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STAR COLUMNISTS

OPINION

Dog owners routinely use public parks as leash-free zones. This group would like to have a word with them

A group of volunteers in High Park is trying a non-confrontational approach to a widespread problem.

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Paws for Parks members Tracy Loconte, left, and Steve Garrett are trying to change the social norms of where it's considered acceptable to let your dog roam off-leash, by patrolling High Park and engaging dog owners in

By Edward Keenan City Columnist

On the Queensway near Colborne Lodge Drive, at the southern entrance to High Park, someone has scrawled graffiti on a utility box: “Let the dogs take over?”

It's not clear if this is a fear, a prediction, a suggestion or a lament. But you could read it as a simple statement of what's happening. Anywhere you go to wander or throw a ball around or just sit for a while, you'll find dozens of dogs romping off-leash, their owners shouting assurances their pet is “friendly” or “loves children” or whatever.

Forget leash restrictions: schoolyards and sports enclosures with clearly posted “No dogs allowed” signs are routinely used as unofficial off-leash areas by unapologetic pet owners.

It's not — or not only — that there's some shortage of off-leash space available. There's an epic 3.5-hectare off-leash area in High Park, yet many local dog owners plainly use the entire park as a dog run.

In the wake of recent [high-profile dog attacks and the city's attempts to strengthen regulations on dangerous dogs](#), plenty of us — [including Mayor Olivia Chow in a recent appearance on a Star podcast](#) — have suggested the city needs to look closely at its enforcement strategy to begin to rein in this wider problem.

In High Park, a group of volunteers is taking a bit of a different approach.

“We’re trying a [community-based social marketing](#) approach,” says Tracy Loconte, head of an organization called [Paws for Parks](#). “There’s a bunch of evidence that shows what it takes for people to change their behaviour, because just handing out flyers or putting up signs is obviously not doing it.

“So some of the things that work are getting people to establish a social norm, and then having people identify with the behaviour you want them to undertake.”

In practice, that involves sending volunteer patrols around the park — generally in the company of city bylaw enforcement officers — to chat with people who are letting their dogs loose in on-leash areas, and in as nonconfrontational a way as possible explaining why they shouldn’t be doing that.

Among the primary reasons, according to Tracy, is that the [thousands of off-leash dogs romping through the forests are destroying the ecosystem of the park](#). High Park has particularly sandy soil, and the dogs running off the trails and digging, tromping, peeing and rooting around is eroding it and disturbing the natural ground cover, keeping tree seedlings from taking root and instead inviting invasive weed species to take their place.

Loconte and fellow volunteer Steve Garrett speak passionately and knowledgeably about the many small mammal and bird species who are abandoning the park as a result, the plant types that have vanished and the butterfly species that have gone with them, the dire threat to the rare Black Oak Savannahs in High Park that dogs pose.

Of course, there’s also the fact that many people are terrified of dogs, and even friendly dogs who are not dangerous will keep those citizens away from the park. And that’s not even accounting for the percentage of dogs who are, whether their owners acknowledge it or not, actually a danger to people or to other dogs.

Loconte is careful to note — in walking with me and when out on the paw patrol — that she’s not anti-dog. She’s a dog lover whose family regularly fosters dogs. She just wants to see them live in harmony with the other users of the park and the natural environment.



Toronto considers dangerous dog registry

Toronto city council is debating new measures as it grapples with a growing number of dog attacks. One of the proposals is a public registry of dogs that have mauled humans or other animals.

Loconte finds that when they first approach dog owners, they are often defensive. But her group's strategy (sharing a conversation "and often not a short conversation" on why people should follow the rules, and asking them to help change norms by becoming "ambassadors") is intended to overcome that.

Because it is a social norm of what's considered standard acceptable behaviour that they are trying to reshape. Once the streets of the city were littered with pet feces before "poop-and-scoop" campaigns made cleaning up standard. Smoking indoors, and drinking and driving were long considered mostly harmless and often expected, and now both are considered monstrous incivilities.

Loconte and Garrett and their group are trying to foster a similar change in what behaviour is considered socially acceptable. They're looking for more volunteers to join them at the moment, in High Park and possibly eventually in other parkland across the city.

And they probably need them, if they're going to make a dent. During the first few minutes we wandered the eastern trails of the park, we saw more than a dozen illegally off-leash dogs, before I stopped counting. The task they've chosen may literally be a walk in the park, but that doesn't mean it will be easy.



Edward Keenan is a Toronto-based city columnist for the Star. Reach him via email: ekeen@thestar.ca

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