

Residents' push-back prompts re-think of Town's dog park policy

A strong negative reaction from members of the public to an off-leash dog park being included in designs for a new greenspace on Hartwell Way could prompt a re-think to the Town's policies on rec spaces for four-legged friends.

Last week, Council received revised plans for the proposed park in Aurora's northeast, a new design which includes naturalized features and, in response to a community survey, no off-leash dog park.

Council received initial concepts for the park in March of 2020. At the time, two designs were on the table which they directed be put out to the public, particularly residents in the homes within a short walking distance to the land in question, and that consultation process began last fall.

According to a report from Sara Tienkamp, Aurora's Manager of Parks and Fleet, approximately 720 letters were delivered to residents within a 500-metre radius of the land. The letters directed residents to take a look at the concept plans and weigh in on them virtually through the Town's Engage Aurora platform. Out of these 720 letters, the Town got 178 responses and while the overall feedback was positive, it was a very different story for the dog park.

Posed with the question, "Do you agree with the proposal to have a small, fenced dog run in this park?" 119 respondents said they disagreed with this component of the plan, with 40 saying they agreed, 11 voting for "somewhat agreed" and just two residents falling into the "somewhat disagree" camp. Just two respondents said they neither agreed nor disagreed.

"Residents were concerned about the potential for noise from barking, security of dogs, odours and inappropriateness of an off-leash park in a residential area," said Ms. Tienkamp. "As such, staff have removed the amenity from the design plans and the area will be programmed as an open space turf area for residents to utilize for recreation.

"Staff have standing direction from Council to incorporate off-leash components in park design. Resident feedback on park design where off-leash parks have been included in design continues to be met with strong opposition. It is recommended that staff continue to pursue off-leash park opportunities but not as a part of park design where lands are located within a residential neighbourhood with bordering homes."

Conversely, a proposal to include a community garden in the area received a much warmer reception.

In previous neighbourhood-adjacent parks, plans to include community gardens have received push-back from residents, who have cited odour, aesthetics and the potential to attract pests among their concerns.

This case, however, might be an exception.

"Community gardens have been suggested in other new park design/retrofits and unfortunately have not been well-received by the public; however, the respondents to the public consultation for this park were very pleased with the natural aesthetic of the design and inclusion of a community garden with raised accessible plots for gardening," said Ms. Tienkamp. "In addition, residents expressed a strong interest in assisting with the administration of the community garden.

"As such, the community gardens will remain part of the park design and staff will work to engage a group partner for the governance of the plots by creating an administration model similar to the York Region Food Network's management plan for the current Aurora Community Garden."

Reviewing the report at last Tuesday's General Committee meeting, lawmakers said that further work is needed to identify appropriate locations for off-leash amenities.

?I understand the rescinding of incorporating the dog park areas,? said Councillor Rachel Gilliland. ?I certainly wouldn't want to eliminate all options or opportunities to have dog parks located in alternative areas.?

Asking staff whether there would be any further efforts to identify appropriate locations, Al Downey, Aurora's Director of Operations, said the last Council was provided with a list of criteria for dog parks and potential locations.

?The direction was that there was no direction coming from that,? said Mr. Downey. ?Council had not asked us to identify any particular area. I would be more than happy to reintroduce that to Council. I think dog parks have to be looked at separately. It is an issue people would like to see them [but] they don't necessarily want to see them in their neighbourhood but [close to] their neighbourhood.

?We looked at hydro corridors and some of those areas [as potential locations] and those are somewhat problematic because they are not our lands [and] would take some negotiations, but I will do my very best to look at those reports and see if I can get that to Council as soon as possible.?

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