



NARRATIVE
RESEARCH



Animal Licensing & Control Bylaw Renewal *Phase 2 Research Review*



Edmonton

Prepared for:
The City of Edmonton

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Project Overview

Background

The City of Edmonton is currently undertaking an in-depth review of its Animal Licensing & Control Bylaw, with the goal of making the Bylaw more modern, promoting responsible pet ownership, as well as a safe and healthy Edmonton. The current iteration of the Bylaw is over 20 years old, and in recent years there have been notable shifts related to pet ownership in the City, including changing expectations and trends with companion animals, growth of urban agriculture, and dramatic population growth in the number and type of animals residents have in Edmonton. Based on previous pet licensing research conducted in 2020 concerning pet licensing in the City, it is estimated that 30,000 licensed cats and 60,000 licensed dogs live in Edmonton; however, there are many more unlicensed. In addition, changing trends have been noted whereby more residents are keeping bees, chickens, rabbits, and livestock as pets at their homes and on their property.

To help inform the Bylaw refresh, the City of Edmonton commissioned Narrative Research to undertake a multi-phased research study aimed to better understand the opinions and attitudes of the public on topics related to the existing Animal Licensing and Control Bylaw and evaluate potential changes.

Project Methodology

Given the scope of Bylaw refresh, the value of obtaining exploratory research to better understand nuances of opinions, and the need for obtaining the measured opinions of a large number of residents, a multi-phased research study was conducted, involving both qualitative and quantitative methodologies with varied audiences. Specifically, the first research phase involved online focus groups and in-depth interviews with members of the general public (including various pet own types) and subject matter experts, followed by an internal brainstorming session with City officials, and an online survey that was distributed to the City's Insight Community and made available through the City's social media channels. For the phase one survey, a total of 8,094 surveys were completed, and results were assessed across a variety of factors, including cat ownership, dog ownership, non-pet owners and survey respondents overall.

This first research phase provided preliminary, general feedback and recommendations for potential changes to the Bylaw. A second research phase was then undertaken aimed at exploring perceptions on specific key issues/concerns and evaluating final options for consideration as part of the final Bylaw refresh. This subsequent research phase involved two online surveys, one that was once again distributed to the Edmonton Insight Community (EIC) (as well as via open link on the City's website) and one that was done with members of a general population (GP) online panel of Edmonton residents.

Question wording was consistent across both surveys. Across both surveys a total of 9,750 surveys were completed (8,949 with EIC respondents and 801 with GP respondents). Samples for the online GP study were pulled to be representative of the City's population distribution, with final results weighted to ensure representation across key demographics. In addition to the online surveys, two in-person focus groups, and two follow-up interviews were conducted with stakeholders whose work is directly impacted by the Bylaw (e.g., animal shelter and rescue group operators, animal welfare and conservancy representatives, official animal caretakers, veterinarians, etc.). The following provides a summary of results from the second research phase only. Results from the first research phase are provided in a separate report.

Summary of Phase Two Results

Results of the *second phase* of the *Animal Licensing & Control Bylaw Renewal Study* reveal several additional areas in need of final adjustment as part of the Bylaw refresh, particularly in relation to the need to revisit specific types of pets that should be covered in the Bylaw, current limits placed on the number of pets allowed per household overall, the number of pets by species allowed on residential property, as well as how roaming cats are defined and managed within the City. That said, while findings show differing opinion as to what specific limits should be put in place in terms of maximum pet allowances, most residents are open to temporary limit extensions under special circumstances (e.g., fostering animals in the home or at home-based businesses). Such limit extensions also receive broad support among animal welfare agencies.



Survey results suggest that residents are open to overarching limits being placed on the total number of pets permitted on a residential property, with an average maximum of 5.3 pets overall, regardless of species, deemed reasonable. However, qualitative findings suggest that there may be some public pushback on limits being placed on certain animals and/or combination of animals. In general, residents may be open to a slight lowering of the maximum number of cats allowed per residential property, with an average maximum of between four and five cats considered reasonable. At the same time, most residents consider the current restriction of a maximum of three dogs per property to be reasonable. Proposed limitations on the number of dogs a single person can walk in a public space and on the number of dogs a single person can have at a dog park has modest support from both the general public and animal welfare agencies with agreement that a maximum of three per person is reasonable.

Roaming cats are considered a significant issue in Edmonton communities. While opinions on the usage of municipal Bylaws to control roaming cats remain polarized, particularly among cat owners, qualitative findings suggest the benefits of such regulations may outweigh the issues and challenges caused by free-roaming cats, including mitigating the overpopulation of Edmonton's feral cat population. At the same time, both survey and group discussion results highlight that opinions are divided when it comes to whether cats should be allowed to roam on public and/or private properties, although only a minority are supportive of this behaviour. Moreover, the vast majority of residents believe cat owners should be held accountable for any damage to private property done by their cat.

There is broad support for the City's Trap Neuter Return (TNR) program both among animal welfare agencies and members of the general public, with the bulk of residents viewing this as an important community program. That said, several animal welfare organizations believe the program is currently underutilized and see a clear need for increased public education on the program, as well as increased funding for program expansion to effectively control the City's feral cat population.

Results from the qualitative phase suggest animal welfare agencies are largely supportive of all pets, whether cats, dogs, bunnies, etc., being required to have some sort of tag, microchip or tattoo for identification purposes. Survey results also show that residents largely support both the introduction of requirements in the Bylaw for dog owners to have dog tags on their pet with owner information and/or indication of the dog being microchipped, and for the requirement of license tags on dogs when off-property.

In the first phase of this study, the dog section of the Bylaw was considered particularly problematic in terms of its lack of clarity, particularly on the issue of excessive barking and the criteria for issuing related fines. This issue was further explored in-depth as part of the second research phase. Overall, most residents consider any barking for more than 10 minutes to be considered excessive, offensive or unreasonable enough to warrant a fine. That said, residents and animal welfare agencies largely agree that other factors should be considered when assigning such fines, particularly the time of day of the offense, as well as proximity of the property where the dog resides to other homes, existence of supporting evidence, and the nature/use of surrounding areas, albeit to varying degrees. Moreover, animal welfare agencies noted that reports of excessive barking could be symptomatic of other broader welfare concerns (e.g., situations of neglect, abuse) and that consideration of why a dog is barking excessively needs to be considered when assessing complaints.

Residents are largely supportive of limitations being placed on restricted dogs. Indeed, the vast majority of residents agree the Bylaw should designate dogs as restricted in cases where there are compelling concerns of public safety, and that peace officers should be empowered to seize restricted dogs in such cases. A clear majority of residents also support prohibiting restricted dogs in dog parks. Some animal welfare agencies questioned the appropriateness of the term 'restricted', and felt 'dangerous' may be more appropriate. Regardless, most residents agree there should be an appeal process in place for the reconsideration and removal of a 'restricted dog' categorization. Animal welfare agencies also commonly suggest that any pet owner who has a dog designated as 'restricted' or 'dangerous' should be required to complete some form of mandatory training.

While results from this quantitative phase reveal modest support for pet rabbits being licensed and regulated under the Bylaw, the bulk of residents agree pet rabbits should be confined to their owner's property, that there should be limits on the number of rabbits permitted on a residential property, and that enclosure requirements should be put in place for pet rabbits being kept outdoors. These sentiments were generally shared among animal welfare agencies; however, some felt including such restrictions in the Bylaw would be a waste of the City's limited resources. For both members of the general public and animal welfare agencies, opinions are clearly divided when it comes to potential restrictions for snakes and lizards as pets, and whether or not domesticated quail and/or ducks should be allowed on residential property.

Finally, when it comes to the City's pet licensing fee structure, while there is clear interest in having alternative payment schedules available, sentiments are mixed when considering the proposed alternatives. A multi-year license option, with a multi-year discount resonates most with pet owners.

Final Considerations

As the City looks to finalize its Bylaw Refresh, findings suggest that there is opportunity to introduce a wide range of adjustments or modifications to the current Bylaw (in addition to those outlined in the first research phase). Of note, findings of this second phase suggest the City could consider bold changes such as the following:

1. Not permitting owned cats to roam off owner's property.

Fewer than four in ten Edmontonians have a pet cat and of those, most have only one cat. The vast majority of residents (79%) have indoor-only cats, with few having exclusively outdoor cats. An additional two in ten have cats that spend time both indoors and outdoors. Regardless of pet ownership, there is general agreement that pet owners are responsible for their pet's actions on others' property. Stakeholders whose work is impacted by the Bylaw unanimously support the concept of prohibiting owned cats from roaming off an owner's property and felt responsible pet ownership means owners should be accountable for their pets. Only a minority of residents are clearly supportive of roaming activities, while the bulk are either opposed or hold neutral opinions on the issue. While it is anticipated that introducing such restrictions would result in some pushback by select interest groups (e.g., owners of outdoor cats), and potential short-term rises in shelter drop-offs, if positioned properly, it was felt this change could go a long way to address the feral cat problem in the long term.

2. Introducing stronger restrictions for restricted dogs.

These would include such things as mandatory training requirements, signage, muzzles, restricted access to dog parks, or giving peace officers the ability to seize restricted dogs in specific situations that involve concerns over public safety. The City should have a clear appeals process in place for the reconsideration and removal of 'restricted dog' categorization, should such a review be warranted.

3. Offering free licensing to rescue organizations.

Offering free licensing to rescue organizations should be considered, while ensuring that clear established parameters for standards of care are implemented for free license recipients (via some type of certification, membership, etc.). This means that not all rescue organizations may have access to free licensing.

4. Allowing exemptions for maximum pet numbers for fosters and home businesses.

While the maximum number of pets in a household need not be adjusted, exemptions should be introduced for increased numbers for fosters and home businesses.

5. Working in partnership with registered agencies to address the feral cat problem.

By having colony caretakers registered, as was supported by community stakeholders, the City could rely on them to assist with the TNR program. The City should also recognize their partners' contributions in addressing key animal welfare concerns by ensuring caretakers are not penalized financially by being charged licensing fees on trapped animals.

6. Requiring containment for outdoor pet rabbits.

While there are recognized benefits to licensing pet rabbits, there is a clear need to address containment of these outdoor pets. The introduction of other pet specific licensing (e.g., lizards/snakes) should only be considered if needing to address specific gaps/areas of concern not currently addressed under provincial regulations.

Public acceptance of any changes will depend on the City clearly communicating why changes are being made (e.g., what problem is being addressed as part of the Bylaw refresh, the extent of the problem, how new restrictions will improve overall standards of pet care), how licensing fees are used, and the importance of responsible pet ownership.