

Sydney's gone to the dogs

Sydney City Council's proposal to increase off-leash dog parks

Sydney City Council is currently exhibiting proposals for new locally accessible off-leash parks and modifications to the off-leash arrangements at many existing off-leash parks. Currently, only 21 parks in the Sydney local government area are off-leash and some impose time restrictions on dog owners. The Council is proposing to add another 29 parks and removing time restrictions. This would make 14% of the city's parks accessible to dog owners—currently there is a total of 350 parks of varying sizes.

Time restricted parks have often been a concern to dog-owners whose work schedules or lifestyle don't fit into the time zones enforced. For instance the times that dogs can be exercised off-leash in many cases are restricted to from 6:00pm and 8:00am. That means if you are a shift-working dog owner your window of opportunity to walk your dog is very restricted. It also makes for a gloomy dark walk during the winter months.

Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore says additional off-leash areas are important for people living with pets in the inner city. Ms Moore said it was all about educating the general community about the benefit of pets in people's lives and educating pet owners about responsible pet ownership. "This is about equity, it's about not treating dog owners as second-class citizens," she said.

She also said that increasing the number of parks will not lead to more dog attacks and has promised to increase the number of rangers to police the parks. Dogs that are off-leash must be under control by the walker.

Australia's pet care industry has supported the City of Sydney's proposal to increase the number of off-leash dog parks.

"Over 40% of Australian households own a dog, and research shows that the benefits of people exercising their dog are felt by the community as a whole, not just the individual owner and their dog," says Dr Kersti Seksel, President of the Australian Companion Animal Council.

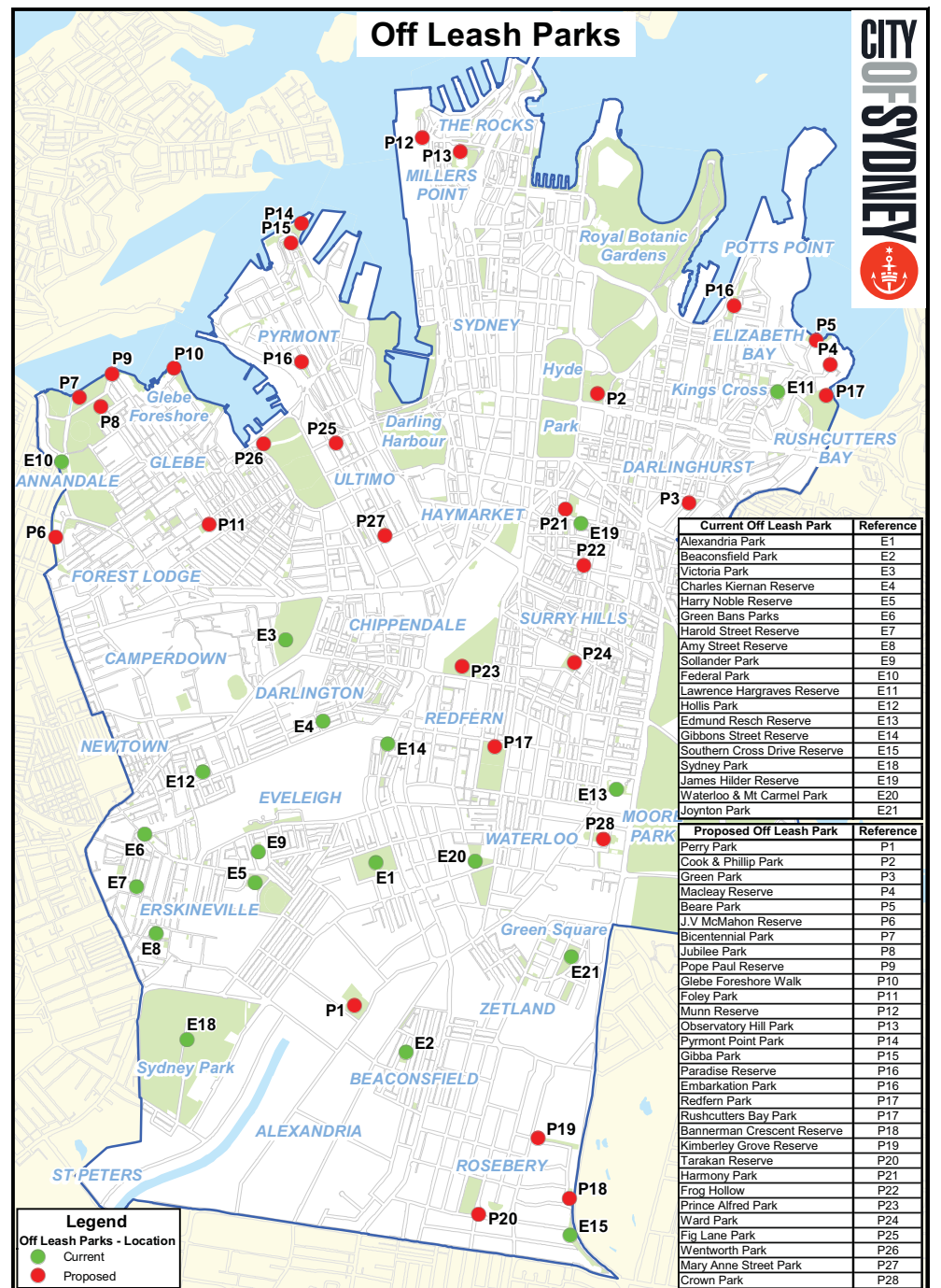
"The latest research from the University of Western Australia shows that dog ownership has a beneficial 'ripple effect' for the community. It seems that the visible presence of people walking their dogs contributes to a sense of community and feelings of collective safety," said Dr Seksel.

Dr Lisa Wood from the School of Population Health at the University of Western Australia, says that non-pet owners spontaneously identified people walking dogs as one of the ways in which they get to recognize and know neighbours and other residents within their suburb. Dog owners also identified that social contact resulted from being out with their dogs. Many dog owners often comment that they know and recognise other dog owners from their dog—with a knowledge of the dog's name but not that of the owner.

There's a feeling that if this proposal does go through then people from outer suburbs will be more inclined to bring their dogs into the City Council's parks for social interaction. One of the proposed off-leash areas is the Foreshore Walk in Glebe which goes from Cook Street around to Blackwattle Bay. It's a great scenic walk that stretches around through Pope Paul Reserve taking in views to the Fish Market and the Anzac Bridge.

Sydney City Council's commitment to education and encouraging responsible ownership also extends to their free obedience training program which has been conducted at a number of parks since the end of 2006. *The program starts again in March and is only open to residents from the council's local government area. It runs over ten consecutive weeks as half hour training classes each Saturday.

*See Furry Festivities and Animal Attractions section for more information on this initiative.



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