



October 23, 2015

Attention: Leah Tivoli, Seattle Parks and Recreation

Cc: Supt. Jesús Aguirre, Mayor Murray, Council Members, Park Board

Re: “People, Dogs and Parks Strategic Plan” presented by Seattle Parks and Recreation & COLA (Citizens for Off Leash Areas)

The Seattle Nature Alliance is concerned that the process for “People, Dogs and Parks Strategy” is flawed. It has not been inclusive or impartial, and much of the information presented has been misleading. We respectfully request that Seattle Parks and Recreation put the process on hold until these problems can be worked out.

It is clear that COLA is promoting unfenced off-leash areas in Seattle’s regional parks, as well as on nature trails and Puget Sound beaches. This is a drastic change from the status quo and would amount to a significant relaxation of our current leash laws. It would have serious impact on wildlife habitat and the nature-experience for all people. This requires serious consideration, and it should not be rushed or done without full participation of stakeholder groups and all citizens.

The following are a few of our concerns about the Survey, the Focus Groups, and the Strategy:

1. This process is not inclusive

Stakeholders such as Seattle Audubon, Seal Sitters, the Friends Groups, forest stewards, Washington Native Plant Society and other such groups should have been involved from the beginning. In addition, the entire process should be more widely publicized. Outside of COLA members, many people have no idea this is happening. The publicity should have stated plainly that the possible outcome of this process is a significant relaxation of the current leash laws.

2. The process is not impartial

Parks states it is trying to achieve “balance” between people, dogs, and parks. Each Focus Group has six dog owners and six non-dog owners. But, only 35% of Seattle Households have dogs. And of those, only 67% prefer to exercise their dogs off-leash*, which reduces the actual number of off-leash users to less than 23%. A more representative split would have been three dog owners and nine non-dog owners for each group. The entire process is weighted in favor of COLA’s desired outcome: “balancing” by increasing dog-owner access at the expense of everyone else.

Additionally, wildlife must be added to the “balance.” Seattle supports *domestic* animals more than most cities**. All leashed dogs are currently welcome into our urban forests for their exercise and enjoyment. But, thousands of other species depend on Seattle’s natural habitat for their mere survival. Urban wildlife is totally dependent upon our goodwill to protect their habitat, and unlike dogs, they get neither free meals nor comfortable beds. And many people feel as strongly about wildlife as dog owners feel about their dogs. To many of us, wildlife is part of our extended “family”, just like dogs are to their owners.

3. The process is misleading

Parks and COLA are using comparisons with other cities to evaluate how we provide park access for dogs. Comparisons are fine, but they should use *truly comparable* situations, not weak or misleading ones. For example, Pacific Spirit Park (see photo below) is not a Vancouver BC city park. It is a 2160-acre University property located outside the city limits. At over 4 times the size of Seattle’s largest park, it would be the equivalent of a county or state park in our system. There are sections of trails that are leash-optional, but also sections that are dog-prohibited. None of this information was provided to the Focus Group.

Another misleading comparison is made with Portland, which has 33 dog parks in comparison to Seattle’s 14. But, there is no mention that Portland also has 14,204 acres of parkland, over *2.5 times as much parkland as Seattle****. It is also never mentioned that Portland also has 3 *dog-prohibited* parks, including 2 dog-prohibited nature parks, whereas Seattle has none.

Finally, Thursday's participants were asked whether the \$100,000 budgeted for OLAs should go for "maintenance of existing OLAs, or acquisition of new ones." Most people, reflexively, tended to favor acquisition, probably because buying new dog parks with existing money sounds like the neighborly thing to do. But, when asked whether "acquisition" meant "purchased as new additional parklands" or "designated from within existing parklands" the facilitator did not provide an answer until the end of the meeting and the voting was complete. But, \$100,000 cannot buy new land, nor is it enough to build new, fenced dog parks within existing parks. The *only* way those funds could create new OLAs is by allowing dogs off leash in unfenced or minimally fenced areas in existing regional parks, places such as the open fields of Lincoln Park or Seward Park. It was a misleading question people would easily misinterpret in the pressured setting of a focus group, and it was skewed toward having people vote in favor of an option they did not understand — one that would significantly relax the current leash laws.

In Conclusion:

Seattle was an early adopter of OLA's in the 1990s. OLAs were promoted as a solution to the (*then*) growing number of complaints about off-leash dogs. Yet, the Parks Department reports that off-leash dog problems are still one of the top complaints it receives. The obvious question here is: how well has the OLA concept delivered on its promises? A complete and meaningful "Strategy" would include such questions, and would not be a pre-determined strategy to green-light more benefits for COLA at the expense of everyone else.

Seattle should be a leader, not a follower

Seattle should not use cities with far different physical geography to promote off-leash access in regional parks, on nature trails, or beaches. Seattle's spectacular natural environment is second to none, but it is small, fragmented, fragile, and must serve a booming population of people. We are lucky to have old-growth forests, maturing forests, estuarine and freshwater habitats and beaches, salmon-bearing streams and rivers, and stunning mountain, forest and water views. Our urban nature is the envy of the nation. We must recognize our natural heritage as the important asset it is, for wildlife habitat and passive recreation for all people. We cannot afford to lose it.

Please put this process on hold until it can be re-started with inclusiveness, impartiality, and accuracy.

Sincerely,

The Seattle Nature Alliance

Directors: Denise Dahn, Mark Ahlness, Rebecca Watson

• data from *Focus Group Handout*

**Seattle ranked as 3rd Best U.S. City for Dogs in 2013. (Handout from Focus Group Forum)

***Park data from *City Facts 2014 Brochure*, *Trust for Public Land*, using *Seattle PRD-provided data*

(Below, Handout from Focus Group at Camp Long, Thursday, October 15, 2015.)

