

For Immediate Release – July 13, 2007

# **Inflammatory Disinformation Campaign Promotes Bitter Division and Discrimination in Toronto**

***The City's proposed "People, Dogs, and Parks" strategy is encouraging attacks against dog owners in parks.***

**Toronto, Ontario – July 13, 2007** – Toronto's dog-owner community is under attack by random members of the public who feel empowered to harass owners in public parks – whether their dogs are on- or off-leash.

Recent coverage surrounding City Council's revised policy has been focused almost exclusively on the perspective of parental groups waging a war of disinformation – claiming that off-leash dogs are terrorizing children and seniors in Toronto's parks – offering many incomplete or erroneous claims and references taken out of context.

"Last night, a man drove by our local park yelling out 'Parks are for kids – not for dogs!,'" said Robert Ruggiero, dog owner. "I don't think I should be attacked like that during legal off-leash hours. I'm a responsible dog owner. I shouldn't be harassed while I'm playing with my dogs and socializing with my neighbours."

While recent articles published by leaders opposing the off-leash areas referenced the dangers children face in off-leash parks, there is no statistical data to support the claim.

The Canadian Institute of Child Health, Safe Kids Canada, and Safe Start Fact Sheet 2001 [states]: Nearly half of the dog bites seen in emergency departments happened with the family pet in the child's own home. According to the City of Toronto's website, Health Canada also reinforces this claim suggesting that bites occur more often at a home than in a public place. The Ontario Injury Prevention Resource Centre also found over 500 children are hospitalized due to a fall involving playground equipment in comparison to less than 190 from being bitten or struck by a dog, with Toronto having the lowest rate of injuries.

Premika Ratnam, chair of "Play at the Park" made reference to the last two serious dog attacks in Ontario, which she neglected to specify took place in a backyard, and with two dogs who had escaped from their outdoor pen – not in a public park.

"I own a dog for many reasons – for companionship, for the lessons in responsibility my dog teaches my children, and for security and safety," says Carolyn Ellis, a single mother of three. "What I've learned being a dog owner in Toronto is that my dog is a huge builder of community and a sense of neighbourhood that I've come to cherish living in a big city. I've met neighbors, new friends, business contacts, playmates for my children and countless other people through simply meeting with our dogs at the park."

Here's what the San Francisco SPCA had to say about the combination of children and dogs in parks: "The SF/SPCA also does not agree that dogs and children in parks are incompatible. Not only have children and animals always been natural companions, children learn responsibility and develop an important sense of kindness from their interaction with dogs." "It is our belief that many park interests can safely and effectively use the areas concurrently," the paper continues. "Further, we feel it is ultimately

the park's users who should determine local needs. The use of a blanket policy that segregates park users should be avoided, in favor of allowing more leeway for local citizen input. To further support the notion of multi-use parks, we agree with the words of the Report itself, **'No one set of park stakeholders should have the power to drive another set from the parks'.**"

– "Selected Comments Regarding the Report of the Advisory Dogs Off-Leash Task Force" (April 14, 1999)

In addition, a local crime prevention officer highlighted the increased presence of dogs off leash had an impact on reducing crime. Rob McDonald, Crime Prevention Officer, Toronto Police, 55 Division stated, "When dogs owners use the park, crime is less likely to happen... Criminals are less likely to engage in illegal or illicit activity if they feel they are being watched."

"Before my local park (in downtown Toronto) gained off-leash privileges, it was the hang-out of drug-dealers, prostitutes, and thugs," says Suzan MacKenzie, parent and dog owner. "Now, it has a thriving playground where young mothers feel safe to bring their children – safe because the dogs and their owners are keeping the criminal element out of the park."

The proposed policy as it currently stands at best fails to facilitate its stated goal – and at worst is a deception designed to unnecessarily polarize communities into a false "dogs vs. kids" dichotomy as well as to place further restrictions and burdens on an already ghettoized group of taxpaying park users.

## Backgrounder: People, Dogs, and Parks

Here's a brief look at the proposed "People, Dogs, and Parks Draft Policy" that our City Councillors will be asked to vote on this Tuesday (July 17).

### Draft Policy: Key Issues

#### 1) Not enough time for all groups to provide input to the policy

This is the one area where both sides agree and would like to see the Council vote delayed.

#### 2) New Off-Leash Areas

The draft policy recognizes that existing off-leash areas are overcrowded, but it establishes no target for how many new areas should be created to support the city's estimated 250,000 dogs. FYI, Calgary currently has 141 off-leash parks for 105,000 dogs; Toronto has 32 – many of which are small or only available a couple of hours a day. Considering the fact that it costs \$100,000 to fence a two-acre area, the proposed budget allocated to parks does not support the creation of new off-leash areas.

#### 3) Dog-Owners Associations

This should be changed to "Park Associations" that would represent all users: parents, dog-owners, sports teams, etc. Also, the latest revision suggests looking into having dog-owners pay to use City Parks. Maybe the person who made that suggestion has forgotten that we already do pay for the right: they're called "taxes" and "dog licenses". Requiring a dog owner to follow an exclusive policy while other special-interest groups – from parents to picnickers to informal sports teams – use the same area with no accountability, permit requirement, or additional fees is a form of discrimination.

#### 4) Location Criteria and List of Exclusions

The location criteria spelled out in the policy are in essence a long, vague list of exclusions that seem designed to ensure that priority will be given to other uses. The most contentious exclusions are:

- Near splash pads or wading pools
- Near playgrounds
- Near or on toboggan hills sports fields, or Blue Flag designated beaches

This list of exclusions essentially means that **no parks in downtown Toronto or East York would qual-**

**ify for off-leash access.** It also means that owners would have to disobey the bylaw – facing hundreds of dollars in fines – or drive to the suburbs to properly exercise their dogs. *Aren't we trying to get people to leave their cars at home – for the environment as well as their own health?*

#### 5) Public Perception

***“Dogs in parks are a danger to children and other users.”***

**WRONG!** A Health Canada study suggests that bites occur more often at a home than in a public place.

***“Dogs cause most of the damage in parks.”***

**WRONG!** Throwing a ball for your dog causes much less damage than playing soccer wearing cleats, for instance. The scarcity of facilities does cause wear-and-tear, however.

***“Overcrowding is a major problem in dog-parks.”***

**RIGHT!** 32 parks (many small or only available for only a couple of hours a day) for 250,000 dogs is completely inadequate, and causes too much wear-and-tear on the existing facilities.

### Social Benefits of a Dog-Friendly Park

The current proposal is a catalogue of problems and supposed incompatibilities, which contains no mention of the many social benefits of dogs in parks, which include:

- Exercise for humans and dogs
- A place for disabled citizens to give their service dogs “time off” to play and exercise
- A valuable opportunity for neighbourly interaction and grassroots problem-solving
- Better socialized, safer dogs
- Crime deterrence and prevention at times when parks are otherwise deserted

***“When dogs owners use the park, crime is less likely to happen... Criminals are less likely to engage in illegal or illicit activity if they feel they are being watched.”***

*– Rob McDonald, Crime Prevention Officer, Toronto Police, 55 Division*

### Solutions

- Create a minimum target of 300 off-leash areas by 2010
- Grandparent all existing off-leash areas – whether or not they fit the new criteria
- Take seasonal usage into consideration (i.e., a wading pool used for 40 days a year should not preclude off-leash)
- Establish off-leash facilities no more than a ten-minute walk from any residential area
- Use money collected from dog licenses and dog-walkers to improve off-leash facilities
- Place clear signage at all entrances spelling out park rules
- Introduce public education in schools re. safe interactions between and behaviour for children and dogs in parks.

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***For more information, or obtain a copy of a CD created by a group of concerned parents and dog owners, please contact:***

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