

Pet lobby group urges strategic civic election voting

By David Hutton, The StarPhoenix October 16, 2009



Patricia Thomas (from left), Paul Panchuk, Kim Stratemeyer and Joe Monahan walk their dogs
Photograph by: Liam Richards, The StarPhoenix, The StarPhoenix

With an estimated 20,000-plus pet owners in the city, the city's growing pet movement will be heard, a local lobby group says. Recreational Off-Leash Organization (ROLO) distributed a questionnaire to candidates in the Oct. 28 civic election and is asking its members to vote strategically. The group asked each candidate if they're in favour of pets in downtown parks, currently under review by the city, adding more off-leash areas within the city and the development of Chief Whitecap Park south of the city, a hot-button issue among many area dog owners, who feel the main users of the park aren't being heard as redevelopment efforts continue to move forward. Each candidate was ranked based on their "pet-friendliness." "What's happening here is that people are starting to understand the importance that pets play in the lives of families," said ROLO spokesperson Paul Panchuk, the owner of an 11-year-old Golden Pyrenees named Piper. "A lot of people's children have moved out and they've replaced them with furry children. "We're hoping people on council and the mayor recognize the importance of these issues." At a meeting this week, group member Patricia Thomas, the owner of two dogs, briefed around 40 members on the various positions of candidates, highlighting on a slideshow those answers that were 'pet friendly' in green or yellow and those that weren't in red. Thomas said members should consider each candidate's position on dog parks among the varied issues facing them this election, but pushed members to vote strategically in several of the wards to try to remove candidates considered in favour of the current plan to redevelop Chief Whitecap Park. Dog owners are unhappy with the proposed reduction of space to run their pets off-leash in Chief Whitecap Park, with public meetings on the issue set for after the election. The off-leash group wants a tighter leash on council as discussions move forward. "Pet owners have to work really hard to change the attitudes in this city because the facilities are really awful," Thomas said in an interview after the meeting. "Off-leash areas in the city are very inadequate." Kim Stratemeyer, the owner of a Basset Hound named Lu-Lu, said pet owners have become more political in recent years as off-leash park space has been threatened. "It's a big movement," she said. There is enough space for day camps and interpretive areas at Cranberry Flats, Wanuskewin Heritage Park and Beaver Creek Conservation Area that Chief Whitecap Park should be "left alone," she said.

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