



Medicine Hat
The Gas City



Dogs in Off-Leash Areas Report

Prepared By
Parks and Outdoor
Recreation
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I. INTRODUCTION

The objectives of this report include:

- Review and assessment of current off-leash dog areas scope and distribution;
- Review of issues associated with current off-leash dog areas;
- Development of criteria for off-leash dog areas that provide designated areas while respecting private properties; with modest development and operating costs; and facilitate bylaw enforcement; and
- Recommendations, including capital and operating costs, for location and designation of off-leash dog areas.

In August 2010, the City of Medicine Hat passed a new Responsible Animal Ownership Bylaw, which outlined new guidelines in terms of pet ownership, bylaw enforcement, and penalties for individuals who contravene any provision of the bylaw. In the course of preparing the new bylaw, the Medicine Hat Police Service conducted a review of the city's off-leash areas, which was compiled in a report on *Off-leash Parks Best Practices and Recommendations*. The report found that the current off-leash areas present in the city were unsafe, failed to promote adequate awareness, and severely compromised enforcement of the bylaw. These issues result from the number and size of the off-leash areas, the mixed use nature, and the lack of clear signage and identifiable boundaries. Because of the increase in licensed dogs in recent years, a relatively high per capita level of dog licenses (10%), and an increase in the number of calls Bylaw Enforcement is dealing with, issues surrounding off-leash areas are likely to get worse in the coming years.

The report completed by Bylaw Enforcement identified three options to take into consideration for the future of off-leash areas in the city. These options are:

- **Option 1:** Status Quo - The City of Medicine Hat makes no changes to the current off-leash areas.
- **Option 2:** Install signage to the entry points of all 22 current off-leash areas.
- **Option 3:** Development of 2 to 4 fully fenced and posted off-leash areas.

Through examining the strengths and weaknesses of each option, and looking at best practices in other communities, Bylaw Enforcement recommended in the report that the City pursue Option 3.

The Parks and Outdoor Recreation Department was tasked with conducting a review of the current off-leash areas.

The off-leash areas review has taken place by analyzing the current system, researching several Alberta municipalities and through consultation with the general public, specific interest groups and Bylaw

Enforcement. This report outlines these findings, as well as provides a recommendation and criteria for the future of off-leash areas in the community.

II. CURRENT SITUATION

The City has jurisdiction to develop off-leash areas as part of Bylaw No. 3935 – *The Responsible Animal Ownership Bylaw*, which states that “The City may designate areas where a dog may be exercised while not restrained by a Leash” (Section 15.1). The current practice for the City of Medicine Hat is for all Environmental Reserve areas to be designated as off-leash areas. This has historically been the case, and the practice has been supported by City Councils in the past. The result of this is that currently there are 22 Environmental Reserve/Off-leash areas, covering about 1,500 hectares. These areas are spread out around the city, most often bordering coulees and creeks or the river. Some of these areas have the potential to be environmentally sensitive, and are the home to various plant and wildlife species. Many of the Environmental Reserve/Off-leash areas back directly onto residential properties and many of these areas have leisure trails running through them. This greatly increases the risk of conflict between dogs and other users.

The distribution, number, size, numerous access points, both formal and informal, and non-descript boundaries with Public Utility Lots and storm water management facilities makes it challenging for the public to identify what exactly constitutes an off-leash area. Many of the entrances into the areas are not signed, and when they are, the signage is limited to identifying the area as off-leash or on-leash. This can create problems with dog owners not knowing where to let their dogs off of the leash, and problems with other users inadvertently entering off-leash areas without meaning to. It also creates complications over bylaw enforcement, as it can lead to disagreements between the Bylaw Enforcement Unit and dog owners over where off-leash areas begin and end.

A map showing the current off-leash areas can be found in Appendix A at the end of the report.

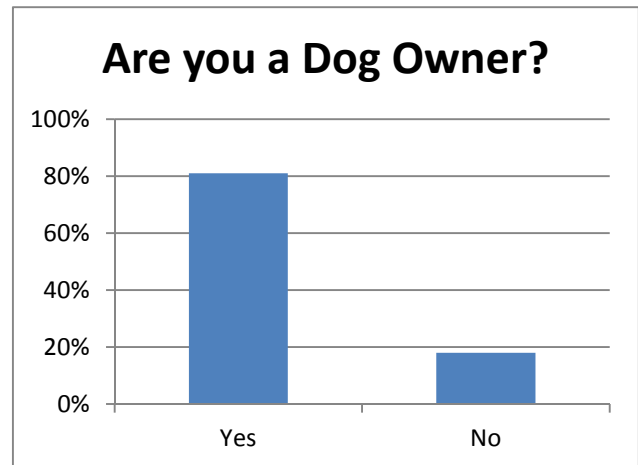
III. PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT & RESEARCH FINDINGS

In order to successfully understand the public perspective towards the current off-leash areas, public engagement was undertaken to provide residents with the opportunity to share their opinions and concerns about this aspect of the Parks System. This was done online and through an in-person survey conducted at a booth during the Great West Home Expo and Leisure Show which took place October 29 to 31, 2010. In total, 339 responses were received during the course of the survey. This response provided a variety and range of opinions, representing residents from many areas of the city.

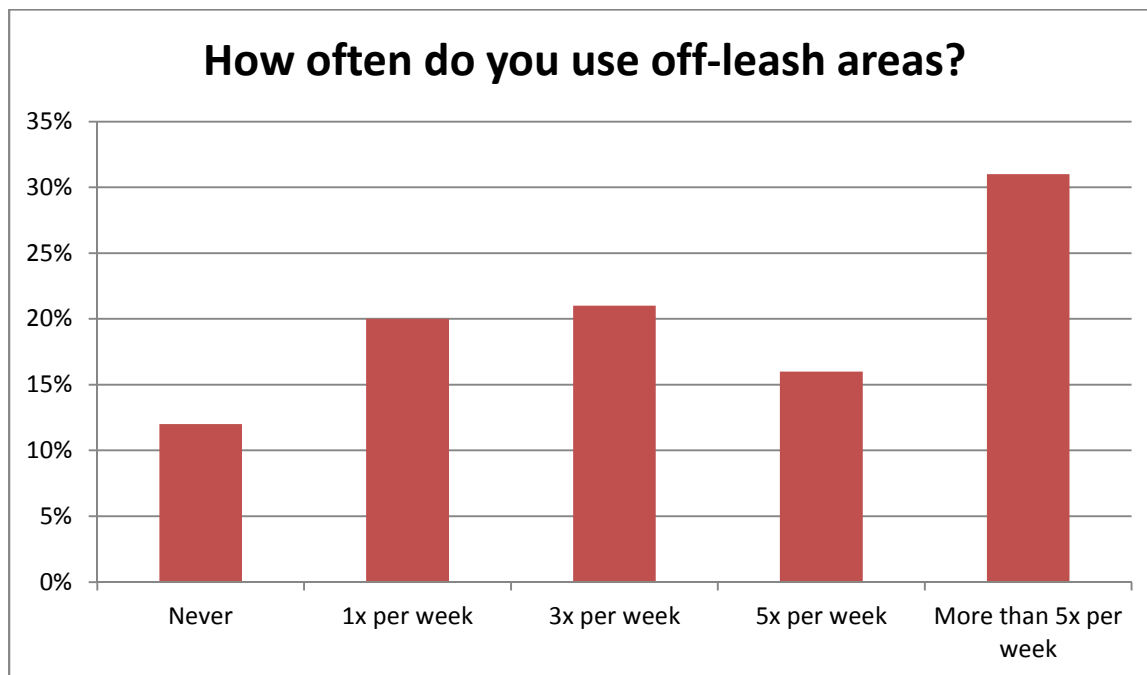
a. Survey Results

Q2: Are you a dog owner?

The majority of respondents identified as being dog owners, 81% responding yes to 18% no. 1% did not answer the question.



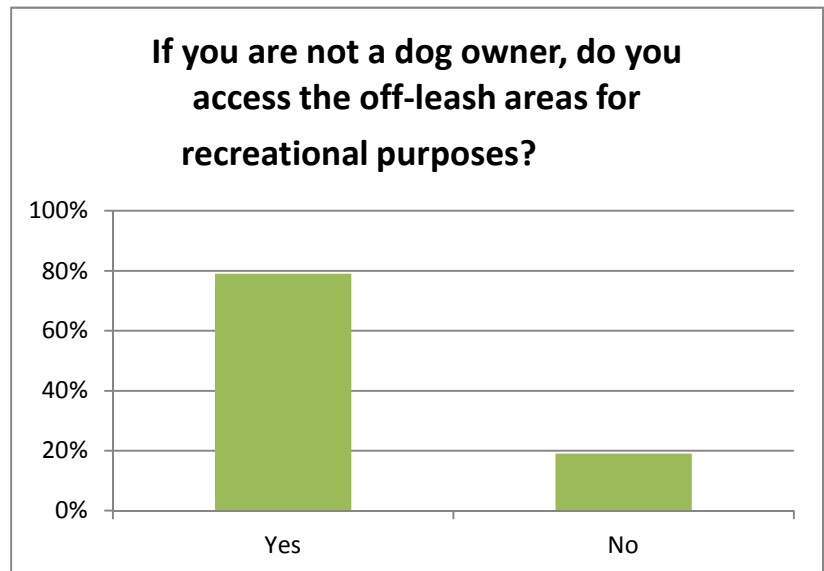
Q3: If you are a dog owner, how often do you use off-leash areas?



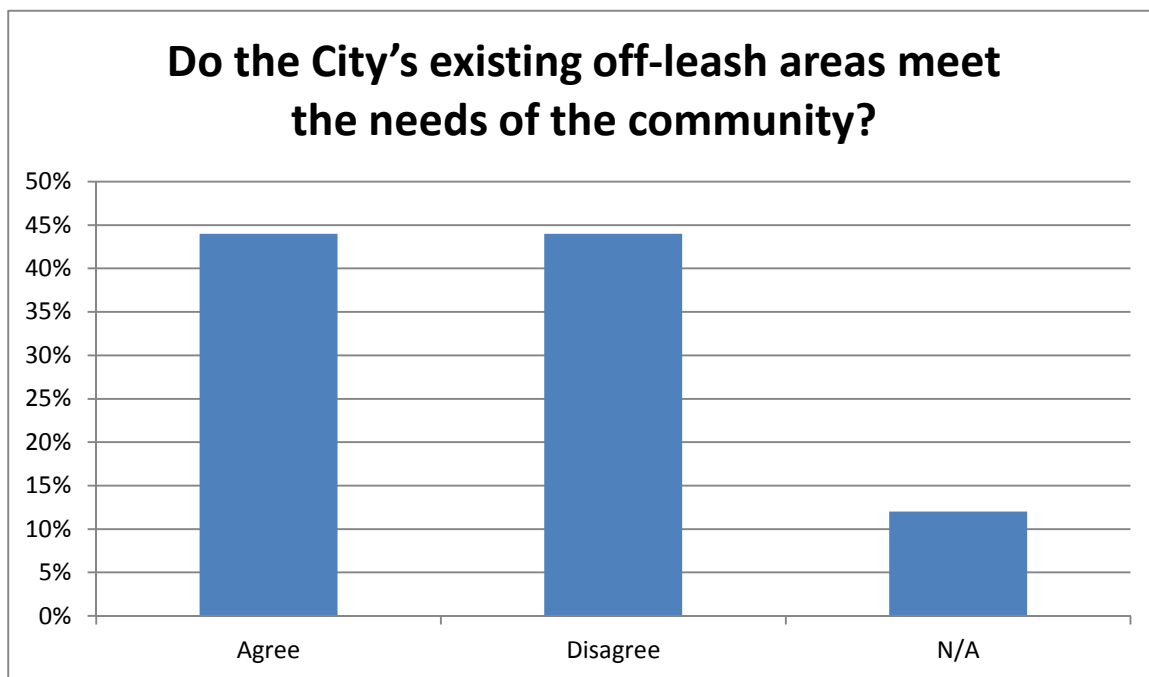
According to the survey, a majority of dog owners are using the current off-leash areas. Only 12% responded to never using the areas, while 31% responded to using the areas more than five times per week. Taken as a whole, these findings show a high level of use for the current areas, and the importance that these areas play within the City's Parks System.

Q4: If you are not a dog owner, do you access the off-leash areas for recreational purposes?

This question shows that a significant number (79%) of non-dog owners are using off-leash areas for recreation purposes. This is not surprising given the size, number and multi-use nature of the current system. It also increases the potential for issues to occur between the various users.



Q5: Do the City's existing off-leash areas meet the needs of the community?



Public Opinion was clearly split on this issue. 44% of respondents agreed that community needs are currently being met by existing off-leash areas, while 44% disagreed with this statement. While this is not an overwhelming show of disagreement, it does mean that there is potential for improvement to the current system. There is a clear opportunity to better meet the community's needs.

Q7: Please provide any other comments or feedback about the off-leash areas in the city.

Comment	# of responses
Fenced Areas	73
More Garbage Receptacles	46
Bylaw Enforcement - Pick up after pets	45
Dog Waste Bags/Receptacles	42
More Signage	41
Bylaw Enforcement	41
Need more areas	36
Irresponsible owners	22
Bylaw Enforcement - Control of Pets	17
Off-leash areas away from trails	15
Need less areas	13
More areas for Dogs to Swim	13
Off-leash area maps	13
Leave as is	12
Improved public education of what is/isn't off-leash	9

When given the opportunity to raise any issues they had with current off-leash areas, the survey created a wide variety of responses. Out of these responses, a few key issues are highlighted. The single biggest issue that was raised is the need for Fenced Areas, receiving 73 responses. Issues relating to bylaw enforcement also received a high level of response on the survey. Respondents were primarily concerned with enforcement around owners not picking up after their pets (45), and this concern was also raised by a high number of responses asking for more garbage receptacles (46) and more dog waste bags provided (42).

The response to this question shows that respondents feel like there are improvements that can be made to existing off-leash areas. Of those that responded, only 12 people responded for leaving the current system as is. This shows a desire and an opportunity to improve the off-leash areas over what currently exists.

While not represented in the survey, the most significant piece of feedback received by staff at the Great West Home Expo and Leisure Show was that the public was extremely unaware of what was and was not considered off-leash areas. Most residents were extremely surprised to see the number and size of the current off-leash areas, and this topic created great discussion at the booth.

b. Interest Group Responses

As part of the review, three stakeholder groups were consulted about providing their input into the current off-leash areas.

I. Bylaw Enforcement

The feedback that Bylaw Enforcement provided was the same as their report. Their comment was that Medicine Hat has a high number of off-leash areas, but they do not meet current needs. The areas are too spread out to facilitate adequate enforcement, and being mixed use areas creates a potential for conflict between users.

Their recommendation would be to see the creation of designated off-leash dog areas, which could be more easily enforced and would help reduce potential conflicts between mixed users. Signage would clearly identify off-leash areas, and physical boundaries such as fences would stop dogs from running at large. They recommend that a number of these sites should be developed, and designating large and small dog areas would help reduce conflicts between dogs further.

If fully-fenced designated off-leash areas were unable to be developed, their alternative recommendation would be to reduce the size and number of the current off-leash areas, and put up signage to clearly identify these areas. This would help with enforcement and would reduce certain issues, but not to the extent that fully fenced areas would.

II. Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA)

Representatives from the SPCA were asked to provide their input about the current off-leash areas. The SPCA itself does not walk dogs in off-leash areas, although some of their volunteer might, but they feel that the situation could be improved with changes. When asked, the group responded that they strongly disagree that the existing areas are meeting the needs of the community. Their main reason for this belief is that they feel that the current multi-use areas create a potential for conflicts between users, due to the large numbers of users and conflicting uses taking place in the areas.

If changes were made, they would like to see well marked, fenced designated areas in each quadrant of the city. In their opinion, these areas should be single use, and divided into large and small dog areas. This type of system would not only be safer for people and dogs, but would also make it easier for bylaw enforcement.

III. Gas City Dog Club

Representatives from the Gas City Dog Club were also asked to provide input on the current off-leash areas. Like the SPCA, they also agreed that current needs are not being met. Safety was their number one concern, with incidents between users and problems arising between large and small dogs being mentioned specifically.

They too would like to see fenced off-leash areas in each area of the city, along with improved signage and more garbage receptacles. They feel this would help with both safety and bylaw enforcement, and improve the quality of life of pet owners and other trail users, especially cyclists. They also mentioned that if fenced areas were created, they would like to see the areas be larger than “baseball fields”. Areas where dogs would be allowed to swim were also identified as a request.

c. Alberta Municipalities

In the course of preparing the report, staff contacted a number of comparable municipalities to find out what communities around the province are doing in terms of off-leash areas. The cities of Calgary, Edmonton, Red Deer, Grande Prairie and Lethbridge were all interviewed, and some common practices and issues facing off-leash areas in general have been identified. A summary of the findings is presented below.

Municipality	Total # of off-leash areas	Are the areas Fenced	Manicured Parks	Natural Area	Signage	Supply Bags	Operating Budget
Calgary	151	3 areas are completely enclosed	Yes	Yes – based on sensitivity of area	Yes	No	Not tracked separately.
Edmonton	41	Only when fences existed previously	Sometimes – In multi-use parks	Mostly natural state	Yes	Yes	Yes; \$60,000 for pamphlets and bags
Red Deer	2	1 fenced (along major roadway)	Some areas	Mostly natural state	Yes	Yes	\$5,000 - \$7,000 for cleaning
Grande Prairie	1	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	~\$6,000 for bags
Lethbridge	3	No	No	All in natural areas	Yes	Yes – City uses 600,000 bags. 140 dispensers	Operations and maintenance is not tracked separately Bags cost \$44,000 city-wide

Following review of the results, there are a few trends that emerge. In all five cases, specific areas are set aside for off-leash use. Medicine Hat is the only municipality of the cities surveyed where all Environmental Reserve parcels are designated as an off-leash area. This difference is especially notable when compared to Grande Prairie, Red Deer and Lethbridge, which only have one to three specifically designated off-leash areas respectively. It must be noted that some of the areas in these three cities are fenced. Beyond this off-leash areas are clearly marked by signage outlining the area and rules of use.

Outside of these points, there are some areas that do not receive a consensus. There is variety in terms of manicured parks versus natural areas, and whether designated off-leash areas should exist in Environmental Reserve areas.

In most cases, cities choose to provide bags for users of the area, and undertake some type of regular cleaning and maintenance. Calgary chooses not to provide bags due to the cost, but they have done so in the past when a corporate sponsor was available.

I. Fenced vs. Non-Fenced

The most significant trend involves the debate of fenced areas as opposed to non-fenced areas. Currently around the province there are many off-leash areas that are not fenced in any fashion. Where fenced areas are present, they have been generally well received and extensively used. Public feedback often calls for more fenced areas in particular, and the development of fully fenced off-leash areas is on the radar across the Province.

Most recently the City of Calgary has prepared and approved a 2010 Off-Leash Area Management Plan, which provides future direction for off-leash areas. Related to the Management Plan, a proposal has gone forward that would see the city installing gates and full fencing in 17 existing off-leash areas, create nine new fully fenced areas, as well as numerous partial fencing projects and other improvements such as signage and garbage receptacles. This Management Plan is one of the most recent in North America, and draws on best practices and experience from numerous communities. Looking at Calgary's Plan, it is clear that fully fenced parks are a key aspect of their strategy going forward.

Fully fenced is not a necessity however, and Calgary and other cities around the province will continue to have a mixture of fully fenced areas and designated areas in multi-use parks.

II. Common Issues

During the survey, staff in each municipality was asked for the major issues they deal with in relation to off-leash areas in the community. From these responses, a few issues were identified as being common in most or all municipalities.

- Irresponsible Dog Owners – This was the number one issue in all municipalities contacted. Problems with people not cleaning up after their dogs and letting their dogs run out of control seemed to be universal. There is no easy way to deal with this problem, but solutions can exist in increased bylaw enforcement.
- Conflict between Users – In multi-use areas, the potential for conflict between the various users is increased. This is minimized as much as possible by the use of signage and fencing, and through separating off-leash areas from other uses.
- Overuse of sites – Off-leash areas can be extremely popular, especially when completely fenced. This can create problems with overuse. If sites are not big enough to accommodate all of the users, they can suffer extreme turf/vegetation damage from all of the dogs and people present. Parking can also be an issue. These sites become destinations that people around the community will travel to, and this can create issues in the neighbourhood if there is not enough parking available.
- “Not in My Back Yard” Mentality – While there are certain people who enjoy living close to an off-leash area, others find it undesirable due to a potential increase in noise, traffic, and the

potential for dogs to be running at large outside of the off-leash areas. This has made it tough for communities to find suitable locations for these areas. In response to this, Calgary embraces extensive public engagement before any new off-leash areas are approved.

IV. OPTIONS CONSIDERED

Building on the research, a number of potential alternatives for off-leash areas moving forward were identified. These options represent some of the most popular comments given by interest groups, survey respondents and other Alberta municipalities.

Option 1: Leave the off-leash areas as is.

Option 2: Install proper signage in all current off-leash areas.

It is estimated that to install signage at the approximately 160 locations that would need signs could cost close to \$30,000. Due to the regulatory nature of the signs, they would need to be inspected and maintained on a regularly scheduled basis, which could cost approximately \$7,000 per year. This is a significant capital and operating expense for a service that will do little to address the current issues or increase the level of service provided to users.

Option 3: Phase out the current off-leash areas, while replacing them with fully fenced, designated off-leash area in each quadrant of the city.

It is estimated that the construction of a typical 1 hectare, fully fenced off-leash area, with water and parking lot would cost around \$115,000. To meet the needs of the community under this option, four of these sites would need to be developed. Due to the high cost involved, and limited number of sites with the potential to be fully fenced, this option is not recommended.

Option 4: Designate and sign specific areas as off-leash within current Environmental Reserve areas, while constructing one fully fenced area.

This option uses a combination of signage complete with boundary illustration to better define the off-leash areas within the city. By reducing the number of off-leash areas, boundaries will be easier to define and the need for signage will decrease. An estimated 25 signs will be required, costing approximately \$7,500. Fully fenced areas should also be constructed, but fewer of them will be needed due to the designated off-leash areas without fencing. This helps to keep capital and operating costs down, and allow for the delivery of a reasonable level of service.

a. Criteria for off-leash areas

- Off-leash areas should have clear and discernable boundaries.
- Signs should be clearly posted at the formal entrances indicating the boundaries of the area and referencing the Responsible Animal Ownership Bylaw No. 3935.
- Areas should be located at least 50m from commercial or residential property.
- Areas should be at least 1 hectare in size.
- Adequate parking should be available.

V. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

After examining the potential alternatives, it is recommended that Option 4 be pursued. This option would strike the best balance between meeting the needs of the public, making the current system more manageable for Bylaw Enforcement and maintaining a reasonable cost.

In addition, pursuing this option also helps deal with the issues raised from the survey responses of the public and stakeholder groups. Fenced areas and improved bylaw enforcement were the top issues raised by the respondents, both of which could be improved by adopting Option 4. Increased signage was also a fairly popular response, and installing signs in designated off-leash areas deals with this issue as well. Although survey results reveal that residents are split in terms of whether or not current needs are being met, very few respondents commented that they would like to see the off-leash areas left as they currently are. Overall, pursuing Option 4 has the most potential to meet the needs of the community and increase the public awareness of these areas.

Implementing Option 4 also better aligns the City with the practices identified by those communities contacted as part of this report. General practice around the Province is to designate a number of areas around the city as off-leash, and then signing these areas as such. These areas are supplemented by fully fenced areas, which have been incredibly popular since they provide dog owners with a more secure option for letting their dogs run off-leash.

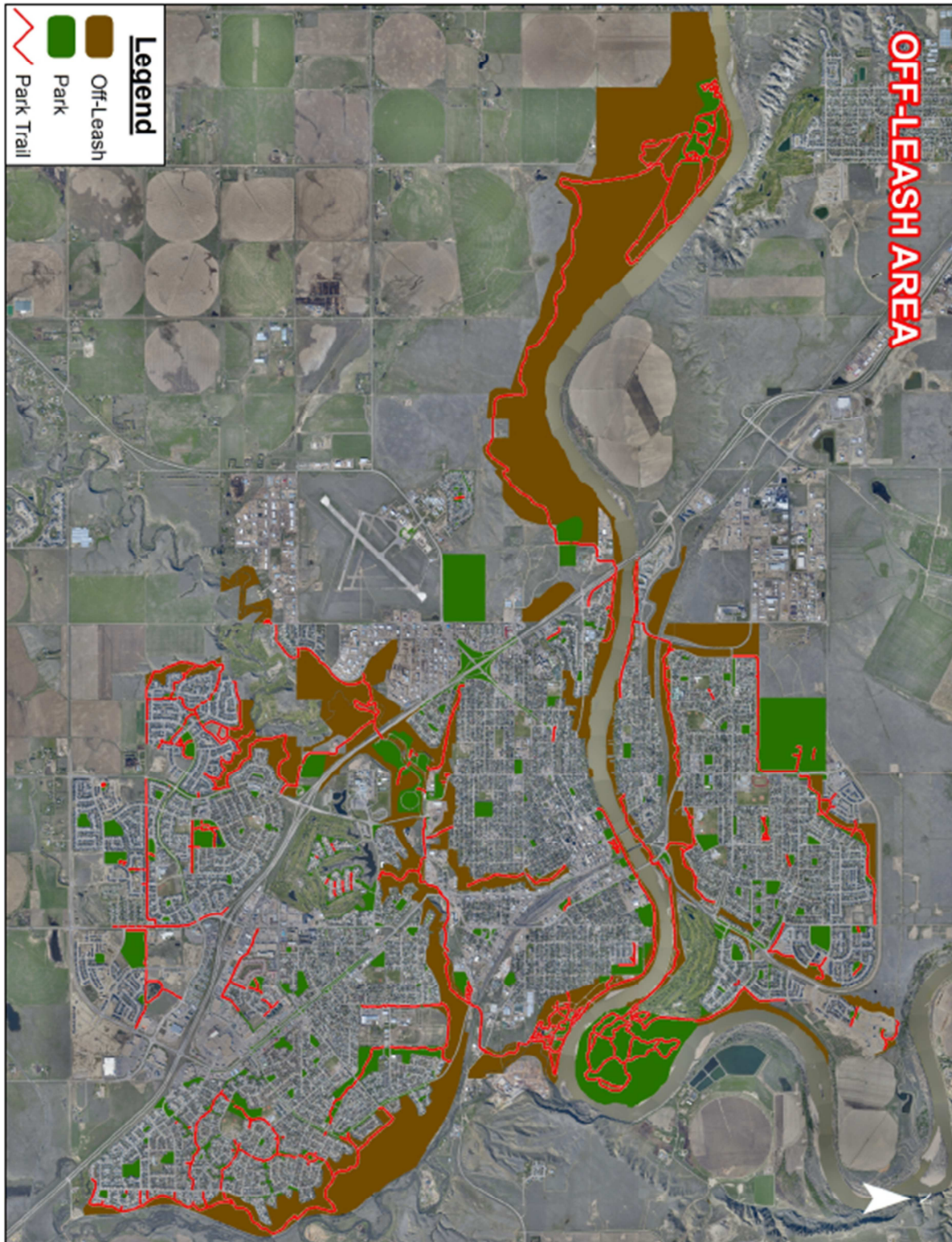
Finally, as the city expands and development commences, the creation of new off-leash areas should be considered in future planning. This will help ensure that as the city grows, the needs of the community in relation to off-leash areas can continue to be met.

a. Implementation Plan

1. Presentation of the report and recommended off-leash areas to the Administrative Committee.
2. Presentation of the report and recommended criteria to the Public Services Committee in open session for recommendation to City Council.
3. Subject to Public Services Committee review and concurrence, presentation of the report to the Urban Environment and Recreation Advisory Board.
4. Presentation of the report and recommended criteria to City Council for approval.
5. Presentation of dedicated off-leash areas 2012 – 2014 capital budget submission for consideration.

6. Subject to budget approval designation and development of new off-leash areas, and the phasing out some of the existing areas.
7. Preparation of a Communication Plan and extensive public education program to make residents aware of the changes to off-leash areas in the city.
8. Continued analysis of potential sites for future fully fenced off-leash areas.

APPENDIX A: Current Dog Off-Leash Areas



APPENDIX B: Proposed Dog Off-Leash Areas

