

OFF-LEASH AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Off-Leash Ambassador Pilot Program was funded through the Council Innovation Fund in 2013. The program supports Calgarians to comply with the bylaws in 151 off-leash areas. Over 200 volunteers in the Off-Leash Ambassador program act as positive role models, promoting responsible pet ownership, positive pet interactions, and safety in off-leash parks and at community events.

By working in partnership with the volunteers, Calgary Community Standards (CCS) has strengthened its approach to education aimed at enhancing positive park experiences and increasing voluntary compliance to the Responsible Pet Ownership Bylaw 23M2006.

ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDATION(S)

That the Priorities and Finance Committee recommend that Council receive this report for information.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL DIRECTION / POLICY

In 2013 May, Council approved the Council Innovation Fund Application – Off-Leash Ambassador Pilot Project in the amount of \$75,000.

BACKGROUND

The Off-Leash Ambassador Pilot Program was funded through the Council Innovation Fund, (CIF) which was established to encourage innovations/pilot projects that either support or contribute to Council priorities or have the potential to change City-wide policies and procedures. Applications for CIF funds require sponsorship from a member of Council, who is responsible for presenting a case for the project to Council. Successful applicants are required to report back to Council on how the funds were spent and the overall outcomes of the project.

Aldermen Macleod and Hodges, sponsors for the Off-Leash Ambassador Pilot Program, secured \$75,000 to design a citizen-led initiative utilizing volunteers to encourage safe interactions with pets and promote responsible pet ownership in off-leash areas. The Off-Leash Ambassador pilot program was launched in 2013 beginning in Egerts and Bowmont off-leash parks and was later expanded to all parks across the city.

INVESTIGATION: ALTERNATIVES AND ANALYSIS

Volunteers in the Off-Leash Ambassador program act as positive role models, promoting responsible pet ownership, positive pet interactions and safety in the off-leash parks and at community events. They answer questions about Calgary's bylaws in off-leash areas and provide an avenue for citizens to share concerns and compliments with City staff. Volunteers also promote City services such as animal adoption, licensing, and calling 311 to report concerns in parks. Additionally, volunteers promote the Responsible Pet Ownership Bylaw, specifically focusing on citizens maintaining control of their dog and ensuring dog waste is picked up. There are over 200 Off-Leash Ambassadors currently active in 151 off-leash parks throughout the city and volunteer recruitment is ongoing.

OFF-LEASH AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

Program Accomplishments

The Off-Leash Ambassador program complements staff efforts in promoting responsible pet ownership. Working in partnership with volunteers strengthens the CCS approach to education and the community model of educating the public. Through the Off-Leash Ambassador program, Calgarians have the ability to participate in making off-leash parks welcoming and safe for all who visit. The program also allows volunteers to share information with Administration about park conditions and other information that helps to inform City operations and future projects.

In addition to regular volunteer shifts in off-leash parks, responsible pet ownership information is provided at public special events sponsored by the Off-Leash Ambassador program, which are well-received by the community. At Dog Recall events, City staff who are certified professional dog trainers offer free 45 minute sessions to participants to teach them how to keep their dogs under control at all times in off-leash areas. These events fill quickly, and satisfaction with this educational event is very high, with 93 per cent of Dog Recall workshop participants rating their experience as positive. Working Dogs Day, an event to celebrate working dogs, attracted over 1,500 people to Bowmont Park in 2016 September. Working dogs are specially trained to offer professional, often life-saving support as service, detection, police, military, search and rescue, therapy, compassion and guide dogs. Participants had a chance to meet working dogs and learn about responsible pet ownership and positive pet interaction practices. Off-Leash Ambassadors help to plan aspects of all of the events and attend the events to help with logistics and education efforts. Community associations have also requested that Ambassadors attend community events or educate residents about targeted behaviour concerns and volunteers will also initiate small events such as park cleanups.

Services to citizens are additionally enhanced through development opportunities for Ambassadors called the Off-Leash Education Series, providing quarterly workshops to volunteers. Topics covered include: exploring the environmental impact of pet waste in parks; Community Peace Officer question and answer sessions; and a pet first-aid training course. These workshops allow Ambassadors to build skills after their initial orientation, increase their confidence during volunteer shifts, and network with other Ambassadors. Administration is also available to provide support to Ambassadors throughout the year.

The Off-Leash Ambassador program is the proud recipient of two awards: the Urban Animal Summit National Innovation Showcase in 2014 and the Minister's Awards for Municipal Excellence (Innovation Category) in 2014. The Off-Leash Ambassador program model is also proving appealing to other jurisdictions as CCS has been contacted by several other municipalities looking to replicate the program in their jurisdiction. A digital toolkit was developed for these municipalities as a response to the requests received. Municipalities such as Edmonton, Saskatoon and Abbotsford are experiencing success with this program model.

Overall, the program is well-received by dog owners and a positive impact is felt by both park users and the Ambassadors themselves. Ambassadors report that they feel they are making a positive impact in their community and that they are seeing a heightened awareness and adherence to the Responsible Pet Ownership Bylaw. Overall, Administration has determined that the program outcomes were successfully achieved in the Off-Leash Ambassador program.

OFF-LEASH AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

Plans are in place to continue to refine the program and recruit new volunteers as needed to enhance key message delivery to citizens.

Stakeholder Engagement, Research and Communication

Significant stakeholder engagement occurred through the entirety of the pilot program. Community needs assessments and engagement occurred at the beginning of the pilot to build an appropriate community-building capacity plan. Staff from CCS and Parks conducted two open houses in Ward 4 in 2013 (where Egerts Park is located, one of the original pilot parks) to promote the forthcoming launch of the Off-Leash Ambassador program. Throughout the pilot, surveys were conducted at Off-Leash Ambassador special events and volunteer feedback has been solicited on a regular basis. Improvements based on feedback include handouts volunteers can provide to park patrons, community events to participate in, and themes to be discussed during education series sessions. Information gleaned from an informal questionnaire in 2017 March indicates that the public is becoming increasingly aware of the program.

Strategic Alignment

The Off-Leash Ambassador program aligns with Calgary City Council Priorities from Action Plan 2015-2018, including N12: Promote and strengthen community standards through facilitated compliance. Additionally, this program aligns with the Responsible Pet Ownership Bylaw, specifically around owners having control of their dog and ensuring their dog's waste is picked up.

Social, Environmental, Economic (External)

The Off-Leash Ambassador program enhances public safety while giving volunteers the opportunity to contribute and positively impact community life. Ambassador efforts increase the public's adherence to bylaws and allow another mechanism to gather information about parks maintenance concerns and areas needing further investigation from Community Peace Officers. Volunteers also encourage dog owners to pick up their dog's waste, minimizing the negative impacts on the environment. Positive pet interactions create a safe environment for both human and canine park users.

Financial Capacity

Current and Future Operating Budget

The Priorities and Finance Committee approved \$75,000 in 2013 to pilot the Off-Leash Ambassador program. The budget spending details for 2013 - 2016 can be found in the Attachment. As a result of its success, Administration will continue the program into 2018. CCS anticipates it may bring forward this program for resourcing as part of the Business Plan and Budget Cycle for 2019 - 2022.

Current and Future Capital Budget

There are no capital budget implications related to this report.

Risk Assessment

The Off-Leash Ambassador program serves to mitigate risks in off-leash parks by encouraging voluntary compliance to the Responsible Pet Ownership Bylaw. Increased compliance with

OFF-LEASH AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

bylaws reduces the risk of problematic pet interactions and decreases the likelihood of experiencing negative environmental and health impacts of pet waste in parks.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATION:

This report meets the requirement to report back to Council on the overall outcomes and expenditures of the Off-Leash Ambassador program pilot, approved through the Council Innovation Fund.

ATTACHMENT

Off-Leash Ambassador Program Council Innovation Fund Expenditures