

**Post City Magazine**  
**City Politics**

**City dog walkers are back on the chain gang**  
**By John Sewell**

**Leash laws now strictly enforced**

Life in the big city has just become more difficult for dog owners. City Inspectors have been seen in almost every park in central Toronto, slapping dog owners with \$100 or \$200 tickets for not having their dog on a leash. That's the law, of course - if you have a dog in the city then it must be leashed.

There are a few leash-free areas in the city, but my experience is that they are allocated to inaccessible parts of ravines where it would be foolish to walk through the underbrush let alone walk a dog, and dogs have no interest in being there - they want to be with other dogs, and they want the exercise of running free.

These tickets are causing dog owners to erupt in anger, gather in coffee shop conclaves and talk about what they might do. Most dogs need lots of running, they say, and that can't be done on a leash. One common response is that certain areas of some parks that dogs frequent should be made leash-free areas, at least for certain times of the day. That would obviously help to resolve the immediate problem. But the question of leash or no leash misses the point. Maybe we should be looking for other kinds of solutions.

There is no question that dogs and dog walkers create a more friendly city. When people get a dog, they begin to realize how many of their neighbours they had never met before and how little they had actually walked around their own neighbourhood to see what's there. Dog owners are forced by their pet to be on the street two or three times a day, and that in itself creates a good sense of neighbourhood. Eyes - and dogs - on the street, to paraphrase Jane Jacobs. The presence of dog walkers also adds a significant level of security to parks for all park users.

Most dog owners are religious about picking up after their pets, and they are often seen picking up other droppings as well as litter, beer bottles left behind by teenagers the night before and random pop cans. Better yet, dog walking is good for your health. We'd all be better off walking the two or three miles a day that active dogs demand and chatting with other owners, the name of whose dogs we know if not their own names.

One bad thing about dogs in the city is when they are out of control, when they are aggressive and won't leave people and other dogs alone. The Ontario government (and many residents) have come to believe that these are innate characteristics of the pit bull variety of dog. Prominent lawyer Clayton Ruby is now bringing a constitutional challenge to the legislation banning pit bulls, arguing that it's the owner and not the dog that's the problem: pit bulls can be trained and under control as well as any other dog, and when that happens, they aren't a problem. Most dog owners agree that the key is good training, although some owners (I'm one) are worried when there's a pit bull in the park.

The key issue is whether the animal is under control. All dogs on a leash are under control (more or less) , but many well-trained dogs can be off the leash and still be effectively under the owner's control, coming when called and not posing any problems to other park users. The issue is not so much the leash or the breed but whether the dog is under the owner's control. Dogs create marvellous benefits for cities, and city officials should be encouraging responsible dog owners rather than randomly slapping them with fines. They should encourage dog owners to attend obedience schools where, as I know from personal experience, the serious teaching happens to the owner and not to the pet. If the owner knows how to deal with the dog, then the dog knows how to respond and will be a dog under control of the owner; on or off the leash.

Off-leash areas allow dogs to run free, as will be their wont, but those areas won't be problem free. Off-leash areas are bound to attract some dogs that are not in the control of their owner, and they'll be a problem for all other users whether two or four footed. And that makes it clear that we need a new law - a law that requires you to be in effective control of your dog. The people who should be penalized are those who cannot control their dog whether or not it is on a leash.

Within two or three minutes, anyone can determine whether another dog in the park is under the control of its owner or not. Does it come when called? Is it playing happily rather than harassing other dogs or other people in the park? It's a fairly easy decision to come to quickly. A city inspector could conclude without difficulty whether a particular dog is under control, and if it isn't, then issue a ticket. That's the kind of bylaw I think most responsible dog owners would support without question. Maybe that's what a new dog bylaw should say.

I know you're interested in what I think of cats, but I'll leave that for a different occasion.

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