



Leash looms for North Shore dogs

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Free-roaming dogs in Capilano River Regional Park may be on a tighter leash this summer.

The Metro Vancouver regional parks committee is considering a "dog management plan" for the 150-hectare North Shore park, which stretches from Ambleside Beach to Cleveland Dam.

The strategy, which may be loosely based on one already in place at Pacific Spirit Park, is aimed at curbing potential conflicts between humans and off-leash canines while protecting the environment.

Metro park staff will hold an open house for the neighbourhood -which includes both West Vancouver and North Vancouver District -at Camp Capilano on April 11 before launching a pilot project this summer.

The pilot will run until December, at which time staff will develop its plan.

"The number of visitors and the number of people to the park is increasing," said Richard Wallis, Metro's acting west area parks manager. "We're trying to find a balance of protecting the environment and providing recreational facilities."

Dog walkers are among many visitors to the North Shore park, which attracts about 940,000 visits annually to its 26 kilometres of trails winding through second growth coniferous forest. It's the third busiest park in Metro Vancouver's regional park system.

The park doesn't allow any dogs to run free, yet only about 45 per cent of dogs in the park are on leash, according to the Metro staff report, which is based on observations and data collected last year.

The region attempts to enforce the rules through education and voluntary compliance.

Gayle Martin, a Langley City councillor and chairwoman of the Metro parks committee, said part of the challenge is that dog owners see their pets as "part of the family" and don't see why they have to be on

leash. "That's why people are so passionate about it," she said.

Capilano River Regional Park is the second park to be earmarked for a dog management plan, mainly because of the rising number of people -and dog walkers -using it, Wallis said.

He notes there are concerns that off-leash dogs will go off the trails, trampling soil and vegetation, chasing wildlife, creating sediment in the waterways and leaving uncollected dog waste throughout the park.

The regional district strategy will look at a range of opportunities for dog walking, both leashed and off-leash, plus opportunities for enhanced services such as dog-wash facilities and dog supplies.

Wallis said the plan may have some similar elements to the one at Pacific Spirit Park, which has certain off-leash hours, requirements to leash up 10 meters from stream crossings and 50 meters from park entrances, and "no-dog" trail designations.

It's estimated that 105,000 dogs live in the City of Vancouver alone, but Pacific Spirit sees an average of 360,000 dog visits per year. Metro wasn't sure how many dogs visit Capilano. Land holdings for Capilano River Regional Park include fee simple ownership and leases from both the province and Greater Vancouver Water District.

West Vancouver Mayor Pamela Goldsmith-Jones said she's not aware of the park committee's plans but said her city has been wrestling with the off-leash dog conundrum for years.

The city has posted signage where dogs can be off-leash as well as extending on-leash areas. A park ranger also reminds dog walkers to keep their pets on-leash or, if they fail to comply, to give them a ticket.

"We always have an issue with being able to enforce what the rules are," Goldsmith-Jones said.

Martin noted issues with offleash dogs are becoming a big problem across the region. While there are off-leash facilities at Surrey's Tynehead and Campbell Valley Parks, as well as Aldergrove Lake, they're not necessarily what people want, she added.

Langley Township resident Peter Wood told the park committee last month that there are only three "postage stamp" off-leash areas where the township's 20,000 dogs can run free south of the Fraser.

North Vancouver District Mayor Richard Walton said people don't realize how much damage a dog can do running through the natural undergrowth of the forest or steep sided canyons.

Coquitlam Mayor Richard Stewart noted his wife was seriously injured after she was tripped up by a dog while running in Mundy Park.

"I sympathize with dog owners," he said. "I want this [strategy] to find opportunities but to make sure they're responsible."

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