implementation Plan that will use the Off-Leash Dog Area Policy as its foundation. The Implementation Plan is citywide and will identify which Pop-Up Off-Leash Dog Areas are recommended to become permanent. The Implementation Plan will also identify future opportunity areas and address the funding requirements for capital, administration, operating, maintenance and lifecycle of the permanent Off-Leash Dog Area’s with associated schedules for implementation. Staff anticipate presenting the Implementation Plan to Development Services Committee in Q4 2025 pending approval of the Off-Leash Dog Area Policy and Guidelines.

Additionally, staff seek approval to convert the Ward 8 Pop-Up Off-Leash Dog Area at Ada Mackenzie Park to a permanent Off-Leash Dog Area, prior to approval of the future Implementation Plan. The early approval of the Ward 8 Off-Leash Dog

Area at Ada Mackenzie Park seeks to align strategically with procurement, design and construction processes currently underway for Ada Mackenzie Park Phase 3. The early approval of the Ward 8 Off-Leash Dog Area provides financial benefits because of reduced fixed start-up costs and economies of scale if it can be developed at the same time that the overall park design and construction is executed. 'Capital Project 23091 - Ward 8 - Off Leash Area - Design and Construction' was approved in 2023 to design and construct an Off-Leash Dog Area in Ward 8, and no further funding is requested. Staff recommend this conversion of the proposed Ward 8 Pop-Up Dog Park location to a permanent Off-Leash Dog Area prior to receiving approval of the upcoming Implementation Plan due to the favorable findings of the Pilot Pop-Up Dog Park Program at this location and its general conformity with the proposed Off-Leash Dog Area Policy.

BACKGROUND:

EXISTING OFF-LEASH DOG AREAS & THE POP-UP PILOT PROGRAM

The 2019 Integrated Leisure Masterplan (ILMP) identified a provision target of at least one (1) permanent Off-Leash Dog Area per ward. As of 2023, the City had four (4) permanent Off-Leash Dog Areas including, Ward 1 at Huntington Park (116 Huntington Park Drive), Ward 5 at Cornell Woodlot Park (319 William Forster Road), Ward 7 at Box Grove Park (6780 14th Avenue), and Ward 8 at 560 Miller Avenue.

On February 6, 2023, the Budget Committee directed Parks Planning, Design and Construction staff to study how an Off-Leash Dog Area pilot program could be implemented in the upcoming year to accelerate meeting the goal of the Integrated Leisure Masterplan provision target of at least one (1) permanent Off-Leash Dog Area per ward. At the May 30, 2023, Development Services Committee meeting, a report outlining eight (8) proposed pilot site locations was approved – one in each ward.

The eight Pop-Up Dog Parks were successfully opened to the public by September 2023 and included the following sites:

Sites for 2023 Off-Leash Dog Area Pilot Program		
Ward	Pilot Site	Status
Ward 1	Cricklewood Park	Opened: September 11, 2023
Ward 2	Victoria Square Park	Opened: September 13, 2023
Ward 3	Monarch Park	Opened: September 18, 2023
Ward 4	Mintleaf Park	Opened: September 8, 2023
Ward 5	Blodwen Davies Park	Opened: September 13, 2023
Ward 6	Berczy Park South	Opened: September 18, 2023
Ward 7	Aaniin Community Centre Park	Opened: September 8, 2023
Ward 8	Ada Mackenzie Park	Opened: September 15, 2023

Since September 2023, all eight (8) temporary Pop-Up Dog Parks have remained open and operational to continue to provide temporary Off-Leash Dog Area's across the City and to gather data across all four (4) seasons to assist with the development of the Off-Leash Dog Area Policy and Guidelines (Attachments 1 & 2). All eight (8) temporary Pop-Up Off-Leash Areas will continue to remain open until such time that they are recommended for approval or refusal for conversion to permanent Off-Leash Dog Area's in the future Implementation Plan. The temporary Pop-Up Off-Leash Dog Area's continue to be used as designated spaces where dogs can exercise and socialize off-leash in a safe and controlled environment during the development of the Off-leash Dog Area Policy and Implementation Plans. Upon approval of the Off-Leash Dog Area Policy & subsequent Off-Leash Dog Area Implementation Plan, future Capital Projects will be requested to convert the recommended Pop-Up Dog Parks to permanent Off-Leash Dog Area's based on the approved timelines identified in the Implementation Plan.

In November 2023 staff retained Tocher Heyblom Design Inc. (Thinc Design) as part of approved 'Capital Project 23074 – Off-Leash Dog Area Policy & Implementation Plan', to assist with the development of an Off-Leash Dog Area Policy and Implementation Plan. The Off-Leash Dog Area Policy and Guidelines were developed using Background Study information (Attachments 3 & 4), which included best practice reviews, stakeholder interviews, public consultation and data gathered from the Pop-Up Dog Parks Pilot Program (Attachment 5). The Off-Leash Dog Area Policy and Implementation Plan seeks to define a clear framework for planning, evaluating, implementing and maintaining new and existing Off-Leash Dog Area's in the City of Markham.

A SUMMARY OF THE PILOT POP-UP DOG PARK PROGRAM

In May 2023 Council approved [staff recommendations](#) to implement a Pop-up Off-Leash Dog Area Pilot Program consisting of eight (8) Pop-up Dog Parks, one in each ward.

The Pop-up sites were installed in September 2023 and all eight (8) continue to be in service today.

For one year from September 2023 until October 2024, staff evaluated the eight Pop-up Off-Leash Dog Area's to gather data that would assist with the development of an Off-Leash Dog Area Policy. The assessment of these sites included bi-weekly site visits, site observations, monitoring and data collection, an online survey, and responding to resident inquiries. YourVoiceMarkham.ca was used to provide online information and drop-in consultations were organized at the Pop-up locations and a Public Open House was held for residents to provide feedback on the program.

Online Survey and Feedback:

Signs with QR codes were installed at the entrance of all temporary Pop-up Dog Parks to encourage residents to access information about the Pop-up Dog Parks and complete the survey on Your Voice Markham (YVM).

In the first full year of the Pop-up Dog Park Pilot Program, the webpage received 7,867 visits and 598 survey responses.

The five (5) most identified topics, generally and specifically from residents, include:

1. Enhanced lighting
2. Water facilities / fountains
3. Additional garbage bins
4. Consideration for expanding into adjacent open fields
5. Desire for the Pop-up dog parks to remain permanently

Resident Concerns:

Since September 2023, approximately 60 residents have provided feedback on the Pop-up Off-Leash Dog Area Program.

The five (5) most identified concerns from residents include:

1. Quantity and location of parking
2. Risk of coyote encounter
3. Noise
4. Dog Waste
5. Environmental Impacts

Additional information and statistics can be found in the Off-Leash Dog Area Community Engagement Summary (Attachment 4)

Drop-in Consultations at Off-Leash Dog Areas:

From April 8, 2024, until April 16, 2024, drop-in consultations occurred at various Pop-up and permanent Off-Leash Dog Area's in Markham. Approximately 96 residents attended.

The five (5) most common feedback topics include:

1. Non-compliance and enforcement
2. Design, size and aesthetics including surfacing and drainage
3. Alternative location requests
4. Community engagement
5. Maintenance and security

Additional information can be found in the Off-Leash Dog Area Background Study (Attachment 4).

City Department Feedback:

Internal stakeholders were consulted,

The five (5) most common feedback topics include:

Priorities:

1. Location including service areas
2. Drainage/topography
3. Lighting
4. Additional or less off-leash dog areas required
5. Sponsorship opportunities

Concerns:

1. Surfacing
2. City dog walkers
3. Garbage/waste disposal
4. Non-compliance with policy and regulations,
5. Setbacks/noise

Councilor Interviews:

One-on-one interviews were conducted with Councilors to gather an understanding of the community's perspective on Off-Leash Dog Area's. The Councilors identified the following five areas of concern:

1. Location considerations, aesthetics, size and design
2. Increased enforcement compliance, code of conduct issues and concerns
3. Impacts on staff workload and city resources
4. Opposition from residents and community consultation
5. Budget considerations

Public Open House:

A public open house took place on Tuesday May 21st, 2024 to gather feedback and suggestions about the Pilot Program from the community and Off-Leash Dog Area users.

Approximately 32 residents attended the open house, provided their feedback and identified their top 5 priorities as follows:

1. Walkability
2. Site Conditions
3. Accessibility
4. Location (underserved areas)
5. Health and Safety

A summary of the Pop-Up Dog Park Survey, Interviews with City Staff, Councilor Consultations & Pop-Up Dog Park Consultations can be found in Appendices A through D of the Background Study (Attachment 3).

Performance, Durability and Use:

Parks Planning, Design and Construction staff have monitored the site conditions and overall site use for twelve (12) months and have concluded that proper surfacing (wood fibre) with sub-surface drainage are integral to creating the most usable off-leash dog areas based on the following:

1. Frequently used locations have fair to average conditions during fall, winter and spring seasons and improve during the summer.
2. Locations with poor drainage have poor to fair conditions during fall, winter and spring seasons and slightly improve during the summer.

Additional information can be found in the 'Pop-up Off-Leash Dog Area Site Monitoring Summary' (Attachment 5).

Demand on Staff Resources:

The addition of eight (8) Pop-up Off-Leash Dog Areas in the City has placed additional demands on staff resources in the following departments:

1. Animal Care Division: Providing prompt responses to animal related issues
2. Parks Operations: Continuous maintenance and monitoring
3. Parks Planning: Responding to resident inquiries

The above items will be evaluated, and recommendations will be made to mitigate these challenges as part of the upcoming Implementation Plan.

DISCUSSION:**The Off-leash Dog Area Policy & Guidelines:**

The proposed Off-Leash Dog Area Policy (Attachment 1) and Guidelines (Attachment 2) were developed utilizing the following;

- Detailed Background Study of Off-Leash Dog Parks
- Detailed review of existing off-leash facilities
- Review of best practices
- Evaluation of Markham's Pop-Up Off-Leash Dog Area Pilot Program
- Community and stakeholder engagement

Draft Policy Review and Feedback:

Staff posted the draft policy online for public review and feedback on January 29th. The policy and the survey were live for four weeks on the [City's YVM page](#) and the survey closed on February 26, 2025.

The main comments received were:

1. There is not currently an Off-Leash area within an appropriate distance to Markham Centre
2. Miller Avenue Dog Park requires driving and is not walkable/public transportation
3. Residents would like lighting and picnic tables to be permitted
4. Residents would like shade structures to be a standard feature
5. Residents are happy about the water service being provided
6. Many comments against the Monarch Park location
7. Many comments wanting an Off-Leash in Millennium Park
8. Many comments wanting an Off-Leash in Dragonfly or Promenade Park
9. Many comments requesting the Mintleaf location fixes the drainage issue
10. Surface requests for artificial turf or wood chips to avoid mud
11. Improvement on accessibility and signage
12. Include noise and visual buffers
13. Residents would like stricter buffers on proximity to playgrounds
14. Many residents would like off-leash areas to be walkable or accessible by transit
15. Additional and clearer signage for responsibilities of pet owners, rules of the dog park, and maintenance of off-leash areas

The Policy (Attachment 1) & Guidelines (Attachment 2) establish provision and design standards, support equitable access for residents, provide clear direction on location, size, design and maintenance of Off-Leash Dog Area's while mitigating potential conflicts with existing or adjacent land uses. The Policy aims to define a clear framework for planning, evaluating, designing, implementing and maintaining new and existing Off-Leash Dog Area's in the City.

The Policy outlines service levels, a classification hierarchy, site selection criteria, design guidelines, maintenance, education & enforcement:

Classification and service area:

The policy proposes the following classification of Off-Leash Dog Area's as follows:

- **Community Off-Leash Dog Areas:** one (1) Community Off-Leash Dog Area is proposed for each ward and are intended to serve dog owners living within 3.75 kilometers
- **Neighborhood Off-Leash Dog Areas:** Neighborhood Off-Leash Dog Areas are intended to serve dog owners living within 1.5 kilometers
- **Urban Off-Leash Dog Areas:** Urban Off-Leash Areas are intended to serve dog owners living within close proximity up to 1.5 kilometers

Site Selection Criteria:

The proposed site selection criteria address size and space allocation, provision and distribution, land use compatibility and facility setbacks, site conditions and assessments.

When identifying appropriate locations for Off-Leash Dog Area's, consideration must be given to balancing the needs, interests and safety of the community, impact on the natural environment and sustainability of the Off-Leash Dog Area. An Off-Leash Dog Area may be located within a public park, open spaces, utility right of ways and other publicly owned properties that satisfy the selection criteria.

Design Guidelines

The design guidelines outline options and identify standard features for the three recommended Classifications of Off-Leash Dog Area's. The design guidelines also identify non-permitted and sponsorship features.

Standard Features

The proposed standard features include and identify surface materials, fencing, separate large and small dog areas, entrance area, buffers, gates, entrances, sub-drainage, grading, seating, pathways, planting, signage, water service, parking etc.

Wood fiber with sub-surface drainage is the recommended standard surfacing material for Off-Leash Dog Area's (artificial turf will be considered for Urban OLDA's). Black vinyl chain link fence is the recommended standard fencing material for Community and Neighborhood Off-Leash Dog Area's whereas metal ornamental fence is proposed for Urban Off-Leash Dog Area's within intensification areas.

Non-permitted elements

Lighting, waste bag dispensers, agility equipment and planting and pathways within the designated fence enclosure are not permitted in Off-Leash Dog Areas.

Sponsorship elements

A shade structure, and community noticeboard are not considered essential to an Off-Leash Dog Area, and these elements can be included if funding is available through sponsorship. The process and procedure for accepting sponsorship will be developed and included in the future implementation plan.

Maintenance

The proposed policy incorporates direction on waste management, maintenance schedules, monitoring frequency and assessment checklists etc.

Education and Enforcement

The proposed policy promotes dog licensing, public outreach, Off-Leash Dog Area rules and the Animal Services' code of conduct and recommends an

Ambassador Program to be further developed as part of the Implementation Plan.

EARLY APPROVAL OF PERMANENT WARD 8 OFF-LEASH DOG AREA AT ADA MACKENZIE PARK

In 2023 Council approved 'Capital Budget 23068 – Ada Mackenzie Phase 3 – Design and Construction' as well as Capital Budget 23091 – Ward 8 – Off-Leash Area – Design and Construction'. Staff have recently completed an 'Evaluated Request for Proposal' to select a consultant with demonstrated skill and capacity to undertake the design work of the Phase 3 park expansion at Ada Mackenzie Park. The original scope of work for Ada Mackenzie Park identified that an Off-Leash Dog Area be included as a potential site amenity if a permanent Off-Leash Dog Area is approved at this location as part of the future Implementation Plan.

Upon execution of the Pop-Up Off-Leash Dog Area program for the past year combined with consideration of the proposed Off-Leash Dog Area Policy, Staff identify that Ada Mackenzie Park Phase 3 would be an ideal location for a permanent Off-Leash Dog Area. Prior to awarding a consultant for the Design of Ada Mackenzie Park Phase 3, staff are requesting that Council approve the permanent location of this Off-Leash Dog Area within the Ada Mackenzie Phase 3 park expansion in Ward 8. The early approval of the Ward 8 Off-Leash Dog Area provides financial benefits because of reduced fixed start-up costs and economies of scale if it can be developed at the time that the park design and construction is undertaken. In addition to the financial benefits, the inclusion of this Off-Leash Dog Area in the design development of the park expansion will assist with a more integrated and seamless park design.

CONCLUSION:

The proposed Off-Leash Dog Area Policy and Guidelines establish

- a clear, consistent and transparent approach for identifying Off-Leash Dog Area's throughout the City of Markham.
- service levels, dog area classification, outlines site selection and evaluation criteria and establishes design standards.
- direction on maintenance, education and enforcement and defines roles and responsibilities of City departments and users.

The proposed Off-Leash Dog Area Policy and Guidelines are the culmination of efforts by staff, consultants, the public, user groups, internal and external stakeholders.

Upon approval of the Off-Leash Dog Area Policy (Attachment 1) and Off-Leash Dog Area Guidelines (Attachment 2), staff will proceed to develop the Off-Leash Dog Area Implementation Plan with an anticipated presentation to Development Services Committee in Q4 2025.

The Implementation Plan will use the approved Policy and Guidelines to identify and recommend

- permanent locations citywide, including recommendations on the conversions of Pop-Up sites to permanent sites.
- capital costs for design and construction
- administrative, maintenance, operating and lifecycle costs
- implementation schedules of permanent sites across the City
- sponsorship criteria and outline an Ambassador Program specific to Off-Leash Dog Area's.

Upon Approval and adoption of the Off-Leash Dog Area Implementation Plan, staff will bring forth Capital Projects based on the approved locations, budgets and schedules during the future Capital Budget process that are outlined in the Implementation Plan.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

This report does not have any financial impact to the Operating Budget or Life Cycle Reserve Study. Staff are seeking approval and adoption of the Off-Leash Dog Area Policy (Attachment 1) and Guidelines (Attachment 2) to proceed to the Implementation Planning phase of approved 'Capital Project 23074 – Off-Leash Dog Area Policy & Implementation Plan'.

Budget 2025 affirmed a current allocation of \$2.6 million for pop-up off-leash dog parks and noted the City's goal of one permanent dog park per ward.

Upon approval of the Off-Leash Policy and Guidelines, staff will prepare an Implementation Plan and seek Council approval of the Implementation Plan and provide any estimated incremental capital, administrative, operating, maintenance and lifecycle funding requirement, to be considered and addressed as part of the budget process.

The table below identifies the currently approved capital funds (eligible to be funded by Development Charges) available for design and construction of additional Off-Leash Dog Areas:

Location	Currently Approved Funding
Ward 1	Design and Phase 1 Construction (\$343,187)
Ward 2	Design Only (\$44,700)
Ward 3	Design & Construction (\$584,800)
Ward 4	Design Only (\$44,700)
Ward 5	No Funding
Ward 6	Design & Construction (\$584,800)
Ward 7	No Funding
Ward 8	Design & Construction (\$584,800)

HUMAN RESOURCES CONSIDERATIONS:

It is anticipated that installation of new permanent off-leash dog areas in the city could result in additional resources being required for maintenance, operations, and animal services. Upon approval of the Off-Leash Dog Area Policy and Guidelines, staff will prepare an Implementation Plan that will identify resource needs and will seek Council approval of the Implementation Plan and associated potential resource needs at a later stage/ date.

ALIGNMENT WITH STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

The Off-Leash Dog Area Pop-up Program and Policy and Implementation Plan is aligned with *Building Markham's Future Together: 2020-2026 Strategic Plan*, particularly the goals of an Engaged, Diverse, Thriving and Vibrant City, and for a Safe, Sustainable and Complete Community.

BUSINESS UNITS CONSULTED AND AFFECTED:

Parks Planning, Parks Design and Construction, Parks Operations, Animal Care Division, By-Law Enforcement, Urban Design, Natural Heritage, Corporate Communications - Sponsorship, Finance, Legislative Services and Recreation Services have been consulted and will continue to be involved in the Final Off-Leash Dog Area Policy/ Guidelines and the subsequent Implementation Plan

RECOMMENDED BY:

Giulio Cescato, RPP, MCIP
Director, Planning and Urban Design

Arvin Prasad, RPP, MCIP
Commissioner of Development Services

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Attachment 1 - Off-Leash Dog Area Policy
2. Attachment 3 - Off-Leash Dog Area Guidelines
3. Attachment 3 - Off-Leash Dog Area Background Study
4. Attachment 4 - Off-Leash Dog Area Community Engagement Summary
5. Attachment 5 - Pop-Up Off-Leash Dog Area Site Reviews Summary