

Nature reserve shouldn't go to the dogs, Councillors argue

The David Tomlinson Nature Reserve, located in Aurora's northeast quadrant, was designed as a refuge for nature and a place for people to take in local wildlife without disturbing them and without barking and pooping dogs.

This was a decision made by Council seven years ago and, without the proper signage in place, and the community growing up around it, area residents have been walking their dogs through the protected area regardless.

Now that residents are using the area for reasons beyond what it was designed for, is it too late to get the nature reserve back on track? That was a question faced by Council last week as municipal staff sought direction from Council to reaffirm its previous decision more than half-a-decade after the fact.

The issue came into focus last week during a wider discussion on potential new off-leash locations in Aurora.

Included among the resolutions staff asked Council to consider was a recommendation to once again formalize the nature reserve as a dog-free zone.

Citing the COVID-related dog boom in Aurora, Councillor Harold Kim said he was not in favour of banning leashed dogs from the nature park, stating that dogs are allowed on most local trails as long as they're on a leash, but Councillor John Gallo was firmly opposed to reconsidering the original vision.

It was an integral part of the design of the Nature Reserve not to have dogs part of that and I think if we move forward with having dogs, even on a leash, you've really destroyed the entire plan of that wildlife reserve, said Councillor Gallo. I would encourage everyone else to also be in favour of it if we want to maintain the plan that David worked 15 years or so to finally come into fruition.

This was a view shared by Councillor Wendy Gaertner who said dogs would disturb the wildlife the area is designed to protect.

The whole intent of this is to protect the wildlife, she said. We even have blinds so that wildlife won't see people. Dogs are just not appropriate in this kind of wildlife park. It's going to be a great park, I wish it could be, but it goes against the intent of the wildlife park.

For other lawmakers, however, reaffirming the ban on dogs at this point without community input could be seen as taking away an existing use from residents.

Councillor Michael Thompson, for instance, said that at this point people are taking their dogs through the park and this would be a change of use or notice to them.

He questioned how banning on-leash dogs would be communicated with residents so they understand the intent behind it with regards to the wildlife, the impact, so that they understand the rationale behind the decision-making.

Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Operations, agreed there will need to be an extensive communication program explaining the concerns with dogs in the park.

We want to make sure that people clearly understand the negative impacts of dogs, whether they are on a leash or not, and what the impacts would be on the wildlife park, he said. It's going to take a while before people clearly understand and we would be working with our bylaw enforcement to make sure there is an educational program with regards to enforcement of this. We will do our best with our staff when they are out there to inform people of the concerns of dogs within the park, but it's something that is going to take a period of time for people to clearly understand but we need to start.

Councillor Thompson agreed that communication will be key because the 'Why now?' question will be asked. Similarly, Councillor Rachel Gilliland supported referring the matter back to staff so the communications questions can be answered as did Mayor Tom Mrakas, who said consultation needs to take place with nearby residents.

'This is going to be a significant change to the area of how they are going to be going on with their dogs,' said Mayor Mrakas. 'I fully understand and appreciate what it says in the plan, we all know what it says in the plan, we all agreed with the plan, but the problem is this park has been open for almost a year now and the residents have been allowed to take their dogs through on-leash? I would like to see us go out [and let the residents know about] the change, why we're making the change, so they have a full understanding.'

'It's a shame those signs were not up Day 1. We wouldn't be in this predicament, but here we are and we need to consult with the residents.'

Councillor Gallo agreed that if the signs had been up when they should have been, this would be a non-issue. He said he was not opposed to consultation, but questioned why staff needed further direction at this time if that decision had already been made.

'I am a little bit shocked at what I am hearing,' he said. 'So much work has been put into this. Council has supported this and I am shocked to hear. I guess some residents must have touched the ear of certain people and it is an election year of course, and we're trying to figure out wards and all of that. There must be some link to that because at a Council table to bring this up now, when this was [at General Committee] you could have resolved your issues between then and now.'

'We have to balance the tremendous amount of work that has been done in strategic planning and developing that and a balance of the predicament we're in now because all of a sudden you're saying 'you can't take your dog there even though we've let you until now.' The pressure we would have to have at this table in an election year from residents in this area who no doubt are going to come to us, fill these chambers, and say, 'We want to walk our dog there because that is what we've been doing.' It is up to us and how strong we are in our principles, in our planning, in the massive amount of work that was done to say, 'This is the plan we had for that area.'

Added Councillor Gaertner: 'Consultation' implies we're going to be listening to residents and their feedback. That's not the right word with this. 'Information' to the residents, perhaps, but that is not a consultation process. That part has been done long ago. We may have dropped the ball with respect to signage and making sure information goes out to new residents, but I don't think we can call this a 'consultation.'

HAVE YOUR SAY ? Should Council stick with the plan and keep the David Tomlinson Nature Reserve dog-free? Send your thoughts to brock@lpcmedia.ca.

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