

Off Leash and Vermont Square Park Redesign

The leash free aspect of Vermont Square Park (VSP) is a significant and important part of the Seaton Village Community and park activity. It should remain so within the context of the park redesign.

VSP has had an off-leash designation for well over ten years. We are unique in the city, in that, the part time leash free designation has successfully shared space. Within the park the leash free area is a place where people can come with their dogs, people can come alone or in groups, and people can come with their children. We have truly made it a space for all. It has taken work and a commitment by the community, especially the dog owners, to create a respectful environment that supports the varied use of the park. This aspect strongly reflects the values put forth in the park proposal adopted by the community and accepted by the City of Toronto.

The part-time off leash designation supports two out of the four underlying values identified by the community in the VSP redesign proposal. These are: multifunctional use and intergenerational mixed use.

The people with dogs who use the park during off leash hours provide an important function for the community. The presence of adults in the park in the evenings has created safety to all. People feel freer to walk through the park on their way home, especially from public transit when there are community members in the park. Drug dealing, pot smoking, drinking and rowdy behavior by youth is limited by the presence of adults standing in the park. We rarely have problems with broken bottles, or loud and aggressive behaviour that is noticeable in other parks, which are vacate in the evening.

Adults, who are there because of their dogs, have an impact. Young people are more careful to control their behaviour when

they see adults surveying the situation. This safety only exists because of the off-leash activity. Without the leash free time there would be no adults in the park after dark. A park without people present can lead to more vandalism and illegal activities. Having a part-time off leash designation minimizes this.

Those who use the leash free area exemplify the multigenerational use of the park. To the casual observer walking past, the people may seem like a random bunch standing together. But what they fail to realize is that there are important communities of those who bring their dog to the park. Significant bonds are frequently forged through the “standing around”. Many people are helped and supported through the community of dog people. One member had a partner who has since died of cancer but was helped through their difficult circumstances by the people standing in the park with their dogs. This was how they learned of the situation and came forward to help. Unfortunately this is happening again with another member of the dog community and again it has been other dog people who have come forward to lend a hand. Jobs, friendships, and networking are all a part of having leash free dog communities. They fulfill a vital function for a healthy community.

In addition, in our community, like others, there are older people who are single or widowed and have dogs as companions. Many in our park count on the human interaction during the leash free times as a way of maintaining social health. Other community members stay aware of their needs and conditions and keep an eye out or lend a hand as needed. Without these contacts, made in the leash free area, many of these older people would be at greater risk to living independently as they age. Those with limited social connections depend on the social contact they receive from regularly coming to the park with their dogs. People who move into Seaton Village and do not have children are faced with problems of how to connect and build community. The leash

free aspect of the park is a place for connecting. If the leash free were to not continue in its present form we would be putting those in need in our community at risks that are unnecessary.

The vast majority of dogs in the park are well under the control of their owners. Parents who don't have dogs use the leash free as a way of helping their children to learn how to be with dogs. Children who can't have dogs for pets are often visitors as a compromise. Children need to be socialized to dogs and dogs need to be socialized. Dogs that are socialized and exercised are least likely to be problematic.

Those who wish to see the leash free area removed often put forward a number of misperceptions. They say that the park would be cleaner. We have a clean park that is mostly kept maintained by the community of dog owners. This has been a responsible group of people who pick up after their pets and the children and the youth who tend not to see the garbage cans, as well as the others who find it desirable to leave large amounts of uneaten food around. There will be dogs in the park regardless of whether or not there is leash free time. Those who don't pick up after their dogs are much more often those who only walk around the perimeter and do not use the leash free area. Removing the leash free area would not result in a cleaner park.

Another misperception is that it is the dogs that create a dust bowl where grass will not grow. In the past the dog owners have made attempts to improve this. We are pleased to say that at present the centre of the park is filling in with ground cover. Issues of soil conditions and irrigation have been addressed in the proposal. The present condition demonstrates that it is not the dogs in leash free that are solely responsible for the condition of the ground. We would recommend that the present ground cover works.

No system is perfect and meets all the needs of the community. There are always people in the community who want what meets their personal needs. While there are occasional issues and concerns that arise, they have been successfully managed through thoughtful acknowledgement that the park is there for the whole community to enjoy and people with dogs responsibly share the space in a respectful way. The model that has been developed in Vermont Square Park has sought to make room for all and it is highly desirable that the park redesign continues to honour this capacity.

The present hours of leash-free times were specifically developed to respect the needs of all members of the community. They give opportunity to meeting social community needs. They encourage community safety and they create a space to socialize the dogs and children. They also ensure that those without dogs or who are not friendly to dogs have complete and total use of the space when most people use the park. It is within this context that the area should be maintained without carving off an area that becomes a dog only space.

It is acknowledged that there are always people who misuse or ignore the rules. We should pay attention so that the misuse by a small minority does not taint the off-leash status, which is in fact an important and vital function of the park.