

COMMUNITY-INITIATED PROPOSALS FOR OFF-LEASH DOG PARKS

RECOMMENDATION

That the August 22, 2022, City Operations report CO01284, be received for information.

Requested Council Action	Information only		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work as we work to achieve our strategic goals.	Urban Places		
City Plan Values	ACCESS		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	A community of communities	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	15-minute districts
Corporate Business Plan	Serving Edmontonians		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dog in Open Spaces Strategy • Dogs in Open Spaces 10 Year Implementation Plan • <i>Breathe</i> - Edmonton's Green Network Strategy • Community Parks Framework Initiative 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CR_3374 Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy (March 21, 2016, Community Services Committee) • CR_3559 Dogs in Open Spaces Pilot Program (Grand Trunk) (September 6, 2016, City Council) • CR_3560 Dogs and Open Spaces Implementation Plan (September 6, 2017, Community and Public Services Committee) • CR_6763 Dogs and Open Spaces (April 10, 2019 Community and Public Services Committee) • CR_7144 Off-Leash Dog Park - Recommendations (July 10, 2019, Community and Public Services Committee) • CR_7145 Dog Park Options with Urban Development Institute (July 10, 2019, Community and Public Services Committee) 		

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Previous Council/Committee Action

At the May 16/17, 2022, Community and Public Services meeting, the following motion passed:

That Administration provide a report to Committee outlining options and resource requirements for community-initiated proposals for off-leash dog parks with the potential to have the options integrated into City processes and strategy implementation.

Executive Summary

- The City currently prioritizes developing new, or enhancing current off-leash areas (OLAs), in alignment with the Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy and based on community need.
- The Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy:
 - Incorporates smart planning, design, and management of OLAs that consider user experience, safety, and environmental sensitivities.
 - Identifies where new OLAs in Edmonton are needed.
 - Establishes a base level of amenities for OLAs.
- OLAs are currently established or updated through capital projects, or by developers in new neighbourhoods.
- The new Draft Community Parks Framework, which includes off-leash areas, aims to improve equity, ensure policy alignment, optimize investment and ensure a more strategic, data-driven approach is taken to community park development, including OLAs/parks.
- If a permanent community-led process is established or integrated into an existing City process to develop OLAs, work would be required to ensure that these areas align with strategy, and that community needs assessments and public engagement are incorporated. Public engagement would be required to confirm support for a community-led approach.

REPORT

Background

Maintaining healthy and vibrant open spaces is essential to achieving the strategic goals of ConnectEdmonton. Edmonton's network of parks, open spaces and natural areas support celebration, ecology and wellness and makes a quantifiable contribution to the long-term livability of the city. Off-leash dog parks, referred to as "off-leash areas" (OLAs) are an ongoing interest in Edmonton, particularly the distribution and the possibility of community-led establishment and enhancement. OLAs can foster healthy activity and social well-being, increase park safety through additional users and can reduce off-leash activity in unsanctioned areas. However, considerations regarding dog waste, noise and other park-use priorities must be considered. Comprehensive planning, design and management is critical to ensure the benefits of OLAs are achieved.

The Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy is aligned with ConnectEdmonton's guiding principles that ensure the City makes strategically consistent choices as it works to achieve the community's

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goals. The Strategy is also aligned with *Breathe*, Edmonton's Green Network Strategy, which recommends prioritizing neighbourhoods currently underserved by OLAs for acquisition and development of new or expanded parks and emphasizes the importance of well-designed OLAs, taking into account safety and environmental impacts.

A timeline of past work related to the Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy is outlined in Attachment 1. The timeline references a report presented to Council in 2019 where Administration undertook a comprehensive review. The review concluded that City-led and developer-led OLAs are the most effective in ensuring equitable distribution of amenities that meet City guidelines. Options for community-led off-leash areas were also evaluated. This report revisits that review, provides information on how OLAs are currently established and presents options for community-initiated OLAs.

Current Off-leash Area Establishment & Enhancement Processes

Since its approval in 2016, the Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy has guided the design, planning, and management of OLAs in Edmonton. Prioritization for both new establishments or enhancements to existing locations is based on community need, including population, density of licenced dogs, proximity to existing OLAs, and community feedback.

The City currently prioritizes new, or enhancing existing OLAs, in alignment with the Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy by the following methods:

- **City-led Capital Projects:** These are City-funded projects that are designed, built, maintained, and operated by Administration. Projects can either be standalone or part of a larger park or neighbourhood renewal project. In both instances, public and stakeholder engagement is used to inform design.
- **Developer Projects:** These are built by developers as part of new neighbourhoods, then maintained and operated by Administration once the inventory is transferred to the City. Projects may be self-funded by the developers or completed through the City's Shared Park Development Program.
 - The partnership allows developers to design and construct above-base-level amenities that are accepted by the City for maintenance and operation.
 - Administration engaged the Urban Development Institute (UDI) to help create landscape design standards and an off-leash areas manual specifically for developers (Attachment 2).
 - Developers have access to a Neighbourhood Heat Map (Attachment 3) which demonstrates priorities for new OLAs based on current OLA distribution, walking distance recommendations, community interest, and dog-licensing data.

Establishing or enhancing OLAs through City-led or developer-led projects provides oversight to ensure that OLAs are equitable, sustainable, safe, and built in alignment with the Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy. Every OLA requires standard amenities, including waste bins, waste bag dispensers, signage, landscaping and clear physical boundaries.

The Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy also drives an equitable distribution of OLAs across the City. In 2018, 315 of 399 neighbourhoods (79 per cent) were within a 20-minute walking distance of an

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OLA, as outlined in the Strategy. For the current budget cycle, Administration's target is that 333 of 402 neighbourhoods (83 per cent) are within a 20-minute walking distance of an OLA by the end of 2022. This target will be met based on new OLAs already built or planned for construction this year.

As part of the proposed 2023-2026 Capital Budget, Administration will be assessing citywide priorities, including the need for additional OLAs and the associated operating impacts of capital.

Temporary Off-Leash Pilot Program: In addition to City-led and developer-led OLA's, Administration currently has a Temporary Off-Leash Pilot Program for community leagues. Between May and September of 2022, under-utilized, fully enclosed amenities on league licensed-land (such as winter ice rinks, tennis and basketball courts, etc.) can be designated as temporary OLAs. Currently, eight community leagues are participating in the pilot which will undergo review in Q4 2022. The evaluation will determine effectiveness and potential for continuation, expansion or additional supports (e.g. added fencing).

Alternative Options for Creating Off-leash Dog Parks

The Dogs in Open Spaces 10-Year Implementation Plan includes a suggestion to develop a process for establishing, enhancing and eliminating (decommissioning) OLAs with options for City-led, community-led, and developer-led OLAs.

Community Group Led Construction Process (CGL): Based on the Dogs in Open Spaces 10-Year Implementation Plan and the additional requests of Council in 2019 and 2022, Administration has explored integrating off-leash areas into the existing Community Group Led Construction Process. This could provide an opportunity for a community group to fund the establishment or enhancement of an OLA, in alignment with the Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy and City construction standards. Communities would be responsible for the ongoing operation and maintenance of the OLA, which would be contained within a community league-licensed area.

Some potential considerations include:

- Inequitable opportunities for groups to establish off-leash areas based on community capacity.
- Potential restricted access given limited land available to community groups.
- Enforcement resourcing and liability concerns.
- Locating OLAs on community league-licensed land may be a barrier or require leagues to request expansion of licensed land.

Attachment 4 outlines a summary table of the highlights of current and potential City processes for OLAs.

Community Parks Framework and Off-leash Areas

In 2019, Administration also included the Neighborhood Park Development Program (NPDP) as part of the original review of options for community-initiated OLAs, where it was determined that a separate funding stream for OLAs would be required to avoid competing with other community priorities (e.g. playgrounds). In 2020, Administration initiated work on a draft Community Parks Framework, which proposes replacing the NPDP with a new approach.

Under the draft Community Parks Framework:

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- The City will be responsible for the provision of core, secondary and specialty amenities including needs assessments, project initiation, engagement, planning, delivery and funding. OLAs are proposed to be categorized as specialty amenities, which may be provided on an opportunity-driven basis, or as needed to meet service level targets. The City can then prioritize amenities in a way that promotes equity and reduces challenges with asset provisions.
- New and renewed park amenities will be prioritized using a decision-making matrix based on service level targets, data analysis of amenity use, condition, demand and demographics.
- The Framework will improve equity by aligning the provision of community park assets with The City Plan and the Infrastructure Asset Management Policy.

Administration does not recommend integrating community-initiated off-leash dog parks into existing city processes at this time. Community-led projects can be very impactful for localized users but present significant risk due to funding issues, (in)equity challenges and community tensions due to diverse perspectives about the value of OLAs.

Next Steps

Administration will continue to move forward with the City-led and developer-led OLAs, both of which contain engagement opportunities for Edmontonians to help shape their communities. The City-led and developer-led OLAs present the best options to align new and updated OLAs with the Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy and advance the City's commitment to community-wide amenity equity. The temporary off-leash area pilot will be evaluated in Q4 2022 and results will be communicated to Council in early 2023.

Key focus areas in the evaluation of the Temporary Off-leash Pilot Program are outlined below.

- Engagement with community leagues for feedback on the existing program and to assess interest in continuation and/or expansion.
- Equity considerations (including infrastructure, financial and volunteer capacity).
- Review of accessibility expectations and integrating solutions to inclusion.
- Review of insurance and liability requirements.

Should Council wish to pursue community-initiated OLAs, additional work would need to be completed to update existing processes or programs to ensure that proposed OLAs are aligned with the Dogs In Open Spaces Strategy and the upcoming Community Parks Framework. Community needs assessments and public engagement would also need to be incorporated into those processes or programs. These assessments are included in Administration's processes, but are typically too costly and complex for community groups to undertake. A staged approach would be required to ensure success.

If directed by Committee/Council, next steps to pursue community-initiated OLA options would be as follows:

- Phase I: Determine Stakeholder and Public Support for Community-Initiated OLAs (6 months)
Public Engagement:

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- Conduct engagement with The Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues, Community Leagues, general public and park users to determine support for community leagues and groups to fund, build and manage OLAs.
- Identify challenges for user groups and potential mitigation tactics.
- Phase II: Service and Process Design (6 months)
Results from Public Engagement (Phase I) will inform Administration the level of support from community leagues and groups to fund, build and manage off-leash areas. If there is support, Administration will move to Phase II.
 - Integration of off-leash areas into City processes and associated resource requirements:
 - Changes to operational procedures and workflow processes for CGL or development of a new standalone process, including:
 - Establish processes and accompanying resources (manual).
 - Develop review and approval criteria, including alignment to strategy and frameworks, location requirements, etc.
 - Develop licensing or agreements, including insurance and maintenance requirements.
 - Develop education and communications.
 - Determine resources required for program implementation including:
 - Funding for program coordination and support for community groups.
 - Resources to support program elements (ie. bylaw enforcement, managing licensing/agreements etc.).
- Phase III: Pilot New Process
 - Due to the potential demand for community initiated off-leash areas, the new process would be piloted with a small number of interested groups where there is high demand for an OLA.
 - Once evaluated, if results are positive, the process could be opened up city-wide.

Budget/Financial Implications

If directed by Council, Administration can complete Phase I (Determining Stakeholder and Public Support through Public Engagement) using internal resources. Once Phase I is complete, Administration would better understand the level of support, interest and resources required for program implementation. If during Phase II (Service and Process Design) additional resource requirements are identified, Administration will bring forward a service package for Council consideration.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

Although there are residents and groups desiring additional OLAs in their community, there are others looking to have other amenities in their open spaces, such as play structures, disc golf, and alternative recreation activities and equipment. These considerations need to be evaluated when space is limited.

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No new public engagement occurred for the development of this report. However, significant public engagement with internal and external stakeholders played a prominent role in shaping the direction of the Dogs In Open Spaces Strategy and supporting plans. Past public engagement did not specifically ask about support for community groups to fund, build and manage OLAs, but responses to open-ended questions included suggestions from internal and external stakeholders to leverage outdoor rinks as OLAs seasonally.

In June 2022, Administration met with the Edmonton Federation of Community Leagues (EFCL) to discuss the proposed options for this report. Points from the discussion included:

- CGL requires time and effort from the community and volunteers. The length of time to implement a project depends on project scope and scale, and the capacity of the community group. Some projects take 5 to 10 years.
- Fundraising is time-consuming.
- It is important to manage expectations around project scope and scale with the groups involved.
- CGL created equity issues for which communities receive park assets. Could consider the CGL as a method for higher capacity neighbourhoods, while capital is spent on projects in areas that don't have that capacity.
- Potential need for more space through expanding league-licensed areas.
- More and more is being pushed downstream onto community leagues with no funding.
- Funding through CGL would need to be weighed against competing priorities, e.g. an OLA versus a new play structure.

Public engagement and communications would be required during Phase I to allow Administration the ability to gather community insights on the proposed options, especially with targeted stakeholders, such as EFCL, community leagues and the wider public.

GBA+

Community-initiated OLAs may contribute to inequity as communities that are better off financially and can organize as a group are typically more successful at leading community-led projects. These projects place a significant demand on the capacity of a community group at the initiation stages of a project for planning, fundraising and construction, but also when it comes to ongoing operation, maintenance and renewal. Administration has seen through the shared NPDP program that funding allocated to the renewal of community parks has been underspent due to a lack of community funding/capacity availability citywide, while at the same time, some communities that have capacity have had assets renewed prior to the end of their lifecycle. No other City assets are delivered or renewed in this manner. The Community Parks Framework is to improve equity and ensure a more strategic approach is taken to community park development.

Accessibility to OLAs and amenities could also be impacted as community groups would be able to restrict access to members of the group and affiliates. Fees for use would be able to be charged (similar to skate tag programs for community league-managed outdoor rinks).

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GBA+ processes would be applied to the proposed options if they were implemented. This would ensure equality of outcomes and barriers to equity are removed. It would also include a thorough review of the impacts of any option on the community and City.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy Timeline
2. Guidelines for Developers Establishment of Off-leash Areas
3. City of Edmonton Dog Off-leash Area Access
4. Comparison of Processes for Development or Enhancement of Off-leash Dog Parks