



Off-Leash Dog Policy

parks+rec **mh**

What We Heard Report

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BACKGROUND

Domesticated dogs have become an integral part of our community fabric. It's now more important than ever to understand how we might balance the diverse needs of parks and open spaces in Medicine Hat. 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.

This report outlines the engagement program conducted as part of developing the Off-Leash Dog Policy for the City of Medicine Hat. The policy will compliment statutory instruments, such as the Parks Bylaw, and is guided by previously developed policy documents that outline the community's visions for parks and open space.

Policy Goal

The goal of this policy is to create a balanced approach to share parks and open space in Medicine Hat, with two primary objectives:

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

This policy will provide a tool to promote responsible dog ownership in the city by guiding the designation of on-leash and off-leash areas and accompanying management strategies.

ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

To understand how off-leash areas are being used, the extent of their success, and how they might be improved, the Off-Leash Policy has been developed with stakeholders, the City of Medicine Hat Community Vibrancy Advisory Board (CVAB), and the broader public. This approach aims to integrate multiple perspectives and utilize community-based solutions.

To kick start engagement activities, a stakeholder workshop was held. The consulting team reviewed workshop outcomes with CVAB to affirm key findings. The insights provided at the workshop and CVAB review informed the development of the Off-Leash Policy draft. The public was invited to comment on the Off-Leash Policy draft through an open house and online survey.

Stakeholder Workshop

During a two-hour session on April 20, 2022, stakeholders were led through a workshop-style presentation and discussion. Stakeholders were determined by their involvement in Medicine Hat parks, trails, environmental health, public health, safety, and bylaw enforcement. Thirty stakeholder groups were invited by email and/or by phone; nine representatives from the following organizations attended the workshop:

- Alberta Health Services
- City of Medicine Hat Bylaw Enforcement
- City of Medicine Hat Community Development
- City of Medicine Hat Community Vibrancy Advisory Board
- Family and Community Support Services
- Kerby/Veiner Centre
- Southeast Alberta Watershed Alliance

Community Vibrancy Advisory Board Review

Outcomes from the stakeholder workshop were presented to the City of Medicine Hat Community Vibrancy Advisory Board for review. The key focus of this review was to reaffirm off-leash areas criteria generated at the stakeholder workshop.

Public Open House

On June 2, 2022, a public open house was held at the South Ridge YMCA following the release of the draft Off-Leash Dog Policy. 74 members of the public attended a drop-in-style session to speak with consultants and City staff leading the development of the policy and review proposed materials.

Public Survey

From May 27th to June 10th 2022, the public were asked to submit their feedback on the draft Off-Leash Dog Policy and respond to six questions through a Shape Your City survey. The survey received 522 responses at a 100 percent completion rate.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

It's evident parks and open space are highly valued by Medicine Hat residents. However, there are differing, and in some cases diverging, perspectives on how off-leash areas should be integrated within the parks and open space in Medicine Hat. Key themes and concerns emerged from engagement activities that will inform the direction of this policy.

What's working well in Medicine Hat's off-leash areas?

Off-leash areas are an excellent community asset in Medicine Hat. When asked "what's working well in Medicine Hat's off-leash areas", some common themes emerged in the responses from engagement participants:

- Opportunities for socialization for dogs and dog owners
- Opportunities for exercise for dogs and dog owners
- The size of Westvue Dog Park and its trails

The fenced in off-leash areas like Saratoga and Westvue are great, besides all the cacti and lack of swimming options in the hot summers.

Off leash-trails are wonderful.

Access to off-leash areas and dog park areas seems very generous.

Having multiple trails that are off-leash. I feel the current system is working just fine. The trails that are off-leash are well spread throughout, so that you don't have to drive or walk too far to get access to one.

The new off-leash areas allow dog owners a place to congregate and act like a community.

There are many off-leash areas around the city, including dog parks. Most dogs are very friendly with each other, and most other trail users are happy to see and interact with dogs.

A choice of fenced and unfenced areas to meet needs of dogs and owners. Not all dogs do well in fenced areas which can become too busy for some dogs.

What's not working well in Medicine Hat's off-leash areas?

Off-leash areas in Medicine Hat are well-loved, however, many concerns were noted throughout the engagement process. Common themes for these concerns included:

- A lack of clarity on which areas are on-leash or off-leash throughout the city
- Off-leash areas shared with other users, particularly cyclists, are causing conflicts
- A lack of understanding and compliance with owner/dog behavior expectations in off-leash areas
- Concerns for public safety and animal welfare on trails as result of aggressive dogs
- Public perception of insufficient bylaw enforcement
- Public perception of insufficient consequences for those who do not comply with bylaw
- A lack of disposal of options for dog feces (location/number of)
- A lack of amenities in Westvue and Saratoga dog parks, such as reliable, safe water sources and separate large and small dog sections

Inconsistency and poor signage as to which paths are off-leash and which are not.

Dog parks that are left not monitored, or regulated. Doesn't seem to be a place to take dogs swimming.

Some owners have zero or very little control over their pets running wild. They do not listen and jump at or up on people. No one likes a giant dog running at them or especially their small child.

Some of the dog owners are not following city bylaws when it comes to controlling their dogs. No policing off-leash areas.

The conflict between dog owners, cyclists, and other people walking is a huge issue. It is stressful taking my dog for a walk off leash because I never know if I will get snide remarks or cyclists coming up behind me with no warning and scaring me.

Zero enforcement against dog owners who 1) are not in control of their animal in on or off-leash areas and 2) let dogs off leash in on-leash areas.

How can we do better?

Several strategies were suggested during engagement activities to improve parks and open space conditions for dog owners and non-dog owners. The following comments were the most common themes for improvement:

- Increase the presence of bylaw enforcement on city trails
- Create a trail ambassadors program to support bylaw enforcement
- Increase the severity of consequences for those who don't comply with bylaw
- Have off-leash trails designated for dog walkers
- Reduce the overlap between off-leash trails and cyclist paths or provide measures that mitigate conflict (i.e. painted bike lanes, slow speed/dismount signs)
- Improve signage/clarity for off-leash area boundaries (i.e. painted trails, review where locations where signage could be improved, create an app map)
- Create larger dog parks
- Consider temporary off-leash through seasonal or hourly closures
- Consider tests for dogs to grant off-leash privileges/licenses
- Provide explicit language what "in control means" in off-leash areas
- Increase the number of garbage bins on trails and supply doggy bags

More fines for people who do not pick up after their dogs and do not have a recall and just let them do whatever they want.

Restricting cyclists from using off leash paths to reduce conflict.

More dog parks so each quadrant of city has at least one. Make it easy to get to so they get used. Should be in walking distance of homes.

Create a huge fenced in area with water for swimming and walking with dogs.

Paved trails should be on-leash. Restriction on off-leash dogs in environmental reserves and more bylaw activity.

More signs emphasizing that areas are on-leash would be helpful. More enforcement/ education for proper off-leash etiquette.

Restrict off-leash areas to contained areas only.

What are the best off-leash areas in Medicine Hat?

When recreating with their dog, many residents noted that they prefer to visit the following areas:

- Altawana Natural Area (Parkview)
- Big Marble Go Centre
- Coulee Natural Area (Echo Dale Natural Area to Gas City Campground Trail)
- Crescent Heights
- Crestwood Coulee (Scholten Hill)
- Echo Dale Natural Area
- Malborough Coulee (Strathcona Island Park to Kin Coulee)
- Maple Ave Gravel Bar
- McCutcheon Trail
- Police Point Park
- Ranchlands/Preston Natural Area
- Ross Creek Natural Area
- Saratoga Dog Park
- Saratoga Trail
- South Ridge Coulee
- Strathcona Island Park
- Westvue Dog Park



Are there areas of the city which currently allow off-leash use that should be designated as on-leash only?

Residents had mixed opinions on the provision of off-leash areas in Medicine Hat. When asked if there are off-leash areas in the city that should be changed to on-leash, the following were common responses provided by engagement

- All paths shared with cyclists
- All paved trails
- Any public property that is unfenced
- Ajax Coulee
- Burnside Trail
- Altawana Natural Area (Parkview)
- Crestwood Coulee (Scholten Hill)
- Kiwanis River Park
- Ross Creek Natural Area
- Saratoga Trail
- Southridge/Seven Persons Coulee
- Strathcona Island/Lions Park
- 11 Ave NE Natural Area

Where's the Balance?

Survey respondents were split in their opinion of appropriate off-leash provision in Medicine Hat.



51%
of survey respondents
suggested reducing
existing off-leash
areas

49%
of survey respondents
said all existing off-
leash areas should
remain (or expand)

When deciding what areas should be off-leash or on-leash, what criteria should be considered?

A key objective of the Off-Leash Policy is to guide the designation of on-leash and off-leash areas and accompanying management strategies in Medicine Hat. The following are key themes of the criteria suggested by engagement participants:

- Off-leash areas should not be designated next to busy traffic areas
- Public lands that share a property line with residential yards should be on-leash
- Areas adjacent to sensitive ecosystems or key wildlife areas should be on-leash
- Areas with snakes should be on-leash
- Shared pathways (i.e., areas with cyclists, runners, walkers) should be on-leash
- Areas that border play structures, school grounds, swimming areas/spray parks, sports fields, golf courses, and cemeteries should be on-leash
- Areas with archaeological/paleontological significance should be on-leash
- Off-leash areas should have clear/unrestricted sightlines
- Mixed responses were received on the location of dog parks (i.e., near residential is good for convenience but some citizens responded with concerns for potential conflicts or neighborhood safety)

Proximity to roads, residences, businesses, archaeological sites, protected environments.

Large area, safe from traffic, and not on a common pathway that will be used for other purposes.

Safety above all. Too many dog bites in recent years.

Please do not make myself and my dog have to walk off-leash in only those horrible fenced in dog parks. That is not conducive to a pleasant walk.

Trees for shade, grass not dirt, proximity to residential housing and road access.

Walkability for dogs and owners of different physical abilities. Safety (away from traffic).

Off leash areas should be remotely placed in all quadrants of city, not interfacing with public walkways.

What partnerships might the City encourage to help deliver a successful off-leash program?

Partnerships are important to help deliver successful parks and open spaces. The following partnerships were suggested by stakeholders and survey respondents to support the city in the management of successful off-leash areas.

- Information sharing on the environmental impacts of off-leash areas
 - Grassland Naturalists
 - South East Alberta Watershed Alliance
- Trail Ambassadors to improve the capacity of Bylaw
- A FCSS/City Department that is inclusive of all needs to provide input on off/on-leash proposals
- Bring back an “annual poop scoop/poop picking party” through sponsorship by local businesses
- Kennel/training club(s) activating off-leash area
- Walking clubs and biking clubs review off-leash trail proposals for safety
- Businesses that specialize in trail-oriented activities, like biking or pet supplies, could offer education about the trail system and courteous use

NEXT STEPS

The engagement responses received thus far will inform updates to the Draft Off-Leash Policy, released in May 2022, and shape an updated policy document to be released later this year. The updated policy will undergo a final review by the public and Public Services Committee before a final policy is released. The final policy will have an established list of criteria to inform off-leash area designations. This will give decision makers the tools to develop an off-leash strategy that represents the public interests. The final policy will also provide recommendations on how to align the current state of off-leash areas with the proposed vision for off-leash areas in the City.

