



# **DOGS IN OPEN SPACES STRATEGY:**

A 10-YEAR STRATEGY TO GUIDE THE  
PLANNING, DESIGN AND MANAGEMENT  
OF OFF LEASH AREAS IN EDMONTON

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**    JANUARY 2016

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The City of Edmonton's existing dog off leash policy originated in the 1990s, and came about in response to public interest in creating dog Off Leash Areas (OLAs). Edmonton's 40 existing Off Leash Areas have been established over time on an ad hoc basis, mostly in response to public requests. The City's initiation of the Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy recognizes the need to review and update Edmonton's current policies and practices. The development of this Strategy reflects best practices in off leash dog areas from across North America, current City policies, and integrates valuable input from the public, City staff (planners, biologists, operations staff), and people who work with dogs (e.g. Edmonton Humane Society, dog behaviourists).

## RATIONALE FOR DOG OFF LEASH AREAS

With an increasing population of dogs in cities, and with more Canadian households having dogs than children, there is growing demand for cities to accommodate residents and their dogs in public places. Many municipalities are recognizing dog Off Leash Areas as legitimate uses of public parks with potential benefits to dog owners and to the city more broadly. For example, Off Leash Areas can foster healthy activity and social well being, can provide increased "eyes on the park" to deter crime, and can reduce unsanctioned off leash activity in more sensitive sites. At the same time, problems with dog waste, noise, and conflicts with other park uses need to be mitigated at Off Leash Areas. Careful planning, design and management is critical to ensure that the benefits of Off Leash Areas outweigh their drawbacks.

## RELEVANT POLICIES

A number of current City policies have been referenced and incorporated into the Dogs in Open Spaces Strategy Technical Report, to ensure the recommendations are consistent with existing policies and initiatives that are under development. Policies that are applicable to dogs off leash include:

- Animal Licensing and Control Bylaw C13145 (consolidated in February 2010)
- Natural Area Systems Policy C531 (amended June 2007)
- Natural Connections Strategic Plan (2007)
- North Saskatchewan River Area Redevelopment Plan (Bylaw 7188) (consolidated July 2012)
- Open Space Master Plan (under development)

- Parkland Bylaw C2202 (consolidated November 2003)
- Ribbon of Green Concept Plan (1990) and Master Plan (1992)
- The Way We Live: Edmonton's People Plan (2010)
- The Way We Green: Edmonton's Environmental Strategic Plan (2011)
- The Way We Grow: Edmonton's Municipal Development Plan (2010)
- Urban Parks Management Plan (2006-2016)
- WinterCity Strategy (2012)

## PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Participation from the public, City staff, and people who work with dogs (e.g. Edmonton Humane Society, dog behaviourists) has been instrumental to the development of this Strategy. A first round of public, staff, and stakeholder engagement took place in May 2015, with the goal of gathering ideas and opinions about dog Off Leash Areas in Edmonton. Over 200 people participated in the interactive workshops, and over 2500 people provided input through an accompanying online survey. The input received helped shape the development of draft guidelines, which were then presented for review to the public, staff and stakeholders at a second round of engagement in June 2015. Over 70 people participated in these open houses and over 300 completed the accompanying online survey. The current recommendations reflect additional feedback received at this second round of engagement.

## SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The following pages provide a short summary of the key recommendations for Off Leash Areas in the City of Edmonton:

1. Planning recommendations
2. Design recommendations
3. Management recommendations

## PLANNING RECOMMENDATIONS

### CLASSIFICATION

- Four categories of Off Leash Area are recommended, summarized in Table 1-1.
  - Neighbourhood Off Leash Area
  - Neighbourhood Fenced Dog Park
  - District Off Leash Area
  - River Valley & Ravine Off Leash Area

### ACCESS AND PARKING

- Neighbourhood Off Leash Areas should be located along walking, biking and transit routes and use on-street parking where feasible.
- District Off Leash Areas and other higher use sites should have access from collector or arterial roads, and have off-street parking.

### DISTRIBUTION

- The target number of Neighbourhood Off Leash Areas should be determined based on population density and dog ownership numbers.
- The target number of Neighbourhood Fenced Dog Parks should be determined based on park planning objectives, land availability, demand, and fence cost recovery from the community.
- There should be one (1) District Off Leash Area per quadrant (e.g. northwest, northeast, southwest, southeast).
- There is no target for River Valley & Ravine Off Leash Areas.

### SITE USES AND ADJACENCIES

- Preferred adjacent land uses: commercial, municipal facilities, employment zones.
- Preferred land types: open space, transportation or infrastructure right-of-ways, utility right-of-ways, drainage lands, or other public land holdings.
- Incompatible site uses or adjacencies and recommended setbacks or mitigation measures: refer to Table 1-2.

### ESTABLISHING AND ELIMINATING OFF LEASH AREAS

- Triggers for the identification of a new Off Leash Area: City's identification of an underserved or high demand area, application for new development or redevelopment, or a request from the public through an application process.

- Once a general area for a potential Off Leash Area has been identified, comprehensive public engagement should be undertaken at the quadrant scale (northwest, northeast, southwest, southeast) to gauge public opinion.
- Candidate sites should be evaluated according to approved guidelines and site selection criteria.
- New sites should be established as pilot projects to allow for a period of monitoring and adjustments. Off Leash Area users should be made aware that Off Leash Areas could be closed if problems arise and cannot be resolved.
- If monitoring identifies a problem with an Off Leash Area, additional review should be done, followed by an identification of options to address the problem(s). Options may include site upgrades (e.g. additional soft or hard boundaries), more bylaw patrol or enforcement, relocation of the Off Leash Area to another site nearby, or site closure.
- Existing Off Leash Areas may be closed and/or their area reduced if they are identified to be located in an over-serviced area for Off Leash Areas.

### FUNDING

- Sites should be planned and designed to minimize capital and operating demands.
- All sites should have a standard level of amenities. Additional amenities can be considered through funding partnerships with private partners and Off Leash Area Ambassador groups.
- Additional funding sources may include private sponsorship, developer amenity contributions, increased licensing fees, user fees, and/or special grants.
- The City may wish to encourage the development of privately-run Off Leash Areas on private or privately-leased land, or at indoor sites for winter use.

## DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

### BOUNDARIES AND EDGE CONDITIONS

- All Off Leash Areas must have clearly defined and visible boundaries, which should be delineated with clear signage and “hard” and/or “soft” edges.
- Hard edges (fencing) should separate off leash dogs from incompatible or sensitive adjacent land uses where setbacks or other mitigation strategies aren’t feasible. Recommended fence height is 1.2 m (4’) with double-entry gates.
- Recommended fencing options include post and wire fencing, post and rail fencing with mesh panels, or chain link fencing with black vinyl coating.
- Fencing for River Valley and Ravine Off Leash Areas should be evaluated on a case by case basis. Fencing may be used for environmental protection and should be wildlife-friendly.
- Soft edges are recommended where possible to integrate the Off Leash Area into the surrounding site, and to reduce capital costs.
- Soft edges can be created through the use of vegetation, land forms, or other materials, such as split rail fencing or straw bales.

### AMENITIES

- Amenities for Off Leash Areas should balance demand, use patterns, distribution across sites, and available capital and maintenance resources.
- Standard amenities include waste bins, waste bag dispensers, signage, open space and trees.
- Special amenities may be considered in partnership with Off Leash Area Ambassador groups and/or private partners. Potential special amenities include: seating, drinking water, dog cleaning station, washrooms, notice boards, mix of conditions (forest, field, etc), separated areas for small (shy) dogs and large dogs, shelter structure, or lighting.

### CIRCULATION

- Include a variety of looped, shaded walking circuits that encourage owners to keep moving with their dogs.
- Primary trails should be universally accessible, and the width and surfacing of trails should be proportional to their intensity of use and operational requirements.
- An animal behaviourist should be involved in reviewing concept designs for new or redeveloped Off Leash Areas to ensure that potential points of dog conflict are mitigated.
- Circulation within the Off Leash Area should consider maintenance requirements, such as vehicle access to waste bins. Concrete or asphalt paths are optional to facilitate vehicle access.

- In shared-use areas separate trails should be provided for bikes and dogs off leash.
- Off Leash Areas should be separated from multi-use pathways. Where this is not possible a combination of hard and soft boundaries should be used to separate uses as much as possible.
- In shared-use parks access to the Off Leash Area should be provided directly from the street or parking lot.

### ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

- Ideally locate Off Leash Areas away from areas of environmental sensitivity, such as natural areas, wildlife corridors, or other important ecological areas.
- Mitigation measures may include changing Off Leash Area boundaries, establishing buffer zones and protective fencing around sensitive areas, seasonal and/or time restrictions, and managing access to water bodies.
- Dog waste and drainage need to be managed carefully to reduce negative impacts of dog waste on receiving water bodies and wildlife.

### WINTER CONSIDERATIONS

- Priority winter-access sites should be designed to create or take advantage of good winter microclimates. ‘Winter-use’ gathering areas should be close to park entries, and should have good sun exposure and be protected from winter winds.
- Vegetation and landforms can be used to create windbreaks for shelter.
- The Off Leash Area website should indicate which sidewalks and pathways in Off Leash Areas are cleared of snow, and which sites have access to year-round washrooms. The website should also provide information about the safe use of Off Leash Areas in winter.
- The City could support the creation of private indoor off leash facilities for the winter months.

### SURFACE MATERIALS

- The selection of surface materials should be guided by intensity of use, site drainage, maintenance demands, capital costs, and topography.
- Grass or other groundcover plants are recommended for large, open, well-draining areas with low intensity of use.
- Crushed stone surfacing is well-suited for pathways and areas of high use, such as entry locations.
- Concrete or asphalt are recommended for paths that are to be regularly plowed and highly used in winter, and for areas around dog wash stations or drinking fountains. Maintenance vehicle access routes can also be surfaced with concrete or asphalt in high use sites.

- Sand and pea gravel can be useful surfaces in poor-draining areas.

## **SIGNAGE**

- Signage messaging should be concise, easily readable, and presented in a hierarchical manner to emphasize priority items. Positive messaging is valued by dog owners, and can help foster compliance with the rules.
- Entry signs at Off Leash Areas should be prominently posted, and should include bylaws and code of conduct, a map of Off Leash Area boundaries, and contact information for emergencies and bylaw enforcement.
- Kiosks or notice boards should be incorporated at the main park entry or entries for City and public use.
- Educational signage can be incorporated to encourage responsible dog ownership.

## **WASTE MANAGEMENT - DESIGN ELEMENTS**

- The number and type of waste bins should be informed by demand and available maintenance resources.
- Large capacity, in-ground bins with lids are recommended as they can help reduce maintenance demands and reduce odours.
- Waste bins should be located at all park entries and at key locations throughout the park to encourage owners to pick up and dispose of dog waste. Locations should also be accessible for waste collection vehicles.
- Waste bag dispensers should be provided as a standard amenity to encourage owners to pick up dog waste.
- There should be highly visible signage to encourage owners to pick-up and properly dispose of dog waste.

## **DRAINAGE AND EROSION CONTROL**

- While Off Leash Areas are best located away from surface water and sensitive groundwater areas, they should also be designed to capture and filter runoff from the site. Runoff treatment options will depend on site topography and soil conditions.
- On well-drained sites with low water tables, runoff should be directed to infiltrate on site. On sites with high water tables and/or low infiltration rates Off Leash Area boundaries may need to be changed, or the site can be designed to direct runoff to specially-designed infiltration and/or treatment areas.
- Off Leash Areas should be located on relatively level terrain to reduce soil erosion and runoff of eroded soil. Dogs should be restricted from accessing steep slopes.
- Off Leash Areas should be regularly monitored for drainage and erosion problems and measures should be taken to address problems promptly.

## **VEGETATION**

- A diversity of vegetation conditions should be provided to create interest for both dogs and owners. Plants should be durable and non-toxic.
- Planting can be used to delineate boundaries, provide visual screening, buffer adjacent site uses, provide shelter, and create seasonal interest, while visually integrating the site with its surroundings. Planting can also be designed to support urban biodiversity.
- Areas of unmown grass or meadow can provide good opportunities and scents to engage dogs, and can reduce maintenance demands for the City
- Existing vegetation within existing or proposed Off Leash Areas should be protected from the potential impacts of off leash dog activity

## **PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY**

- Risk of conflict at Off Leash Areas can be reduced if the site is adequately sized, is located away from incompatible uses, has good circulation to disperse activity, has a variety of vegetation and terrain to break up low sightlines, has good enforcement presence, and has education programs to foster responsible dog ownership.
- In shared-use areas additional strategies should be implemented to minimize conflict, such as separation of uses, education campaigns, and improved signage.
- Public health risks from dog waste can be minimized by having good waste management strategies in place, enforcing dog waste pick up, ensuring good drainage, and educating people about the health risks.
- Off Leash Areas should also be designed using Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles, in order to promote user safety and positive site activity.

## MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

### GENERAL MAINTENANCE

- Maintenance requirements can be minimized by thoughtfully designing waste management elements and circulation, incorporating durable and well-draining surfacing, and selecting durable and easily repaired site furnishings.
- In-ground waste bins with lids are recommended to reduce collection frequency. Bins should be located along maintenance vehicle access routes, and ideally along routes with snow clearing.
- Park users, Off Leash Area Ambassadors, or private partners should be engaged in the restocking of dog waste bag dispensers.
- Incentive programs can be explored to encourage compliance with dog waste bylaws.
- The demands of vegetation management at park sites can be reduced by limiting the extent of mown grass areas. Leaving defined areas of the site unmown can increase the site's interest for dogs, while reducing maintenance demands, and potentially offering some habitat value.

### EDUCATION AND COMMUNICATIONS

- Expanded education efforts should target all park users regarding expected behaviour within shared-use spaces. In shared-use Off Leash Areas messaging at park entries should alert all park users to the possible presence of dogs, and to who has the right-of-way along the trail.
- Signage should be updated to show Off Leash Area area maps, with off-leash trails and shared-use trails (if applicable) clearly indicated.
- The Off Leash Area website should be expanded to provide more detail about the features and characteristics of each Off Leash Area (e.g. size, fencing, shared-use, amenities, trail information).
- Communication tools, such as a dog owner email list and smartphone app, can be developed to distribute information to dog owners about events, educational opportunities, Off Leash Area planning initiatives, and alerts at Off Leash Areas. The app could also be used to provide information about Off Leash Areas and to allow users to report site problems to the City.
- Educational resources can be offered through the website or through partnerships with dog welfare groups.
- Responsible pet ownership can be further promoted by the City by offering discounted licensing fees (or other incentives) to owners whose dogs have participated in a certified obedience training course, or who have passed the "Canine Good Neighbour" test.

### COMMUNITY STEWARDSHIP

- The City should build on the success of the Jackie Parker Pooch Patrol as the basis for creating Off Leash Area Ambassador groups across the City.
- It is recommended that, as a condition of establishing a new Off Leash Area, there should be the commitment of an Off Leash Area Ambassador group, similar to the requirement when establishing a new community garden in the City.
- Standard terms of reference or operating agreements should be drafted to outline the roles and responsibilities of the Off Leash Area Ambassadors, and those of the City.
- Members of Off Leash Area Ambassador groups can play an important role in promoting safety and education, such as encouraging dog owners to pick up dog waste, and handing out information brochures.

### ENFORCEMENT, RULES AND CODE OF CONDUCT

- The regular presence of bylaw officers at Off Leash Areas is recommended to provide an incentive for dog owners to follow the rules.
- Off Leash Area Ambassadors can also play a role in helping encourage dog owners to follow Off Leash Area etiquette.
- Rules should be concise, clearly stated, and easily understood. It is recommended that the City simplify and prioritize the current list of rules / code of conduct.
- Park users should be encouraged to report bylaw infractions and problems at Off Leash Areas through the City's 311 phone line or other tools to be developed (e.g. smartphone app).
- Off Leash Area rules should be promoted through annual dog licensing, vet offices, and private businesses.

### MONITORING AND EVALUATION

- Monitoring and inspections of each Off Leash Area should take place on a regular schedule.
- Keeping track of monitoring data can be facilitated by the development of an Off Leash Area evaluation checklist.
- Monitoring data should be recorded in an Off Leash Area database so that, over time, trends by Off Leash Area and across the city can be identified.
- Off Leash Area Ambassador groups and regular site users can be engaged in site monitoring as well.

TABLE 1-1. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDED TYPES OF OFF LEASH AREAS

	NEIGHBOURHOOD		DISTRICT OFF LEASH AREA	RIVER VALLEY & RAVINE OFF LEASH AREAS
	OFF LEASH AREA	FENCED DOG PARK		
<b>General description</b>	Unfenced area that serves residential neighbourhoods within walking distance. Variable sizes and surfacing options depending on level of use.	Fenced area that serves residential neighbourhoods within walking distance. Variable sizes and surfacing options depending on level of use.  Includes small, durable “urban dog parks” or “dog runs.”	A destination area with priority off leash use. Selective use of fencing may be considered.  Site may also accommodate a small Neighbourhood Fenced Dog Park.	Shared-use and relatively undeveloped area with selective fencing and special measures to protect wildlife and river valley or ravine ecosystems.  Site may also accommodate a small Neighbourhood Fenced Dog Park.
<b>Fencing / boundary strategy</b>	Generally considered an unfenced area, however, selective fencing may be considered depending on street traffic, adjacent park uses and environmental considerations. Boundaries are clearly defined and legible to all park users.  Where conflicting adjacencies occur options may include boundary review, temporary or permanent fencing, or closure/relocation.	Fenced dog parks at sites with high street traffic, incompatible or sensitive adjacent park uses, environmental considerations, or with demand for dedicated fenced areas.	Selectively fenced on a case by case basis depending on street traffic, adjacent park uses, environmental considerations, and demand for fenced Off Leash Areas. Boundaries are clearly defined and legible to all park users.  Where conflicting adjacencies occur options may include boundary review, fencing, or closure/relocation.	Selectively fenced (wildlife-friendly fencing) on a case by case basis depending on street traffic, adjacent park uses, environmental considerations, and demand for fenced Off Leash Areas. Boundaries are clearly defined and legible to all park users.  Where conflicting adjacencies occur options may include boundary review, wildlife-friendly fencing, or closure/relocation.
<b>Single use or Shared use</b>	Shared use	Dedicated off leash use	Shared use	Shared use
<b>Distribution</b>	Target number to be determined based on population density and dog ownership numbers	No target. Sites to be determined based on park planning objectives, land availability, demand, and fence cost recovery from the community.	Target 1 per district (northeast, northwest, southeast, southwest)	No target
<b>Target service area</b>	± 20 minute walk <sup>1</sup>	No target	± 20 minute drive <sup>1</sup>	No target
<b>Amenities</b>	Standard amenities <sup>3</sup>		Special amenities <sup>4</sup>	Standard amenities <sup>3</sup>
<b>Parking</b>	Street parking and use of existing parking lots where possible; limited off-street parking		Off-street parking is recommended.	Parking is adjacent to area.
<b>Recommended size</b>	From 0.2 ha (0.5 acre) to 2 ha (5 acres) <sup>2</sup> Small sites should have highly durable surfacing and fencing (e.g. “dog runs”)		From 2 ha (5 acres) to 4 ha (10 acres) <sup>2</sup>  Consideration should be given to having highly durable surfacing for any small fenced dog park areas within the District Off Leash Area	From 0.5 ha (1 acre) <sup>2</sup> - size to be based on River Valley planning objectives.
<b>Examples of candidate sites from Edmonton’s existing Off Leash Areas</b>	121 Street Prince Rupert Orval Allen Valleyview Cromdale Fraser	None currently identified	Jackie Parker (SE) Laurerdale / Grand Trunk (NW) New sites to be developed	Hermitage Park North Buena Vista Great Meadow Terwillegar Dawson Park Patricia Ravine Kennedale Ravine Mill Creek Ravine North Mill Creek Ravine South Goldbar hiking trail

1. Based on public survey respondents’ willingness to walk or drive to Off Leash Areas

2. Target sizes are based on best practices research. Actual size of Off Leash Area to be based on planning objectives and land availability, and to be reviewed on a case by case basis

3. Standard amenities (waste bins, waste bag dispensers, signage, open space and trees)

4. Special amenities (e.g. seating, drinking water, dog cleaning station, washrooms, notice boards, etc.)

**TABLE 1-2. SUMMARY OF INCOMPATIBLE OR SENSITIVE SITE USES OR ADJACENCIES AND RECOMMENDED MINIMUM SETBACKS**

LAND USE / ACTIVITY	RECOMMENDED MINIMUM SETBACK OR MITIGATION MEASURES
Residential areas (to property line) Cemeteries	100 m unless separated with berm(s), solid fencing, or other mitigation measures
Arterial roads Golf courses	50 m unless separated by fencing or other mitigation measures
Public areas that attract high concentrations of people - e.g. sites that host special events or are common tourist destinations	50 m unless separated by fencing or other mitigation measures, such as temporary fencing during special events
Multi-use trails, equestrian trails	25 m unless separated by fencing or other mitigation measures
School grounds and associated walking routes Play areas and associated walking routes Pools and splash pads Sports fields Picnic areas	Neighbourhood and District Off Leash Areas: 25 m buffer zone from activities and Off Leash Area to be partially or completely fenced if the site is within a shared-use park with any one of these activities. A band of planting is recommended around the fenced area to deter children from coming up to the fence, while still allowing views in and out of the Off Leash Area.  River Valley and Ravine Off Leash Areas: 50 m unless separated with mitigation measures
Natural areas, wildlife corridors, and otherwise environmentally sensitive areas	To be determined based on guidance from planning staff in the Parks + Biodiversity Section. May include seasonal or time restrictions, wildlife-friendly fencing, or other mitigation measures (see section 4.4 Environmental Protection)

# Dog off-leash areas in Edmonton

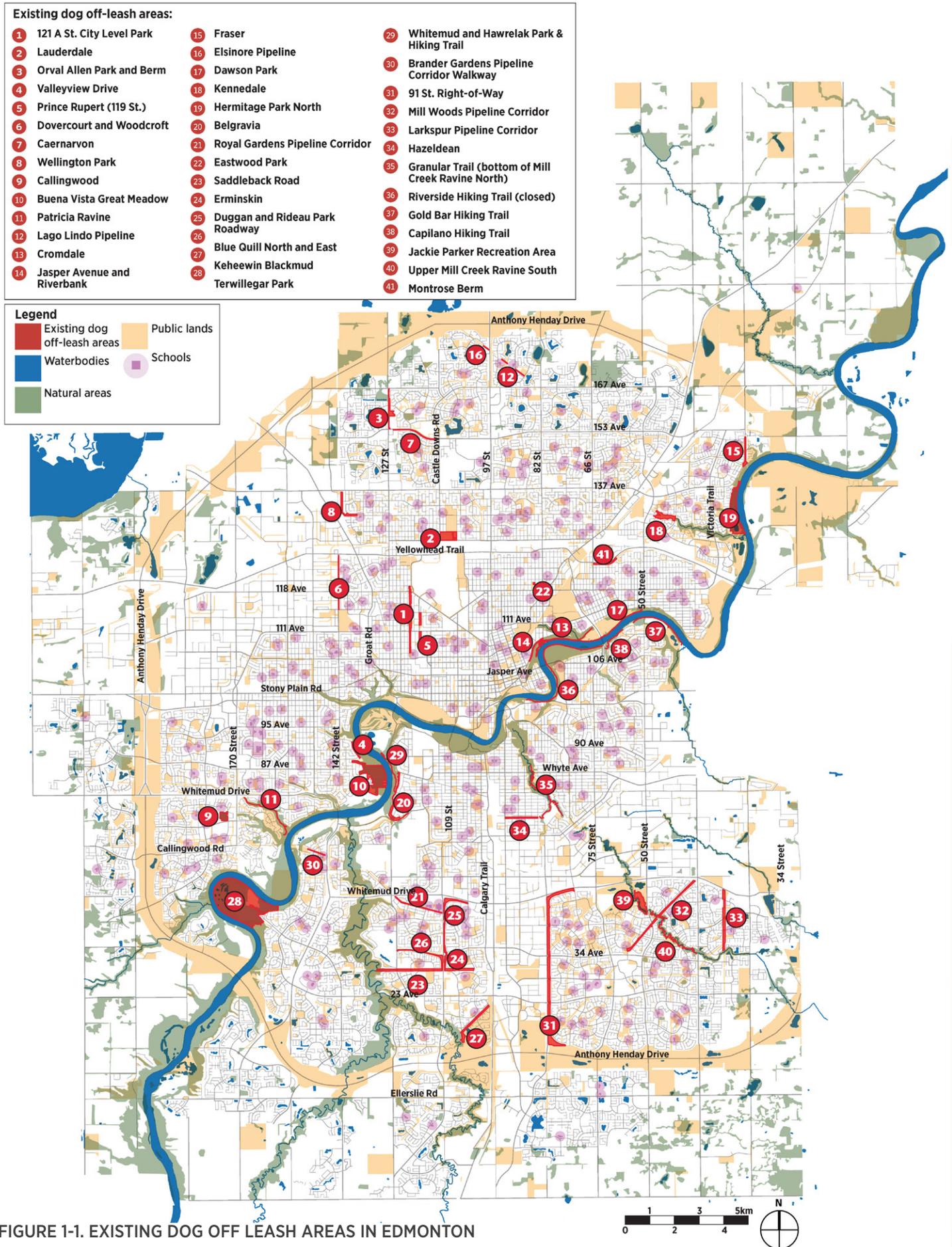


FIGURE 1-1. EXISTING DOG OFF LEASH AREAS IN EDMONTON