



# Off Leash Dog Policy

parks+rec **mh**  
MEDICINE HAT OFF LEASH DOG POLICY

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Prepared By:



## 1.0 Introduction

Domesticated dogs and other pets have become an integral part of our community fabric and the social condition of Canadian communities. Medicine Hat is no different, with dog owners taking full advantage of the expansive network of parks and open spaces in the City. To make the dog ownership experience more fulsome, most municipalities provide for designated off-leash areas within their community to allow canine pets to enjoy the outdoors, exercise, and socialize without a leash - while at all times still under full control of their human owners.

With significant use of parks and open space by dog owners and their pets, it's now more important than ever to understand how we might balance the diverse needs of parks and open spaces in Medicine Hat. There must be a balance of opportunities for all people to enjoy parks and open space. Off-leash areas are an important part of achieving this balance, however the benefits and challenges of these areas must be considered to successfully plan, design, and manage parks and open space in Medicine Hat.

Some benefits of designated off-leash areas include:

- creating opportunities for dogs to exercise and socialize;
- dog owners knowing of designated places where off-leash dog use is permitted;
- serving as community gathering point and foster opportunities to build social networks;
- activating parks and open space to maximize use and enjoyment of recreational areas;
- providing a more inclusive network of parks and open space by reducing conflicts with other user groups and mitigating safety concerns;
- providing protection of environmental assets for future generations;
- encouraging responsible ownership; and
- improve animal welfare but mitigating conflict.

While off-leash areas come with benefits, there are also some challenges of off-leash areas that can include:

- uncollected dog waste;
- uncontrolled dogs posing a risk to other dogs and humans;
- limited experiences for people and their pets, and only having a small proportion of the total municipal land base where off-leash activities are permitted; and
- off-leash dogs have the potential to disturb wildlife and damage significant environmental areas.

To balance the interests of all park and open space users, municipalities across Canada are increasingly keen on designated off-leash areas (vast open spaces where dogs may play off-leash) and dog parks (formal areas that are fully fenced, and often have supporting amenities such as benches, or designated areas for different sizes of dogs). By designating specific areas for off-leash activities, all park users can make informed choices on the type of outdoor experience they will have by knowing the types of activities permitted in each area. Those individuals intimidated by off-leash dogs or who have had bad experiences in the past can choose to avoid designated areas. Dog owners who have less obedient dogs may choose a fenced dog park opposed to an off-leash area without confines. A variety of park experiences and opportunities for all people and their pets is important.

### 1.1 Purpose

This report outlines background research conducted as part of developing a new off-leash dog policy for the City of Medicine Hat. This policy is being developed in collaboration with City staff, stakeholder groups, Provincial government department representatives and shaped by feedback from the public. The policy will complement statutory instruments, such as the Parks Bylaw, and is informed by previously developed policy documents that outline the community's visions for parks and open space in Medicine Hat. The goal of this policy is to create a balanced approach to share parks and open space in Medicine Hat, with two primary objectives:

- to promote the safety and welfare of all people and their pets while on public land; and
- ensuring all park and open space use minimizes adverse effects on ecologically sensitive areas, wildlife and natural habitat.

Ultimately, developing this policy will provide a tool to promote responsible dog ownership in the City by informing the designation of on-leash and off-leash areas and accompanying management strategies. This policy will accommodate the needs of dogs/dog owners while balancing the broader needs of the community and natural environment.

*Vision: Medicine Hat off-leash areas foster **human enjoyment, safety for all, and ecological protection** providing the appropriate provision of on- and off-leash areas within the City*

**Human Enjoyment:** Opportunities for everyone to enjoy parks and open spaces in Medicine Hat is imperative. To be inclusive of everyone who uses the trails and parks in Medicine Hat, including dog owners, bikers, runners, and those with mobility issues, we must ensure all users have access to safe, enjoyable outdoor spaces.

**Safety for All:** Throughout the public engagement process for the Medicine Hat Parks and Recreation Master Plan, numerous accounts of conflict between parks and open space users and off-leash dogs were discussed with facilitators. An off-leash policy will provide guidance on how to decrease the number of conflicts in parks and on trails and in parks throughout the community. While safety for all people is imperative, safety for our pets is also important to consider.

**Ecological Protection:** A key attribute of the newly adopted Medicine Hat Parks and Recreation Master Plan was its inclusion of numerous objectives to move toward a stronger environmental ethic. This policy creates an opportunity for the City to take meaningful action towards the realization of community values.

### 3.0 Project Background: Medicine Hat Off-Leash Areas

In 2010, the City exercised its ability to develop off-leash areas as part of Bylaw No. 3935 – The Responsible Animal Ownership Bylaw. This Bylaw states that, “The City may designate areas where a dog may be exercised while not restrained by a Leash” (Section 15.1). In general, the current practice for the City of Medicine Hat is for all Environmental Reserve (ER) areas to be designated as off-leash areas, unless otherwise posted. As a result, there are currently 22 Environmental Reserve areas that permit off-leash areas, covering about 1,500 hectares. These areas cover an expansive area of the city and typically border coulees or the South Saskatchewan River (the River) and its tributaries. The overlap of ER /off-leash areas is detrimental to the ecological integrity of these sensitive landscape features and infringes on Federal and Provincial jurisdiction. Many of the ER/Off-leash areas back directly onto residential properties which have leisure trails running through them. This greatly increases the risk of conflict between dogs and other users. At a high level, some of the challenges with this practice include the following:

- The public does not have a clear indication of where municipal land ends, and where provincially-owned lands (for example along the River and other waterbodies) begins, where Provincial Acts and Legislation supersedes the authority of City bylaws;
- Environmental Reserves usually contain some of the City’s most sensitive ecological areas. Research demonstrates that pets – whether off-leash or on-leash – along with human use of landscapes in general can have adverse impacts on nature. We need to be much more strategic with the types of recreational activities that are permitted in sensitive areas; and

- Many regional trails pass through several municipal reserves, environmental reserve, or other types of open space. Some trail users who have had bad encounters with off-leash dogs feel that some trails are simply unusable given potential encounters with uncontrolled pets.

The distribution, number, size, numerous access points, both formal and informal, and non-descript boundaries makes it challenging for the public to identify what exactly constitutes an off-leash area. Many of the entrances into the areas are not signed, and when they are, the signage is limited to identifying the area as off-leash or on-leash. This can create problems with dog owners not knowing where to let their dogs off of the leash, and problems with other users inadvertently entering off-leash areas without meaning to. It also complicates enforcement, as it can lead to disagreements between the Bylaw Enforcement Unit and dog owners over where off-leash areas begin and end.

Overall, current off-leash areas in the City pose safety concerns for residents, functionally fail to communicate on/off-leash limits, permit the degradation of environmental assets, and do not encourage effective enforcement of the Bylaw. These issues result from the number and size of the off-leash areas, the mixed-use nature, and the lack of clear signage and identifiable boundaries.

## 4.0 Policy Framework

Because many permitted off-leash areas are found adjacent to land that is under Provincial or Federal jurisdiction, the current ER/off-leash-policy causes conflict with Federal and Provincial Acts and Legislation. Primarily, off-leash dog use is counter to ensuring the protection and conservation of ecologically significant areas. The natural spaces in Medicine Hat are well-loved by residents, particularly the South Saskatchewan River, its tributaries, the coulees along riverbanks, and the grasslands surrounding these aquatic environments.

### Dogs and Natural Areas

The use of ER as off-leash dog areas contradicts the intended purpose of many of the mandates outlined in Federal and Provincial legislation. ER is a land use designation outlined in the Alberta Municipal Government Act, and gives municipalities the authority to designate lands using stipulated criteria under that Act. For all intended purposes, a municipality designates ER for the purpose of ensuring the protection of certain natural areas and limits development in these areas. There is a growing body of evidence that dog activity is detrimental to many of the land types and wildlife included in Medicine Hat ERs (Hennings, 2016). Despite the wonderful companionship that dogs provide in outdoor spaces, dog activity can have a negative impact on wildlife as result of:

1. Displacement – Wildlife typically will perceive dogs as a threat. When wildlife senses a dog nearby, or even their scent, it can cause wildlife to flee from the area, limiting the amount of habitat available for feeding, rest, and reproduction (George & Crooks, 2006; Lenth, Knight, & Brennan, 2008; Silva-Rodriguez & Sieving, 2011; Thomas, Kvitek, & Bretz, 2003);
2. Disturbance and Stress Response Activation – When dogs are nearby wildlife will enter periods of increased alertness which reduces their ability to sleep, eat, breed, and groom themselves. A prolonged stress response may result in increased vulnerability to disease and parasites. (Cizauskas et al., 2015; Hing et al., 2016);
3. Direct or Indirect Mortality – As a result of their natural instincts dogs like to chase, and sometimes kill, wildlife. Dogs are also capable of transmitting disease to some wildlife species (Baker et al., 2013; Ballard et al., 1999; Gondim et al., 2004); and
4. Water Quality – The presence of dogs near waterways and bodies of water can impact water quality due to bacteria found in dog feces (Shueler, 2000).

To further the stewardship of Medicine Hat's natural areas, the City's off-leash dog policy must align with the following Federal and Provincial Acts.

## 4.1 Federal

The Fisheries Act – The purpose of the Act is to “...provide a framework for the proper management and control of fisheries and the conservation and protection of fish and fish habitat...”(Government of Canada, 2019). Any activity that negatively alters the ecological integrity of naturally occurring fish bearing water bodies is prohibited by the Act.

The Species at Risk Act – The Act illustrates Canada’s legal “...commitment to prevent wildlife species from becoming extinct and secure the necessary actions for their recovery” (Government of Canada, 2019). The Act prohibits any activity that has negative consequences for any of the extirpated, endangered, threatened, or special concern species outlined in the Act and their respective residence (nest or den). The Provincial government has identified several Species at Risk whose range extends throughout the Southern portion of the Province (Government of Alberta, 2014). While definitive studies are required to identify the presence of these species within Medicine Hat, the City’s natural areas have the opportunity to provide critical habitat for at risk species. Continued use of ERs as off-leash areas is likely causing inadvertent, detrimental effects to at risk species.

## 4.2 Provincial

The Public Lands Act – The Act outlines the crown and Province’s ownership of the bed and shore of all naturally occurring waterbodies, rivers, streams, watercourses, and lakes. It prohibits any activities that damage or disturb these areas, noting specifically soil erosion.

The Water Act – The Act “promotes the conservation and management of water, through the use and allocation of water in Alberta”(Government of Alberta, 2021). Alberta’s Water for Life Strategy complements the Water Act and outlines three key objectives of water management practices in the province: (1) safe, secure drinking water, (2) healthy aquatic ecosystems, and (3) reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy (Government of Alberta, 2011). The City must not contravene the management objectives outlined by the Provincial strategy

The Wildlife Act – The Act “supports and promotes the protection and conservation of wild animals in Alberta” (Government of Alberta, 2020). The act specifically describes the Province’s and appointed employees’ authority to take the appropriate measures that prevent dogs, and other private animals, from negatively impacting wildlife. If a dog “harasses or poses a threat to the life or health of wildlife” or “is damaging or is likely to damage wildlife habitat” they contravene the mandates outlined in this Act, and other complimentary Acts.

## 4.3 Municipal

The City of Medicine Hat is taking steps to ensure parks and open spaces in the city embody the vision and values of the community. The following policies guide the development and management of Medicine Hat’s Parks and Open Spaces and informed the creation of the off-leash dog policy:

- myMH Medicine Hat Master Plan - The long-range vision, for the future growth and development of Medicine Hat;
- Parks Bylaw – Regulates all parks and recreational areas in Medicine Hat;
- Responsible Animal Ownership Bylaw – Regulates pet ownership in Medicine Hat; and
- Medicine Hat Parks and Recreation Master Plan – A guide for how Medicine Hat will grow and develop open space, recreation, social development, culture, and foster environmental stewardship within Medicine Hat.

A key attribute of the Medicine Hat Parks and Recreation Master Plan (PRMP) was its inclusion of numerous objectives to move toward a stronger environmental ethic and making recreation and land use decisions that are more compassionate to environmental protection. Secondly, residents claimed an affinity to genuine natural area



experiences and the ability to access nature without the pressures of urban development. As a result, the PRMP provided Action B12 as a final recommendation:

*Conduct a study to identify optimal locations, sizes, and configuration of designated off-leash areas; change policy to only offer off-leash opportunities in specified areas.*

## 5.0 Community Comparison/Precedents

General planning practice has yet to develop any widely accepted criteria that indicates the number of off-leash dog parks and off-leash areas by population or land area. For comparison purposes, the following chart identifies the total number of off-leash areas and off-leash dog parks, for Medicine Hat as well as five other comparable municipalities:

Municipality	Total Off-Leash Areas	Unfenced Off-Leash Areas	Fully Fenced Off-Leash Areas	Total Area (ha) of Off-Leash Areas
Strathcona County	7	1	6	TBD
Red Deer	2	0	2	TBD
Prince George	5	2	3	TBD
Grande Prairie	4	2	2	TBD
Fort St. John	2	1	1	TBD
Medicine Hat	24	22	2	TBD

This comparison identifies that Medicine Hat holds a significantly higher amount of unfenced off-leash areas than any of the other communities used as a comparison, while it has a similar proportion of fully fenced off-leash dog parks.

## 6.0 Engagement Program

The stakeholder and public engagement program for the off-leash dog policy creates an opportunity for the City of Medicine Hat to integrate community knowledge into the policy and create community lead solutions. The City has retained EDS Group, a landscape architecture and environmental planning firm, to lead the development of the off-leash policy and facilitate stakeholder and public engagement events. Key stakeholder and public engagement milestones include:

1. Stakeholder Workshop – Completed April 20, 2022

During this two-hour session, a group of stakeholder representatives were led through a workshop-style discussion. The outcomes of this workshop included:

- educating participants on the importance of formalizing off-leash areas and dog parks on public land;
- identifying criteria that will best inform what areas of public land are suited for off-leash activity and those where off-leash activity should be prohibited;
- identifying successful attributes of off-leash areas; and
- identifying challenges associated with off-leash areas.

The following stakeholders were asked to attend the session:

- 670 Mountain Bike Collective
- Advisory Committee on Disability Issues
- Alberta Environment and Parks
- Alberta Health Services (Injury Prevention)

- Medicine Hat Bylaw
- APARC
- Big Brothers/Big Sisters
- Cows and Fish - Alberta Riparian Habitat Management Society
- Cross Country
- Madd Hatters Running Club
- Medicine Hat Accommodation Association
- Medicine Hat College
- Medicine Hat Fish and Game
- Medicine Hat Interpretive Program
- Medicine Hat Running Club
- Medicine Hat SPCA
- Medicine Hat Tourism
- Society of Grasslands Naturalists
- South East Alberta Watershed Alliance (SEAWA)
- Youth Action Committee and FCSS
- Gas City Canine Cruisers Club (Dog Association)
- SE Hill Neighbourhood Association
- Working Group for Accessibility and Inclusion (Former ACDI)
- Community Vibrancy Advisory Board
- Chamber of Commerce
- Gas City Dog Club
- Veiner Centre
- True North K9 Compound

## 2. Community Vibrancy Advisory Board Review – Completed April 27, 2022

Outcomes from the stakeholder workshop were presented to the Community Vibrancy Advisory Board for review. The key focus of this review was to reaffirm off and on leash areas criteria generated at the stakeholder workshop. A draft of the criteria have been included in the proposed off-leash program portion of this report.

## 3. Open House and Online Review of Policy – Ongoing

An open house and online review of the proposed policy will provide an opportunity for further discussion on the proposed criteria and off-leash program. These comments and findings will be integrated into the final policy.

# 7.0 Proposed Off-Leash Program

Through the background review, site evaluation, and public and stakeholder engagement program, a proposed off-leash policy is being developed. The Medicine Hat Off-Leash Program will provide areas for the enjoyment of dogs and dog owners throughout the City, while supporting the diversity of user needs in Medicine Hat's parks and open space.

## Guiding Principles

1. Medicine Hat's parks and open spaces are inclusive - Designation of off-leash areas and fenced dog parks create a variety of destinations that can accommodate the needs of all residents;
2. Responsible dog ownership is practiced by all – It is a privilege to visit off-leash areas, and therefore all dog owners must abide by all off-leash area bylaws and rules; and

3. Environmental stewardship is upheld – Restricting the ability of dogs to access environmentally sensitive areas protects wildlife and their habitat, ensuring the ecological integrity of these areas is maintained for future generations.

#### Draft On-Leash Criteria

Off-leash areas in Medicine Hat require further evaluation to provide the appropriate provision of on-leash and off-leash areas within the City. The implementation of this policy illustrates how the City will transition from the current policy of “off-leash unless otherwise posted” to “on-leash unless otherwise posted” in Medicine Hat parks and open space.

The following criteria will inform what areas in the city are required to transition to on-leash:

- areas with high cyclist and pedestrian use;
- areas adjacent to high vehicle traffic with insufficient buffers;
- areas with poor visibility;
- areas without opportunity for refuge. Those who feel threatened by an uncontrolled or aggressive dog must be able to safely and quickly leave the area;
- areas frequented by vulnerable populations. This may include but is not limited to seniors and children;
- any area with evidence of archeological remnants;
- all significant environmental areas. This may include but is not limited to:
  1. The South Saskatchewan River;
  2. Tributaries of the South Saskatchewan River;
  3. Naturally occurring water bodies;
  4. Remnant stands of intact, native prairie; and
  5. Species at Risk Habitat.

#### Draft Off-Leash Areas Categories

Two categories have been created to address the differing user needs of off-leash areas; Designated Off-Leash Areas and Dog Parks. These off-leash areas vary in provided amenities and intensity of management, but facilitate opportunities for exercise, socialization, and enjoyment for dogs and dog owners. A set of criteria to inform their implementation has been developed to address these differences. However, a common set of policies for all off-leash areas guides the use of both off-leash area categories:

#### Off-Leash Area Policies:

- All persons using the park do so at their own risk;
- All dogs must be under control:
  - Owners must keep dogs in view at all times;
  - Dogs must respond to verbal controls;
  - Dogs must be leashed before entering and exiting the off-leash area; and
  - Dog owners accept responsibility for any injury or damage caused by their dog.
- Owners must pick up and dispose of dog waste;
- Owners must fill any holes their dog digs;
- Dogs must be licensed and vaccinated;
- No glass containers are permitted in off-leash areas;
- Dogs must not be in heat when visiting off-leash areas; and
- Children under 13 must be supervised.



Designated Off-Leash Areas: Off-leash areas that provide opportunities for dogs to roam but may overlap with other uses where appropriate. Grassy fields with unrestricted views are the most suitable landscape type for this use. However, some parks, trails, or off-season sports facilities may be considered through shared use agreements.

Shared use agreements are typically well suited to large off-leash areas. They may restrict off-leash use to early morning or evening. The geographic boundaries and hours of shared use agreements must be effectively communicated for their success. These areas are intended to provide spaces for dogs and dog owners while maximizing the use of City recreation amenities.

Additional Policies:

- Cyclists must slow speeds to a walking pace or dismount

Location Criteria:

- On and off-leash areas can be effectively delineated through natural barriers, signage, and/or fencing
- Off-leash areas must have sufficient space for a buffer or set back from nearby residences

Minimum Amenities and Services:

- Accessibility – Ensure all entry points are accessible to all mobility types with navigable routes throughout space
- Boundary markers – may include topography, natural barriers, mown areas, bollards, or more formal fencing options as required
- Dog waste stations – provided at off-leash entrance and exit points
- Dog bag dispensers – provided at off-leash entrance and exit points
- Durable surfacing – surface is compatible with intensity of use but is preferably grass or granular
- Signage – the entry points of all off-leash areas should be delineated with signage identifying boundaries, etiquette, bylaws, or relevant community notices. Boundary signs should be posted more frequently at the edges of unfenced off-leash areas

Maintenance:

- Seasonal mowing
- Weekly waste removal as required

Enforcement:

- Primarily oversight by community ambassadors with support from Bylaw Enforcement Officers as required

Fenced Dog Parks: Off-leash areas that serve as community hubs. The amenities offered create a destination for community members within their neighborhood. These areas are designed specifically for use by dogs and their owners.

Location Criteria:

- Central to residential neighborhoods to provide opportunities for residents to walk their dog
- Areas accessible by key transportation or transit routes
- Off-leash areas must have sufficient space for a buffer or set back from nearby residences

Minimum Amenities and Services:

- Accessibility - Ensure all entry points are accessible to all mobility types with navigable routes throughout space

- Fencing – chain-link or equivalent that prevent dogs from straying and maintains sightlines in and out of the park
- Double Entry Gate - creates a safe, designated space for owners to transition their dog to off- or on-leash
- Dog waste stations – provided at off-leash entrance and exit points
- Dog bag dispensers – provided at off-leash entrance and exit points
- Durable surfacing – surface is compatible with intensity of use but is preferably grass or granular
- Signage – the entry points of all off-leash areas should be delineated with signage identifying boundaries, etiquette, bylaws, or relevant community notices.

**Preferred Amenities:**

- Designated areas for small and large dogs
- Seating for owners
- Shelter for owners
- Lighting
- Agility Elements
- Water source (for drinking and/or play)
- Trees and plant material

**Maintenance:**

- Mowing as required
- Weekly to daily waste removal as required

**Enforcement:**

- Bylaw Enforcement Officers as required due to heightened activity in these areas

## 8.0 Implementation

*Potential Locations*

1. Provide an off-leash area within 1 km of most residents
2. Prioritize neighborhoods that see the most notable reductions in off-leash areas for the acquisition/development of new fenced dog parks

*Stewardship & Environmental Protection*

1. Review proposed off-leash areas and fenced dog park locations in accordance with the ongoing South Saskatchewan Opportunities Assessment
2. All dog park proposals should be reviewed by an environmental professional to mitigate environmental impacts

*Evaluation and Monitoring*

1. Perform site reviews and develop metrics to:
  - a. Gain user numbers
  - b. Gauge user satisfaction
  - c. Understand safety and maintenance deficiencies
  - d. Determine potential of success for shared use agreements
2. Review operational costs to understand where funding may be better distributed to achieve the goals:
  - a. Enforcement

- b. Maintenance
- c. Public Communication
- d. Evaluation

#### *Education and Enforcement*

1. Publish on and off-leash map on the City website with corresponding policy
2. Develop signage programs for Designated Off Leash Areas and Dog Parks
3. Ensure signage communicates animal notices

#### *Partnerships*

1. Establish connections with community groups and businesses for educational partnerships
2. Create a Trails Ambassadors Program with community partners
3. Seek community sponsorship
4. Evaluate Opportunities for Shared Use Agreements

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