

# Star Phoenix Editorial April 5, 2010

## “Accommodating city's dog owners must be priority”



From the battle over who should be allowed in Chief Whitecap Park to the two-decade-late decision to allow pets on leash in Rotary and Friendship parks to the struggle residents face in finding pet-friendly recreational spaces in Montgomery, Saskatoon is doing a poor job of accommodating pet owners.

It's increasingly clear to anyone who has struggled to find a parking place at any of Saskatoon's out-of-the-way dog parks, and who has watched dozens of pet owners manoeuvre to get their animals past the ubiquitous mud holes, that the growth in the demographic that owns dogs has been much greater than of the general population.

Pet ownership is also growing much faster than the city's ability to accommodate it.

This is leading to many problems, not the least of which is the increased likelihood of conflict between dog owners and those who believe parks should be reserved for Saskatoon's two-legged inhabitants.

Saskatoon has among the highest rates of compliance in Canada when it comes to pet owners willing to license their critters. This compliance defies logic, because the return on that investment for most pet owners is having to tolerate substandard recreational opportunities

. Nowhere is that clearer than in the city's downtown. Even the decision by council this week to allow the walking of leashed dogs in Rotary and Friendship parks while leaving out Kiwanis Park, which joins one side of the downtown to the other along the river, makes absolutely no sense.

The justification is that Kiwanis plays host to too many festivals to allow people to mix with dogs. Setting aside for the moment that the festivals leave ample room for people who want to stroll along the river with their pets, the notion that people and pets can't mix runs counter to experiences of most North American cities -- including those with major festivals.

This is symptomatic of an attitudinal problem rather than evidence that Saskatoon pet owners or their animals are somehow more irresponsible than those in other cities.

Civic officials have complained about the cost of putting up adequate garbage containers to handle the dog droppings they anticipate. They estimate the cost of removing the extra garbage at \$657 a year, and the cost of signage to inform owners they must leash pets and pick up droppings at \$2,250.

This appears to be grasping for excuses.

Whether one has a dog or is walking the city's trails strewn with discarded fast-food containers, chewed gum, bits of paper, chip bags or any amount of other garbage, it's obvious there aren't enough trash containers in places where people like to gather or walk.

That people and pets using designated off-leash areas are often forced to tote a bag containing excrement a kilometre or more for disposal at one of the rare waste containers is highly inconvenient and insulting. Certainly, those who fail to pick up after their pets should be targeted aggressively and fined heavily, although Coun. Maurice Neault's suggestion to put a bounty on the miscreants and reward citizens for turning in video evidence seems a recipe for violent disaster.

Councillors should be congratulated for finally recognizing the need to open up more downtown parks to pets, but they must realize that the file has lain dormant far too long. Unless they do more quickly to accommodate the increasing number of pet owners, conflicts will grow. And Saskatoon, a city that likes to think of itself as welcoming a new generation, will find that the people it's counting on to build its future going instead to places that are more accommodating of pet ownership.