

Proposal Regarding Use of Brooke Street and/or Porter Parks

Introduction

We are a group of more than 35 Fairfield dog owners who are seeking support to continue the inclusive and mutually supportive community we have built by gathering daily with our dogs for leash-optional meet-ups at Brooke Street and Porter Parks. We include singles, seniors, widows, parents and children, renters and homeowners. Different groups meet at different times - currently there is one group that meets daily at 5pm about which someone has complained to animal control, which has prompted this proposal.

Background

- For over 14 years, dog owners have gathered in the Brooke Street and Porter Parks to meet with their neighbours and socialize their dogs.
- Most of the people who use the park with their dogs live in the immediate neighbourhood and enjoy walking to and from the park with their pets.
- Dog owners using the parks are self-policing, including ensuring dog waste is picked up, that dogs are well behaved, and picking up garbage or litter left by others.
- Dog owners appreciate connecting with non-dog owners who also use the park, and strive to be considerate and respectful, including checking in with other users to ensure dogs are not a problem for them and leaving if another group needs the use of the park. For example, over the past year the evening ultimate players and the dog owners have peacefully co-existed through good communication and mutual respect.
- These kind of informal dog meet-ups are common in parks throughout Greater Victoria.

Community Impact

- These informal daily meet-ups are more than just a chance to let dogs exercise:
 - They encourage dog owners to get outside and be more active by going for a walk every day. Some people regularly go for a group leashed walk with their dogs after a play in the field.
 - Experienced dog owners share their experience and provide advice, helping to ensure that dogs are well behaved and that new owners are responsible and have the skills they need to be good pet guardians.
 - Parents who do not have dogs sometimes bring their children to meet the dogs.
 - People share excess produce from their gardens and fruit from their trees.
 - Friendships are formed between neighbours who otherwise would not have met.
 - There is a true sense of community and connection.
- Particularly during COVID, these daily meet-ups at Brooke Street and Porter Parks have filled an important need:

- For those who live alone, they would often comment that it was the only time in the day when they saw or spoke to anyone.
- The parks are large enough to allow for social distancing, increasing comfort being around others, and particularly important for those who are seniors.
- People who had formed connections at the meet-ups offered support and help to their neighbours, such as offering to pick up groceries for seniors.
- Once permitted by public health, the group had 2 outdoor potlucks at the park, including sharing food with neighbours who walked by and some ultimate players who had arrived early for a game happening that evening.
- The antics of the puppies and children have lifted our spirits and improved our mental health during times of stress and anxiety.
- Numerous research studies show pet ownership in communities raises social capital and civic engagement, and increases loose ties, connections among individuals and perceptions of neighborhood friendliness and cohesion.

Proposal

We propose that leash-optional times be established at Brooke Street and/or Porter Parks from 6-10am and 5-7pm daily, to be in effect if the field is not being used by permit holders. Closure of the field by the City for maintenance or due to field conditions would also preclude use by dog owners. We would be happy to have this done on a pilot basis, and note that there is precedent in the three pilot areas currently in place according to the [City of Victoria's Paws in Parks page](#).

Our group of dog owners is willing to take responsibility for communicating with other dog owners using the park to ensure responsible use and cooperative sharing of space with others in the neighbourhood.

We are proposing this solution because the costs will be minimal and the last 14 years of park use indicate it can work. We would be happy to work with the Fairfield Gonzales Community Association or City of Victoria on other longer term initiatives to support responsible dog ownership and increased community connections.

We are using [Windsor Park in Oak Bay](#) as our model – the Oak Bay website says:

Dogs are allowed to be off leash on the playing fields in the park if the field is not being used by permit holders and only during the following times:

1. between sunrise and 9 o'clock a.m. on any day from July 1st to August 31st in any year; and
2. between sunrise and 11 o'clock a.m. on any day from September 1st to June 30th provided, however, that the dog must nevertheless remain at all times under the full custody and control of a competent person.

Windsor Park is used by a very active and organized dog-walking group that utilizes the fields in the early morning hours for off-leash exercise for dogs. This group has taken

responsibility for ensuring communication with other dog users of the park and has created a website promoting responsible use of parks by dogs.

Dogs are not allowed in the Rose Garden, children's play area, or in Windsor Pavilion at any time.

Petition

We have started a petition as one mechanism for community members to get involved. We wanted to provide a way for others, including our neighbours who do not own dogs, to express their support for our proposal. We are pleased to share that 245 community members have signed the petition as of February 20, 2021. [The petition is available online](#) for your viewing.

Alignment with Fairfield Gonzales Community Association (FGCA)

We feel our proposal is aligned with the interest in creating additional off-leash areas expressed by the FGCA. On October 5, 2021, the FGCA Board sent a [letter to Mayor and Council with a list of priority inputs for consideration for the City of Victoria's 2022 Financial Plan](#), including:

Park and Greenspace Priorities for the Fairfield Gonzales Neighbourhood for 2022 Financial Plan

1. Work with residents to undertake a Park Review for the Fairfield Gonzales neighbourhood, with adequate resources, for the purpose of: (1) improving access to parks in under-served areas with larger populations; and (2) creating additional off-leash areas.

Alignment with City of Victoria Strategic Plan Objectives

We feel that our proposal meets with several objectives and measurable outcomes identified in the [City of Victoria's Strategic Plan](#), specifically:

Strategic Objective Five: Health, Well-Being and a Welcoming City (pg 29)

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

- › Increase in number of people who feel safe and part of the community
- › Increase in people accessing nature
- › Increase in number of people who are more active, including increase in registrations in the City's recreational programs

Strategic Objective Eight: Strong, Liveable Neighbourhoods (pg 43)

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

- › People feel listened to and consulted about what makes a neighbourhood distinctive
- › People feel that their neighbourhood is safe and walkable
- › Increase number of people walking compared to other modes of getting around within neighbourhoods
- › All neighbourhoods are thriving, distinctive, appealing, viable and have amenities

Conclusion

Please help us in maintaining the supportive and inclusive community we have developed. We value the connections we have made, and the sense of belonging and community they give us, made even more important during the pandemic. We believe that all community members, including dog owners, can share space in public parks with mutual respect and civility, and that there are significant benefits to the community when we do so.

Appendix: Some Letters and Emails from Supporters (copies have been sent directly to Mayor and Councillors individual email addresses - other letters/emails will have been sent directly, as well)

Letter from Anne Mullens

Re: Pilot project off-leash hours at Brooke Field/Porter Park

I am writing in support of establishing a pilot project to have designated off-leash times at Brooke Field or Porter Park in Fairfield. I am part of a group of responsible, neighborhood dog owners requesting that City Council enable a trial of designated off-leash hours in either park from 6-10 am and 5 -7 pm daily, when the parks are not being used by permit holders and as field conditions permit.

If successful, our pilot model could be applied to other neighborhood parks to create more liveable, healthy, and connected communities across Victoria.

In this letter I will stress two important features of enabling small, neighborhood, dog-friendly off-leash gatherings in either park:

1. the building of neighborhood social capital through a small, well managed, time-limited group-run site, and
2. the reduced reliance on cars to drive to other dog-friendly sites (where social capital is not created.)

I will then explain how I experienced these two myself, with our new puppy during the pandemic after 30 years of living in Victoria.

Building Social Capital

US sociologist Robert Putnum first lamented the collapse of community in his ground-breaking 1995 *Bowling Alone* and coined the term social capital to describe the connections among individuals and their social networks, and the feelings of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from those connections. Most simply, social capital has been described as the “glue” that holds society together.

Many studies have since explored what creates greater social capital and what diminishes it. As Council has recognized already, getting people out of their cars, and walking and meeting outside of the four walls of their homes builds social capital.

[Studies](#) have found that dog ownership is significantly associated with higher levels of social capital. The results are not confined to dog owners, as they interact with others while out and about. Their presence increases neighborhood friendliness and trustworthiness that benefits all who live there. They are the eyes and ears of the neighborhood, they facilitate daily interactions.

Dogs and their owners can be powerful conduits for building social capital, but are often seen instead by city councils (and those who are afraid of dogs) as a problem to be constrained rather than an asset to be developed and supported.

By supporting a pilot project at Brooke Field, you would be conducting a valuable experiment in building social capital that can then, if successful, be applied to other neighborhood parks.

Reducing reliance on cars in Victoria

Victoria city council has spent a great deal of time, money, and effort to reduce the dominance of the car in the city. You have facilitated increased, safer use of bicycles and increased the walkability scores of neighborhoods.

It makes no sense therefore to force the thousands of dog owners, who must walk their pets twice a day, to get into their cars to drive to the increasingly diminished number of sites that are friendly to dogs, where social capital cannot be built nor helpful connections made.

Local neighborhood parks are within short walkable distances, sitting empty for a good part of the day, where local dog owners can connect and support neighbors, and support greater connections in their immediate communities.

My personal experience

I have personally experienced and benefited from this increased social connection and reduced car use through our pandemic puppy, Alfie, who we got in January 2021.

I have lived in the same house in Fairfield for 30 years and am an outgoing, friendly individual. But while I knew my immediate neighbors, I never knew any of the people who lived further down the block or on other streets. (I even canvassed for the Cancer Society and Heart and Stroke Foundation, and volunteered as part of the neighborhood emergency preparedness, but these efforts were not very successful because I did not know my neighbors. I was a stranger knocking on the door.)

During a time of tremendous isolation and stress during the pandemic, our new energetic puppy brought us out and about meeting our neighbors. We discovered early in January the wonderful 5 pm get-together of dogs and owners at Brooke Field, that had been happening without incident for more than a decade. We attended it every day we could from January 7 2021 until it was shut down by animal control in October 2021.

Here are some of the benefits I experienced:

- I walked every day to the park and almost never got in my car to drive Alfie to a dog-friendly location. Since October, however, I am driving three or more times a week so that Alfie can get the runs and playtime he needs. (And I am not connecting in the same way with others at these other sites.)
- I now know by name more 50 neighbors (and their dogs); I have emails, I know where they live. I have had conversations with them all. I know their circumstances and can support them, such as a personal health struggle, a charity they support, or a need they are trying to fill (ie dog walkers, an apartment for a friend etc.)
- My mother was terminally ill in 2021 and I had to fly back to Ontario a few times for extended absences. The group supported my emotional needs during her illness and then my grieving after her death; helped walk and look after Alfie in my absence, and supported my husband with friendship and dinner invites while I was away.
- We held two potlucks among the dog group in the field in the summer of 2021. This was the only social engagement/sharing of food I'd had up to that time during the pandemic. It was a fabulous connection with more than 30 people attending.
- More experienced dog owners helped us train and socialize Alfie, especially as he went through an adolescent male phase of trying to assert his dominance. He has become a much better behaved and socialized pup, and we became much better owners, from the wisdom and consistency of the group.
- The group transcends ages, life and health situations, economic classes, ethnicities, politics, physical abilities. It is the most inclusive, supportive neighborhood group I have ever experienced. Deep friendships have been created among people that I might never have met. We have each other's back.
- We know the dogs and how they relate to each other, which gives greater safety for our dog as he develops. We can control and anticipate any difficult interactions and mediate to resolve them (or separate the dogs before they meet.) We all make sure dogs' excrement is picked up and discarded. Together, we make each of us better dog owners with better, happier dogs.

I want to stress that this sort of connection does not happen to the same extent simply passing another dog walker on leash through the streets. And it never happens at the Dallas Rd off-leash area.

We take Alfie to Dallas Rd often (he is a very energetic terrier cross and needs to run.) People don't stand around and talk, day after day, at the same time, sharing stories and connections, trading names and emails.

Plus the huge numbers of dogs at Dallas Rd is overwhelming and the mix of dogs and people a bit scary for all. We have had random dogs suddenly behave very aggressively, without warning towards Alfie. While the dogs do get their exercise, but the owners do not build community social capital and get the relaxing break of a supportive network of neighbors. I find Dallas Rd to be a very stressful experience.

The intimate, small neighborhood gathering at Brooke Field breeds connection, trust, and community. Small is manageable and beautiful.

A limited time for dogs and owners at local small parks is a model that can be applied to other neighborhoods to create this valuable connection.

I urge you to help us build greater social capital and less reliability on the car for dog owners and support our pilot for Brooke Field or Porter Park. It can be studied and tweaked to get the maximum benefits for the whole community, and then applied to other local parks.

Sincerely,

Anne Mullens

1326 Thurlow Rd.

Letter from Neil Medcalf

Dear Mayor and City Council Members:

This letter is in support our proposal for off-leash times at Brooke Field. I understand our members are now beginning to send in emails of support before some of us present our proposal to City Council on Feb 24th. I would like to explain why this small group of approximately 30 dog owners is perusing this matter before City Council. We are looking for a unique solution to our field of choice and do not wish to see a city park wide re-evaluation which would not necessarily work for us. Or our own solution work for the other parks. A re-evaluation would inevitably lead to delays in any implementation of our proposal.

I am a mental health sufferer who has suffered for over 20 years. A deep depression and anxiety has recently forced me to take the last two years off of work while I worked with a therapist to crawl my way out of the depths. While in therapy my therapist suggested an emotional support dog. To acquire a trained dog would have cost more money and time than I could afford in dollars or time. As a result we settled for a regular pet. This was not without its own difficulties as our first attempt ended with the death of our first dog in just 6 months as she passed away with liver failure. We pressed on and were offered another dog that was to be born just a couple months later.

Early last spring as my new dog of 4 months and I were walking about our neighbourhood, we came across this group who have been meeting at Brooke Field for the past several years. This was the perfect opportunity to socialize my dog Finnegan with other young dogs and dogs of all sizes. The group is small and never seemed to exceed 18 or so dogs. The dogs all got along extremely well and more so the people were ever to so kind and inviting to me and my puppy. None of the dogs where loud, out of control or running off. The other owners were watching all the dogs and if one of the dogs left a deposit and the owner didn't see it, the group would notify the owner, or even pick it up themselves.

I kept returning to Brooke Field every day as I felt welcomed by the members and Finnegan was learning to play with the other dogs in a gentle playful manor instead of being attacked by other bigger dogs. By the end of the summer I had made excellent strides forward with my mental health thanks to my dog and these few dog owners who so warmly welcomed me into their group.

Since late this fall after our group was broken up by animal control I have been forced to take my dog elsewhere for his exercise. We've tried all the dog parks in Victoria and those in Sidney as well. Our closest alternative has been Dallas road. While Dallas road has a number of dogs I have yet to meet anyone more than once or twice there. Those I do meet are there for their own exercise and not the dogs. People will say hello, but will continue on their way. They don't stop to let their dogs play with others.

I strongly feel that a completely new look should be given at dog parks in Victoria, considering the closing of other dog parks and beaches. A study of Sidney's Cy Hampson park being a good starting point. I feel that what has been happening and will continue to do so at Brooke field, which is a unique gathering of a special group of dog owners and dog's that all have become friends is not likely to be able to be replicated elsewhere.

I would like to continue to bring my Finnegan to meet these wonderful people and dogs at Brooke Field with off-leash permission from the City. It will continue being of great benefit to my personal mental health and those of others that I know meet there as well. Please approve of our modest plan of allowing off-leash times at Brooke Field immediately, if only for a trail period.

Sincerely

Neil Medcalf and his dog Finnegan.

Letter from Elizabeth Westlake

RE: Pilot Project for off leash hours at Brooke field

Firstly, thank you for your service to the City of Victoria and thank you for taking the time to read this letter requesting change to By-law 11-044. I'm adding my voice to the group promoting off leash hours for dogs at Brooke field. I am a resident of Fairfield since 1983 and while not currently a dog owner, I have enjoyed canine companionship with 3 dogs over the years.

I invite you to consider that a neighbourhood pup hub as outlined in our group's presentation could serve as a **best practices model for similar hubs in other neighbourhoods** with shared green space. Small local pup hubs may show to take the pressure off the few remaining off-leash areas available to dog owners. It would certainly reduce the number of unwelcome dog/human interactions that increases the pressure for action from city decision makers. While building fences is one way to go to address a problem, this grassroots initiative fosters

neighbourliness, builds community and addresses a number of challenges precipitated by two years of pandemic.

The Fairfield Community Association has endorsed this proposal and hopefully you have received this acknowledgment from their Board. I'm sure that within our group a member would gladly step up be the liaison for the FCA and/or the Animal Control department to monitor and assess the success of a pilot project.

Thank you in advance for your swift attention to our request.

Letter from Karlyn Jones

Increase Off leash times for dogs at Victoria parks - Make Victoria Dog Friendly

Healthy urban living has many aspects. Under council leadership the city has increased urban biking commuting access.

Now it is time to support healthy living by facilitating ways to living peacefully with each other and our pets.

Start with more off leash times at parks including Brooks Park and on beaches (yes, I am aware of migratory birds but a deeper dive into the research does shows complete bans are not necessary.)

In Canada, 57 per cent of households own pets and the overall population of dogs and cats is about 14 million. That's a lot of dogs. And ownership is growing.

A fearful dog can cause problems is more likely when not socialized to other dogs and exercised.

It is in all our interest to have areas where dogs can socialize and exercise.

This can be done by listening to responsible dog owners who are asking Victoria council to create more opportunity for dog positive space,

Start with more off leash times and locations like at Brooks Parks.

Karolyn Jones

625 Linden Ave

Victoria

Letter from Samantha Hulme & Edward Wright

Proposal requesting pilot project to amend the Animal Responsibility By-law 11-044 to permit specific leash-optional times at Brooke and/or Porter Parks

First off, thank you for your service to our community. By way of introduction, my husband and I have lived at 1404 Brooke Street directly across from Brooke Park for 11 years, and had a dog for 6 of those years.

Three members of our Fairfield community will be addressing Council on this pilot by law amendment request on February 24th. Below please see the email that we wrote to you last November seeking your support for this proposal. Since that time, we have presented to and received the support of the Fairfield Gonzales Community Association, from whom you should have received a letter of support. We would welcome further dialogue on this issue including welcoming you to visit the park and meet some of the dog owners supporting this proposal.

November 27th, 2021 email

We are writing as a members of the group of more than 35 responsible Fairfield dog owners who are seeking an amendment to Schedule A of the Animal Responsibility BYLAW NO.11-044 (posted at Brooke Field as BYLAW 91-19) to permit leash-optional times between 6 and 10 am, and 5 and 7 pm daily, in Brooke Street and/or Porter Parks, when not in use by a permit holder, and when field conditions permit. This request borrows from the successful model in use at Windsor Park in Oak Bay and would support the continued inclusive and mutually supportive community we have built by gathering daily with our dogs for leash-optional meetups at these parks.

Our group includes singles, seniors, widows, people with mobility challenges, parents and children, renters, homeowners, puppies and senior dogs. This joyful, socially distanced, safe gathering in nature has become critical to the mental health and wellbeing of the dog owners, many of whom live alone and experience loneliness and isolation, particularly over the past 20 months of living with Covid. In fact, at least 10 people in the group sought out and acquired their dogs during Covid.

We can assure you that our group are responsible dog owners, most of whom live in the immediate neighbourhood and walk to the parks. We strive to be respectful of passers-by and other park users and educate the new dog owners and their dogs about appropriate behavior. One of the main rules that we are all adamant about is that owners pick up after their dogs. On rare occasions when there have been minor incidents or conflicts between dogs, the matters have been settled responsibly and owners do not bring their dogs back to the off leash group if they can't behave.

Our group has been in touch with Vanya McDonell at the Fairfield Gonzales Community Association and will be making a presentation to the Association at their next available meeting, December 6th. Included in the presentation is a petition in support of the by-law amendment signed by over 175 local people.

As you are aware, this fall dog owners have lost access to Willows and Gonzales beaches, where we were able to take our dogs for off leash play October 1 - April 1. This has had a tremendous detrimental impact on dog owners – it had been one of the truly special things about where we live, to be able to take our dogs to play at the beaches through the fall and winter, happily surrendering the beach to other users in the spring/summer.

Similarly, about 2 years ago, we lost access to the University of Victoria dog park – which had also been a wonderful resource for off leash dogs and their owners. As a result, there are very few places for dogs to be able to run off leash, exercise that many of the dogs need in order to be healthy and manageable in their homes. While Windsor Park, Pemberton Park and Dallas Road are options, they are not accessible except by car for most of us. Driving to these parks negates the environmental and health benefits of walking to our local park. Additionally, Pemberton Park already has their own community, and cannot accommodate more dogs in that relatively small space. Dallas Road, though larger, also has a large number of dogs from a number of areas and multiple activities underway. Familiarity amongst our dog group is an important factor as we are able to help each other manage our dogs and ensure good behavior, particularly important for our seniors and mobility challenged folks. As Dallas Road undulates, that presents an additional accessibility barrier for these folks.

As we live directly across from the park, and are retired, I can tell you that dog owners are the group that make the most use of the park - year round. After sports wrap up in the fall until they start up again in the spring - no one uses the park, other than dog owners. During the spring - fall sports season, dog owners yield the park to the ultimate frisbee players, soccer players and baseball players, whether they have permits to be in the park or not, and are respectful of picnic groups. There is a wonderful community rhythm to our park use.

We understand that there was a complaint made last fall about bylaw violation. We don't know the nature of the complaint, but we believe that a bylaw amendment pilot project could promote safe and healthy shared use of the park for all. We feel our proposal is aligned with the interest in creating additional off-leash areas expressed by the FGCA in their October 5, 2021 [letter to Mayor and Council with a list of priority inputs for consideration for the City of Victoria's 2022 Financial Plan](#), including:

Park and Greenspace Priorities for the Fairfield Gonzales Neighbourhood for 2022 Financial Plan

1. Work with residents to undertake a Park Review for the Fairfield Gonzales neighbourhood, with adequate resources, for the purpose of: (1) improving access to parks in underserved areas with larger populations; and (2) creating additional off-leash areas.

We also feel that our proposal meets with several objectives and measurable outcomes identified in the [City of Victoria's Strategic Plan](#), specifically:

Strategic Objective Five: Health, Well-Being and a Welcoming City (pg 29)

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

- › Increase in number of people who feel safe and part of the community
- › Increase in people accessing nature
- › Increase in number of people who are more active, including increase in registrations in the City's recreational programs

Strategic Objective Eight: Strong, Liveable Neighbourhoods (pg 43)

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

- › People feel listened to and consulted about what makes a neighbourhood distinctive
- › People feel that their neighbourhood is safe and walkable
- › Increase number of people walking compared to other modes of getting around within neighbourhoods
- › All neighbourhoods are thriving, distinctive, appealing, viable and have amenities

We have seen firsthand and experienced ourselves the mental and physical health benefits of gathering with this group. It has encouraged all of us to get outside and be more active by walking to the park, and even doing a group leashed walk after the dogs have burned off some energy. Of great significance is that some of the people who live alone have confided that these meetups were the only time they saw or spoke to anyone that day.

We would like to share a few more notes about how the off leash group has created and strengthened community connections:

- Families who do not have dogs have brought their children to meet the dogs.
- The group has shared excess produce from their gardens and fruit from their trees.
- Friendships are formed between neighbours who otherwise would not have met.
- We have assisted our neighbours in their attempts to find jobs and accommodation, groceries and meals when in need
- Once permitted by public health, the group had 2 outdoor potlucks at the park, including sharing food with neighbours who walked by and some ultimate frisbee players who had arrived early for a game happening that evening.
- The antics of the puppies and children have lifted our spirits and improved our mental health during times of stress and anxiety.

Numerous research studies have shown that pet ownership in communities raises social capital and civic engagement, and increases loose ties, connections among individuals and perceptions of neighborhood friendliness and cohesion. My husband and I had lived here 5 years before we got our dog, and although we knew our immediate neighbours, it was only after

getting our dog that we met the wonderful group of about 35 neighbours we now regard as friends.

Please help us in maintaining the supportive and inclusive community we have developed. We value the connections we have made, and the sense of belonging and community they give us, made even more important during the pandemic. We believe that all community members, including dog owners, can share space in public parks with mutual respect and civility, and that there are significant benefits to the community when we do so.

We would very much appreciate your support, and we would welcome an opportunity to meet with you to discuss further.

Sincerely,

Samantha Hulme and Edward Wright

