

Will Stouffville also lap up a dog park?

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A pocket full of treats and a tennis ball will make you the pack leader of any dog park.

While dogs relish being free of their tether, their owners always have one eye on their dog and the other on the look out for people who aren't amused by 90-pound dogs jumping all over them in jubilation of being leash-free.

But now, dogs all over York Region have places they can call their own.

Leash-free dog parks have been created in Richmond Hill, Markham, Vaughan and Aurora and one in Georgina is in the planning stages.

"(Dogs) are considered family members," said Beverly Kolb, owner of Keswick's Global Pet Foods and a member of Georgina's off-leash dog park volunteer planning committee. "I think (an off-leash park) is becoming rapidly an expectation of residents now. Through taxes, residents expect it now the way parents expect parks for children."

MARKHAM FIRST WITH DOG PARK

Markham was the first municipality in York Region to build an off-leash dog park.

In 2001, the municipality put a dog park by the Milne Dam Conservation Area.

"It was popular amongst people who owned dogs, but not residents," said Alan Glushko, chairperson of Leash-Free Markham and the Miller Avenue Dog Group.

Instead of abandoning the concept of a dog park all together, the municipality found a new location, one far removed from residential neighbourhoods.

A two-hectre piece of land along the hydro corridor on Miller Avenue, just south of Hwy. 7 and west of Woodbine Avenue, has been a leash-free haven for area dogs since 2003.

The town owns the property, however, the park is operated by a group of volunteers.

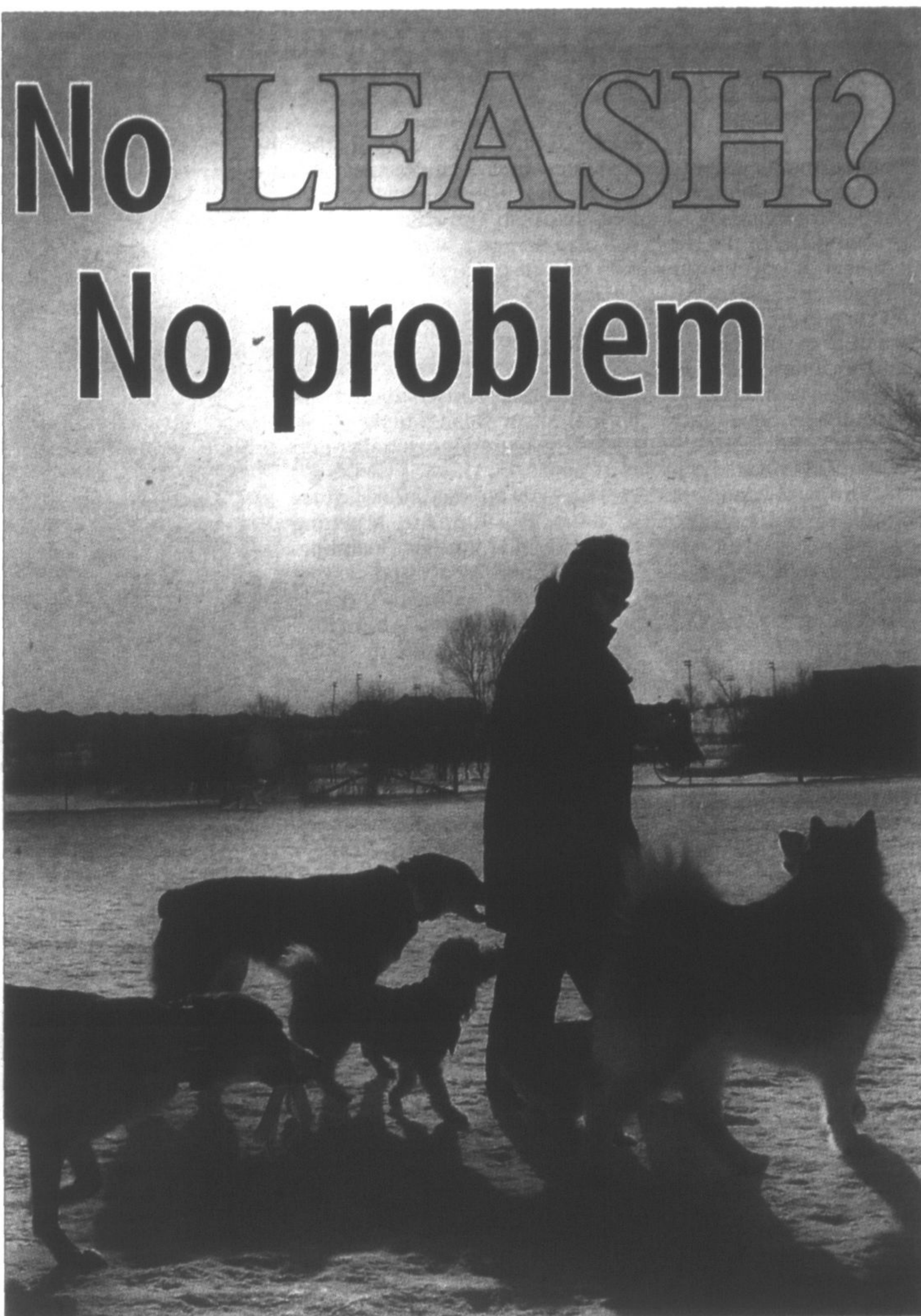
"It's an absolute success how we work with the city," Mr. Glushko said.

When the park was first created, farm fencing with holes wide enough for a crafty canine to escape through bounded the park that was little more than a piece of dirt.

Through donations, membership fees and fundraising, there is now a chain-link fence surrounding the park, a double-gated entrance, wooden shelters for the humans, an agility area and a permanent water line into the park for year-round hydration.

About 20 to 30 dogs use the park daily.

"It's not exactly scenic, but it's fenced, a



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Pennie Schade has a collection of friends following her as she strolls about the Aurora Canine Commons. Whitchurch-Stouffville council is considering a leash-free dog park.

good size and not too muddy," said Sheila Whittingham, who has been bringing her English field setters, Riley and Millie, to the park since September.

Despite the cold temperatures this month, about 10 men, along with Ms Whittingham

and their canines, took to the park. Groups of two to three men huddled together conversing about guy things, while their Labs, huskies and mutts chased each other, tennis balls and their tails that were wagging double-time.

No LEASH? No problem

The Miller Avenue Dog Group has about 400 members who voluntarily pay \$20 a year to use the park.

"People are glad to help out. It's cheaper than coffee to come to the park," Mr. Glushko said.

There are an additional 200 to 300 dog owners who also use the park, but don't pay the fee.

"It's a little more than a small interest group," Mr. Glushko said.

About eight months ago, Vaughan's off-leash park finally opened after years of planning. The park is at the east end of Concord Thornhill Regional Park.

It, too, is run by a group of volunteers. "They are the real dog lovers," said Vaughan Councillor Sandra Yeung Racco.

Mrs. Racco's husband, Mario, can often be found at the park with the couple's two-year-old golden retriever Lucky.

"Right now, I have not heard anything bad. I believe the people using it are very happy," Mrs. Racco said.

One municipality where the off-leash dog park has raised some hackles is in Richmond Hill.

"All day, in the evening, on weekends, the noise is non-stop," said Laima Slizauskas, who lives near the park.

STOUFFVILLE SITE

"Barking. Owners calling dogs. Much of the park is located on the crest of the hill and the surrounding valley acts as an amphitheatre into my yard."

In October, a pilot park spanning 7,500 square metres, with a separate area for very small dogs, opened on Tower Hill Road near Yonge Street.

"It really isn't noisy," said Sid Fischburg, spokesperson for the Richmond Hill K9 Club, which operates the park. "If you look at the number of people (and dogs) using the park and running around and having fun, it's just amazing."

"You're always going to get people complaining about something, no matter what."

Avoiding a situation like the one in Richmond Hill will be top of mind when Whitchurch-Stouffville's staff report on a potential site for a dog park in the municipality comes to council within the next few months.

This is the second time a leash-free park has been entertained in town. The first occurred about 10 years ago when a group of residents lobbied council.

"The town just didn't want it," said Christel Hawkins, a resident who was part of the committee lobbying council years ago.

"It's a shame we don't have a dog park."
— with files from Adam Mclean

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