

# The Regional Municipality of York

Committee of the Whole  
Environmental Services  
February 10, 2022

Report of the Commissioner of Environmental Services

## **Amendment to Management Plan for the York Regional Forest – Managing Dogs in the York Regional Forest**

### **1. Recommendations**

1. Council approve the amendment to “It’s in our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 - 2038” to require dogs be on-leash at all times, unless in otherwise designated area(s)
2. The Regional Clerk circulate this report to the Clerks of the local municipalities and local Conservation Authorities for information

### **2. Summary**

This report seeks Council approval for an amendment to the “It’s in our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 – 2038” to update rules for dog walking in the Regional Forest. Amendments to the management plan are presented in Attachment 1 and the full management plan can be viewed at [York.ca](http://York.ca).

Key Points:

- It’s in our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 - 2038 identified off-leash dogs as a concern and included a short-term action to review dog walking practices to better balance visitor experience and ecological integrity
- A review and comprehensive public consultation were undertaken over an 18 month period to develop an updated rule for dog walking in the Regional Forest
- The proposed amendment to the Management Plan requires dogs be on-leash at all times, unless in otherwise designated area(s)
- To provide a variety of visitor experiences, off-leash dog walking along trails is being proposed for the Bendor and Graves tract in East Gwillimbury and Davis Drive tract in Whitchurch-Stouffville
- Education and enforcement will be key to transitioning to the updated rule, and will be delivered in partnership with local municipalities

- The proposed amendment supports the vision and goals of the Management Plan, while better managing risk and continuing to provide an exceptional visitor experience

### **3. Background**

#### **Dog walking is one of the most popular uses in the York Regional Forest**

First established in 1924, the York Regional Forest has grown to include 24 properties totalling over 2,400 hectares with more than 150 kilometres of trails that support a variety of passive recreational uses. Dog walking in the Regional Forest has steadily increased in popularity and is currently the most common use. According to a 2017 forest use survey, about 53% of all visitors walk dogs while using the York Regional Forest.

In 2019, Regional Council approved the [“It’s in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 – 2038”](#), including a rule requiring all dogs be on-leash or under control. This rule allowed dog owners the ability to walk their dog off-leash, provided the dog remained in control. This rule was revised in March 2020 as a COVID-19 safety measure, requiring all dogs to be on-leash at all times in the Forest, except for the designated dog off-leash area at the Bendor and Graves tract (Attachment 2).

#### **Updated Management Plan identified the need to review rules around dog walking in the Forest**

During development of “It’s in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019 – 2038”, it was recognized that dog walking, in particular off-leash, was increasingly creating challenges for visitors as well as for staff responsible for management and education in the Forest. In the 2017 forest use survey, 55% of all respondents supported having dogs on-leash unless in a designated off-leash area. It was also clear that many others valued the opportunity to walk their dogs off-leash in the Forest.

Additional concerns were raised regarding ecological impacts of off-leash dogs in the Forest. To address these challenges, the Management Plan identified a short-term action to “review dog walking practices and options to better balance visitor experience with ecological integrity”.

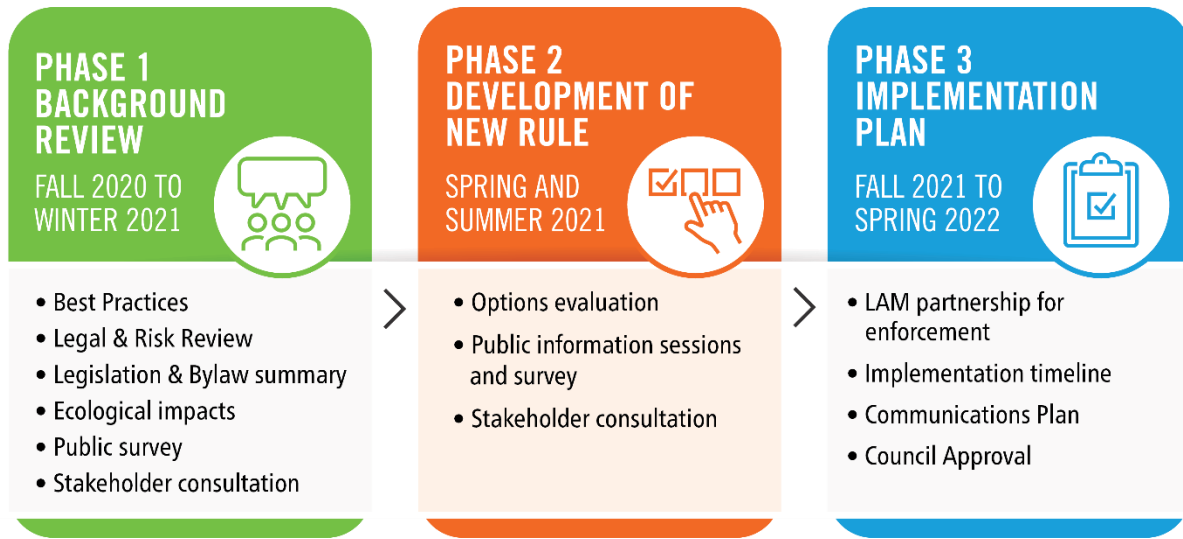
### **4. Analysis**

#### **Comprehensive background review and consultation undertaken to inform an updated approach to managing dogs in the York Regional Forest**

In 2020, the Region commenced a project (Figure 1) to develop an updated approach to managing dogs in the Regional Forest. The project included a review of relevant provincial legislation, local bylaws and risks, identification of best practices, and a series of public consultations.

**Figure 1**

**Phased Project to Develop an Updated Approach to Managing Dogs in Forest**



Review of the rule included public consultation and establishment of three project teams including a Technical Advisory Team comprised of staff from the Region’s Forestry, Legal and Risk teams, a Local Municipal Advisory Team comprised of bylaw enforcement and parks staff, and the Regional Forest Advisory Team. The Regional Forest Advisory Team is comprised of representatives from various user groups, including the Canadian Recreation Horseback Riders, Oak Ridges Trail Association, Ontario Trail Riders Association, York Mountain Bike Club, Georgina Sportsman Alliance and local naturalist clubs.

**Rule requiring dogs to be on-leash or under control presents challenges to providing a safe and enjoyable visitor experience for everyone**

The Regional Forest rule requiring dogs be on-leash or under control is inconsistent with all local municipal animal control bylaws that require dogs to be on-leash except when in a designated off-leash area. Defining the term “in control” is difficult and forest visitors have varying interpretations of the term. Differing rules between the Regional Forest and local municipal bylaws make enforcement of serious incidents challenging for local municipal bylaw officers. Other public landowners including local conservation authorities, Ontario Parks and Rouge National Urban Park all require dogs to be kept on-leash unless in a designated dog off-leash area.

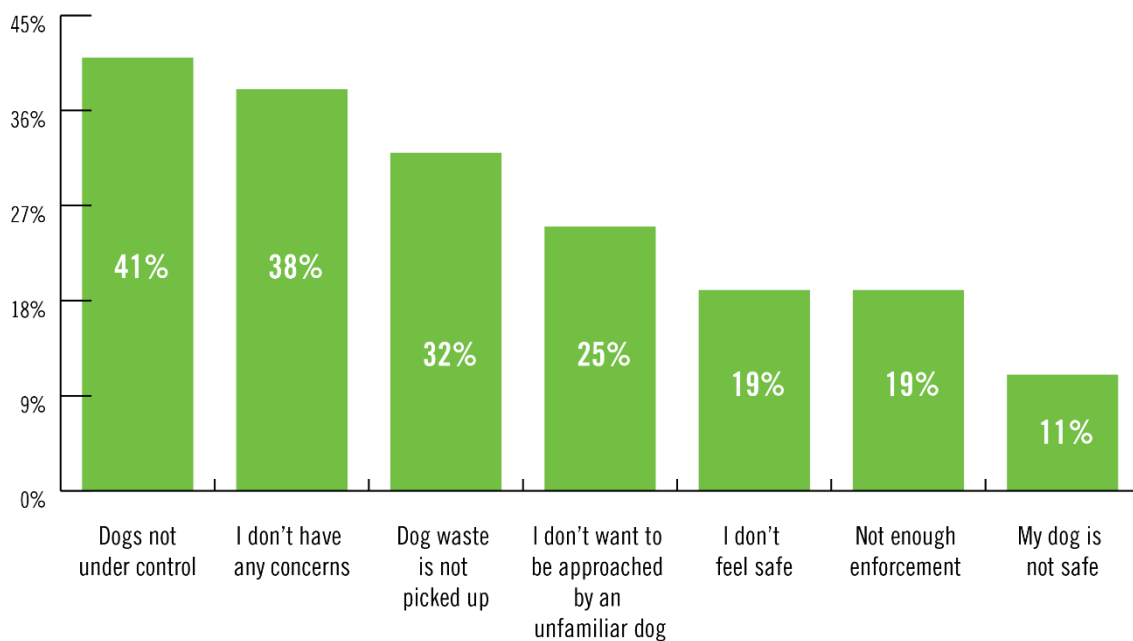
Off-leash dogs pose a greater risk to forest users, other dogs, and the ecological integrity of the forest when compared to on-leash dogs. Risks to dogs include encounters with wildlife, exposure to poisonous plants and ticks, as well as bites and scratches. In recent years, there has been an increase in confrontations between off-leash dogs resulting in serious injuries and several dog fatalities. Similarly, off-leash dogs pose a bite risk to forest visitors and encounters with off-leash dogs can make for an unpleasant visitor experience. Users have also reported dogs spooking or chasing horses, creating an unsafe situation for the rider.

Off-leash dogs can impact the ecological health of natural areas by impacting animal life cycles, destroying understory habitat for native plants, and introducing invasive species. When people and dogs remain on the trail, these impacts are reduced.

### **Feedback illustrated a strong desire to provide both on-leash and off-leash opportunities in the Forest**

In fall 2020, a survey was completed to better understand Regional Forest use as it relates to dogs. Over 1,900 people completed the survey with 96% identifying themselves as Region residents and 76% as dog owners or caregivers. While 38% of respondents had no concerns relating to dogs, 41% were concerned that dogs were not kept under control. Other top concerns (Figure 2) included dog waste not being picked up, not wanting to be approached by an unfamiliar dog, and not feeling safe in the Forest due to dogs.

**Figure 2**  
**Forest Visitor Feedback on Dogs in the York Regional Forest**



When asked to provide recommendations on how best to manage dogs in the Regional Forest, an equal number of people indicated support for the following ideas: Dogs off-leash everywhere, dogs on-leash everywhere, and dogs off-leash in some Forest tracts and/or on select days/times. Feedback demonstrated that residents preferred different experiences in relation to dogs in the Forest.


## **An updated rule requiring dogs be on-leash at all times with three additional experiences identified for further consultation with residents and stakeholders**

Using background research results, initial public consultation, and input from the technical advisory team and local municipal staff, potential rules for dog walking in the Forest were evaluated in terms of risk, ecological impact, compatibility with other uses, cost to administer, ease of understanding and enforcement, as well as visitor experience and user preference.


Requiring dogs to be on-leash at all times was the approach most consistent with goals and objectives for ensuring a positive visitor experience for all forest users and with local municipal animal control bylaws. It is recognized that this approach could impact users who visit the forest for off-leash dog walking. To more deeply consider the implications of providing a variety of visitor experiences, three additional experiences were discussed with stakeholders, including tract(s) with no dogs, tract(s) where dogs would be permitted off-leash and additional fenced dog-off leash area(s) were identified for further consideration (Figure 3). Based on feedback two tracts have been identified where dogs are permitted to be off-leash.

**Figure 3**

# **UPDATED RULE FOR DOGS**

 **Dogs remain on-leash at all times, in all York Regional Forest tracts, except in designated areas.**

**PLUS**

 **Two tracts where dogs are permitted to be off-leash.**

## **Public input supports informed development of new rule including provision of two dog off-leash tracts**

In June 2021 public feedback on the proposed updated rule (Figure 3) was obtained through three virtual information sessions and a public survey. Over 2,200 responses were received with over 95% of respondents indicating they were residents of the Region and approximately 80% were dog owners or caregivers. Analysis of comments showed 28% of respondents supported a return to the pre-pandemic rule of on-leash or in control, while 22% indicated a desire to continue with the pandemic rule of dogs be on-leash at all times.

Of the three additional experiences, one to three tracts where dogs are permitted off-leash had the highest level of support with 57% of respondents indicating high/very high support. About 25% of dog owners/caregivers indicated they would not use an off-leash tract.

While 32% of respondents indicated high/very high support for tracts where dogs would not be permitted (not applicable to service dogs), many neighbours of the Forest expressed concern that this designation would significantly limit nearby opportunities to walk their dog.

Survey results indicated support for additional fenced dog off-leash areas with 44% of respondents indicating high/very high support for this type of facility. While there was support for additional fenced off-leash areas, respondents said they would not visit a fenced off-leash area more frequently, indicating that the need for this type of facility is currently met with the existing fenced off-leash area at the Bendor and Graves tract.

### **Proposed rule will require dogs on-leash at all times, except in otherwise designated area(s)**

Based on public input results, background research, and input from the technical advisory team and local municipalities, staff are proposing to amend section 4.3.2 of the “It’s in Our Nature: Management Plan for the York Regional Forest 2019-2038” (Attachment 1) to require dogs to be on-leash at all times, unless in otherwise designated area(s).

While requiring dogs on-leash is the most balanced approach between managing risk, protecting the ecological functions, providing a safe visitor experience and allowing dog walking, there is a desire from visitors to provide an off-leash opportunity where owners can walk, horseback ride and/or engage in other nature appreciation activities with their dog off-leash.

### **Two Forest tracts proposed as off-leash to provide additional visitor experience**

To provide an off-leash opportunity while monitoring any impacts, staff are proposing to designate two Forest tracts as off-leash. Forest tracts were assessed for suitability for off-leash use with consideration for ecological sensitivity, size, location, current use, educational programming, and parking. The Bendor and Graves tract in East Gwillimbury and our Davis Drive tract in Whitchurch-Stouffville were selected as the most suitable for off-leash dog walking (Attachment 1). Off-leash dog walking will be monitored over a 12-month period, including environmental impacts, visitor experience and incidents relating to off-leash dogs. Results of monitoring will be evaluated to determine if off-leash dog walking should continue at these tracts. A memo will be brought forward to Council summarizing any changes to dog walking in these tracts.

Options to designate tracts as no-dogs permitted and additional fenced off-leash areas are not being considered at this time. The proposed updated rule for dogs would not preclude these designations being reconsidered in the future based on forest visitor and management needs.

### **Region to partner with local municipalities to deliver education and enforcement**

The *Municipal Act* places responsibility for animal control with local municipalities, including enforcing animal control bylaws in the Regional Forest. Local bylaw staff support the

amended rule as it is consistent with local bylaws and are willing to partner with the Region to proactively enforce the amended rule. Concerns regarding the ability of local municipalities to sufficiently resource proactive enforcement were identified during consultation. To assist with resource limitations and support local bylaw enforcement, the Region will fund local bylaw enforcement in the Regional Forest on a fee for service basis. More details are provided in section 5. Proactive enforcement will allow officers to visit various forest tracts at different times to engage with users to address non-compliance quickly. Enforcement activities may focus on times and locations of reported non-compliance.

When consulted regarding allowing off-leash dog walking at two tracts, local bylaw staff indicated some concerns related to the potential for increased calls due to bites and the staff resources required to investigate incidents. Local municipal data on call volume and investigations will be used as part of the evaluation of off-leash dog walking.

### **Updated rule for dogs will be introduced in May 2022 with an initial emphasis on education and awareness**

The Region has developed a plan to implement the new rule effective May 1, 2022. The first three months of implementation will focus on ensuring this new rule is properly communicated through signage, updates to online and printed materials, and an on-site presence. Enforcement will be used as appropriate during the transition phase, such as for more serious incidents, failure to correct behavior, or repeated non-compliance. Following this transition period, education will continue but complemented with stronger enforcement that is targeted based on known non-compliance. While education is our preferred approach, enforcement including the issuance of tickets will be used to address non-compliance. Local bylaw officers will also be enforcing other elements of animal control bylaws including requirements for licencing. Local bylaw officers are also equipped to apprehend dogs found at large.

## **5. Financial**

Costs associated with initial implementation of the updated rule are estimated at \$85,000 and have been accommodated within the approved 2022 operating and capital budgets for Natural Heritage and Forestry. Costs primarily pertain to updated signage, creating educational material and communications, as well as costs associated with fee for service proactive enforcement provided by local municipal bylaw staff.

On-going annual operating costs to implement this updated rule have been estimated at \$65,000 and include \$60,000 for enhanced proactive local municipal enforcement and \$5,000 for communications. Should additional funding be required to support implementation of the updated rule, a request will be made through a future budget process.

## **6. Local Impact**

The York Regional Forest is a key component of the public open space system and provides residents with opportunities for outdoor nature oriented recreational activities, including walking with and without dogs. Local municipal staff have been consulted throughout the process and are supportive of the proposed updated dog rule to require dogs to be on-leash at all times, unless in otherwise designated area(s). Local bylaw officers have been enforcing local animal control bylaws in the forest in response to complaints. Updating the rule to be consistent with local animal control bylaws will improve officer's ability to deal with complaints.

In a collaborative approach, the Region and local municipalities will work together to engage, educate and enforce the updated rule. Local municipal bylaw enforcement staff have indicated their willingness to assist with proactive enforcement within available resourcing. The Region has agreed to financially support enhanced proactive enforcement on a cost recovery basis up to a maximum of \$60,000 annually.

## **7. Conclusion**

The recommended amendment to the management plan requiring dogs to be on-leash unless in an otherwise designated area(s) provides a balanced approach between managing risk, protecting ecological functions, providing a safe and enjoyable visitor experience for all users, and allowing dog walking. The updated rule is consistent with local bylaws and best practice for managing natural areas. By designating two tracts for off-leash dog walking and maintaining the existing fully fenced off-leash area, the Region is providing a selection of visitor experiences to meet the desires of residents. Amending the plan ensures the Forest's long-term sustainability and balances the need to protect ecological features and functions while providing benefits to the residents of the Region.



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For more information on this report, please contact Laura McDowell at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 75077. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.



Recommended by:

**Erin Mahoney, M. Eng.**  
Commissioner of Environmental Services



Approved for Submission:

**Bruce Macgregor**  
Chief Administrative Officer

January 12, 2022  
Attachments (2)  
eDocs#13387105