

WHAT WE HEARD 

# Thornhill Local Off-leash Dog Area

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT REPORT

September 2022



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# Project overview

## About this report

This report provides an overview of what the City of Vaughan heard through community engagement regarding the location of a new local off-leash dog area in Thornhill.

In the spring of 2022, the City hosted an online survey to collect community input on three proposed off-leash dog area locations in Thornhill:

- York Hill District Park (330 York Hill Blvd.)
- Winding Lane Park (580 York Hill Blvd.)
- Gallanough Park (21 Springfield Way)

In total, the City heard from 1,115 people. While support for a local off-leash dog area in Thornhill was mixed, the survey results demonstrated that York Hill District Park is the preferred location.

However, due to concerns raised by some participants in the engagement process, City staff will further assess the feasibility of adding an off-leash area to York Hill District Park – including its location in the park, configuration and design – and community members will have another opportunity to provide input in early 2023.

This report provides a summary of what community members liked and disliked about each location, as well as their potential interest in becoming a Local Off-leash Dog Area Steward.

## About the Local Off-leash Dog Area Strategy and Thornhill locations

**Local off-leash dog areas are secure, fenced-in spaces for pets to safely exercise, socialize and roam free.**

Recognizing the importance of off-leash areas to dogs and their families, Vaughan Council endorsed the [Local Off-leash Dog Area Strategy \(PDF\)](#) in June 2021. Developed through extensive consultation with City staff, residents and stakeholders, the strategy includes criteria for site selection and establishes roles and responsibilities for Local Off-leash Dog Area Stewards. The criteria used to evaluate potential sites for off-leash areas are:

- **Governance** – including existing by-laws, policies and regulations; potential for community stewardship; safety and security; and community input
- **Accessibility** – including available parking, number of residents served and proximity to sidewalks and trails
- **Location** – including available land owned by the City, as well as proximity to residential areas, children’s play spaces, outdoor sports fields and courts and environmentally sensitive areas
- **Design** – including size of area and site characteristics (e.g. drainage, grading, vegetation, microclimate)

To be considered as a potential site, a location must score a minimum of 75 per cent on the above criteria. If a location meets this minimum score, it is then evaluated based on community feedback, cost and the potential for external funding, as well as layout and availability of amenities. To be selected, a site must also have a minimum of three Local Off-leash Dog Area Stewards registered with the City through the Stewardship Program.

Following this evaluation process and informed by the input received through public consultation, six locations for new local-off leash facilities were identified and approved within the Local Off-leash Dog Area Strategy. As of September 2022, four are open for use:

- Mackenzie Glen District Park (Ward 1)
- Legion Park (Ward 2)
- Matthew District Park (Ward 3)
- Sugarbush Heritage Park (Ward 4)

A seventh location was identified at Jean Augustine District Park. However, Council directed staff to explore alternative site options for an off-leash area east of Bathurst Street to serve the Thornhill community. York Hill District Park, Winding Lane Park and Gallanough Park are located east of Bathurst and had been short-listed as potential off-leash locations by the consultants who developed the Local Off-Leash Dog Area Strategy. Following Council's direction, City staff reviewed and reevaluated the three sites and determined they warranted community consultation and input.



# How we engaged

**From March 22 to April 12, 2022, the City invited the community to review the three potential locations for a new off-leash dog area in the Thornhill community and provide feedback on their desired location.**

Community input was collected through a survey hosted on the City's online engagement platform, Have Your Say, Vaughan. For each of the three proposed locations, survey participants were asked to:

- indicate their level of support for the proposed location (a Likert scale ranging from strong agreement with the proposed location to strong disagreement).

- identify how they might travel to the proposed location (e.g. walk, bike, public transit or drive).
- provide comments, if any.

Survey participants were also asked to indicate their interest in becoming a Local Off-leash Dog Area Steward, whether they wished to subscribe to a mailing list for project updates, their home postal code and IF they currently own a dog or plan to in the future.



# How we reached the community

Promotion of the survey was multi-faceted, including a combination of far-reaching and targeted communications tactics:

## Direct mail notice to nearby residents

A notice with information about the three proposed locations and the engagement survey was mailed to all residences within 250 metres of York Hill District Park, Winding Lane Park and Gallanough Park (please refer to Figure 1 on page eight).

Additionally, this information was emailed to roughly 40 people who reside in Thornhill and previously expressed interest in off-leash areas.

## Public Service Announcement

A public service announcement was released on March 22, 2022 to local, Greater Toronto Area, national and cultural media outlets. It was also issued to those who subscribe to Vaughan News, the City's eNewsletter.



## Organic social media

Over the three-week period, the City shared 18 posts across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn to promote the survey and encourage the community to learn more by visiting the project website.



## Community signage

The City installed temporary signage in each of the three proposed locations – York Hill District Park, Winding Lane Park and Gallanough Park – to inform park users and those living in the community of the opportunity to get involved and have their say. Additional information was posted at the Concord/Thornhill Primary Off-leash Dog Area and three Curbex signs were placed along Bathurst Street and Clark Avenue.

## Local off-leash dog area video

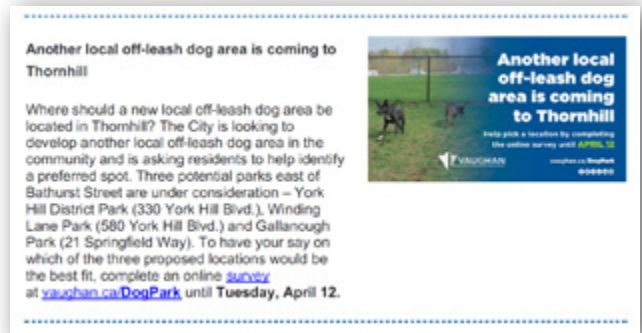
An educational video was developed and promoted alongside the engagement survey to increase awareness of how off-leash areas operate in Vaughan, proper use and etiquette, and the value they bring to dogs and their families.

## Vaughan Engagement eNewsletter

The Thornhill Off-leash Dog Area survey was promoted to approximately 1,100 people through the March 2022 edition of the Vaughan Engagement eNewsletter.

## Outreach through the Local and Regional Councillors

Information about the project and survey was distributed to all members of Vaughan Council to share through their targeted networks. The Thornhill Off-leash engagement survey was featured in several Councillors eNewsletters.

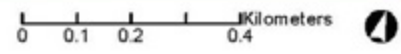


**FIGURE 1. Map of Thornhill residents who received a direct mail notice**



**Legend**

-  Subject Park - Potential Location
-  Mailing Area
-  Planning Block
-  Railway



Date: 1/11/2022



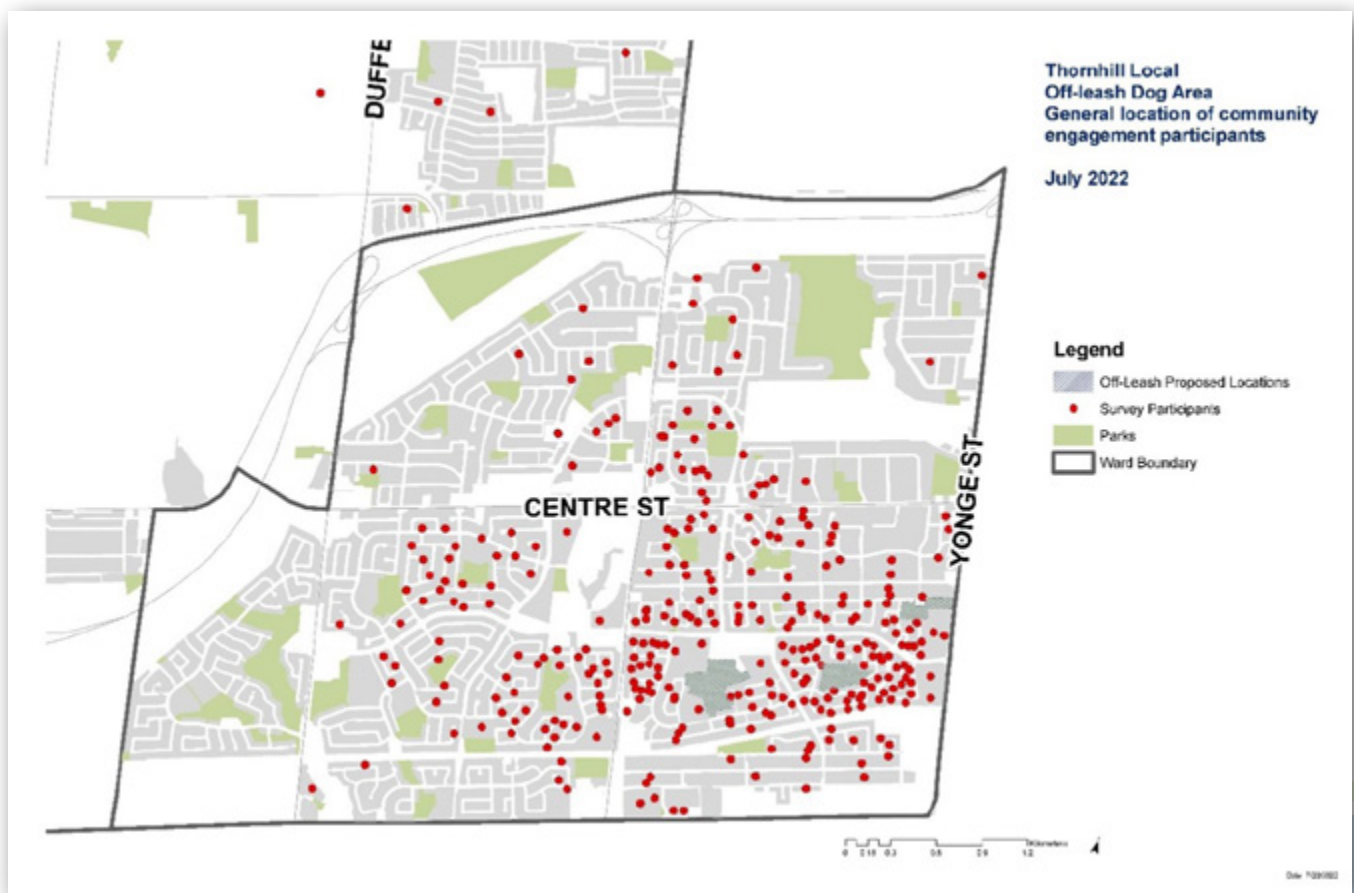
# Who we heard from

**In total, the City heard from 1,115 people through the survey.**

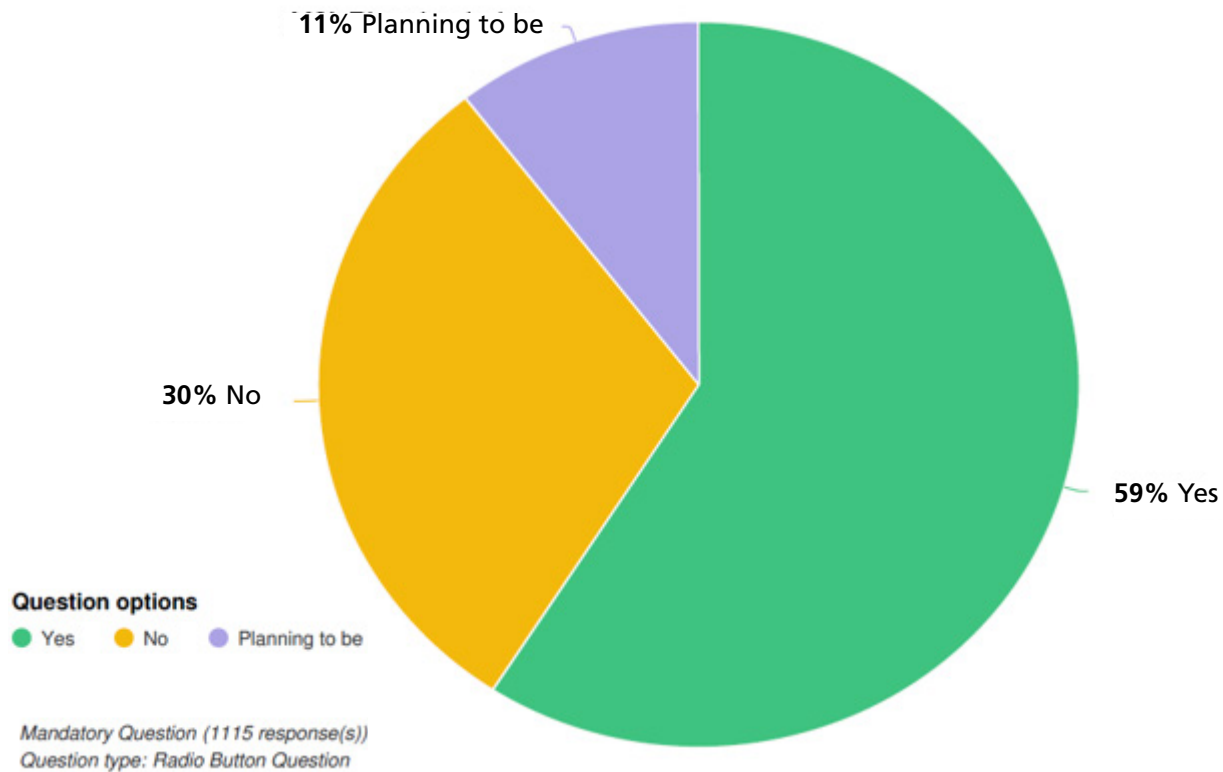
Survey participants were asked to provide their home postal code, to be used by the City to spatially analyze the feedback received. Approximately 90 per cent of survey participants

were identified as residents within the Thornhill community (defined as the area within the Ward 5 boundary). The remaining responses were provided by residents living north of Thornhill, with a few from participants residing in neighbouring municipalities.

**FIGURE 2. Map of survey respondents within the Thornhill community by postal code**



## Are you currently a dog owner?



In the survey, participants were also asked to indicate whether they currently own a dog or plan to own a dog in the future. Most respondents were dog owners (659 people or 59 per cent) or plan to be in future (117 people or 11 per cent), with 30 per cent indicating they do not own a dog nor plan to (339 people).



# What we heard

## General perceptions towards off-leash dog areas

**While this engagement was focused on selecting a location for a new local off-leash dog area in Thornhill, many of the comments received were general in nature – applying to all three potential locations.**

General perceptions towards off-leash dog areas were mixed, with many expressing excitement and sharing the benefits dog parks provide, while others voiced concerns related to safety and proper etiquette.

### Summary of community feedback:

- **Expressed need for a safe space to exercise and socialize dogs:** Several respondents noted seeing an increase in the number of dogs within the Thornhill community since the beginning of the pandemic, and many expressed the importance of having a secure area to exercise and socialize their dogs. Others pointed out that many community members are letting their dogs run off-leash in the three potential locations already, indicating the need for a safe, secure facility. Respondents were also excited to potentially have an off-leash area within walking distance of their homes.

*Thank you for understanding how critical this is for pets and their families!*

*These are parks that are frequented by young families with many young children and would like comfort of being able to play without fear of loose dogs roaming around and approaching the children.*

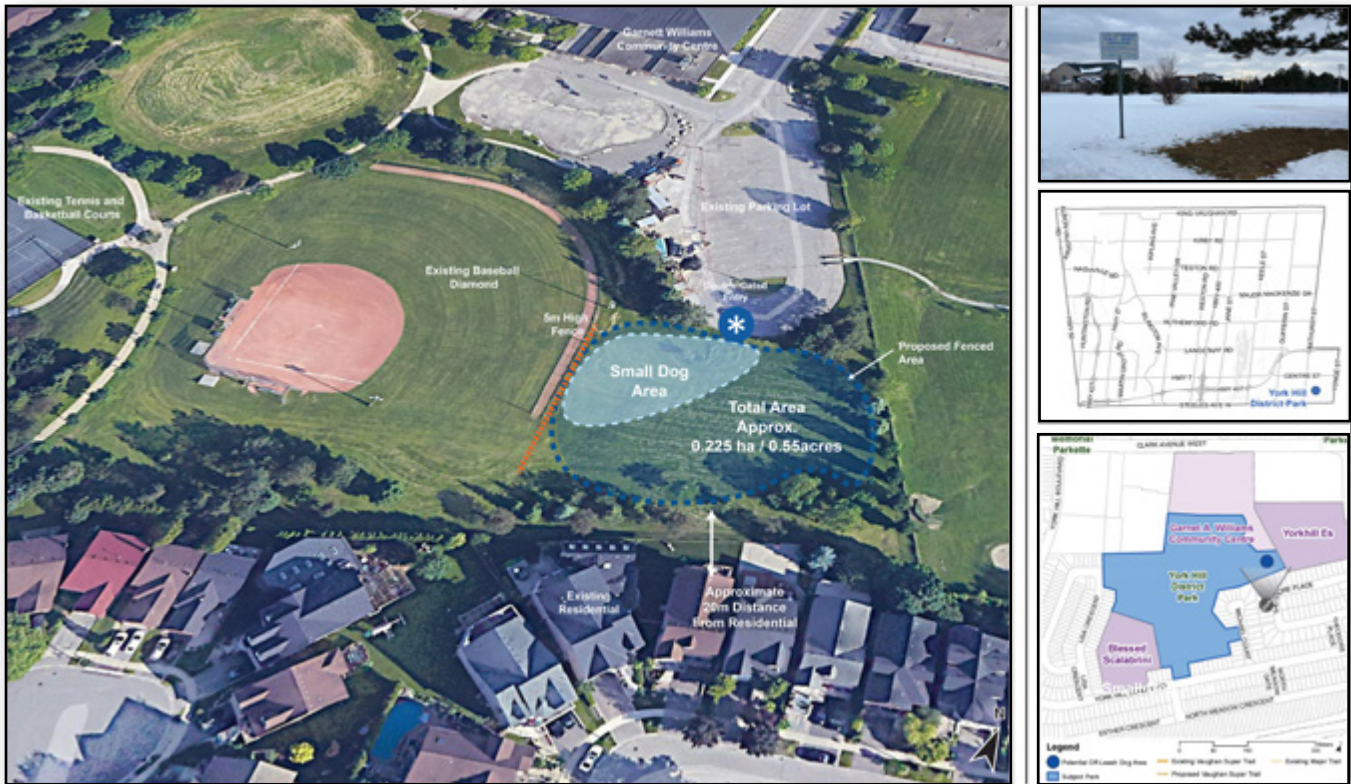
- **Potential for conflicts between off-leash dogs and park users:** A common concern expressed by survey respondents was the potential for conflict between park users and off-leash dogs. In particular, many respondents felt the introduction of an off-leash dog park posed a safety risk to vulnerable park users, like children and seniors. For some respondents, this concern was due to a misunderstanding that the off-leash area would be an open and unregulated area rather than a secure, fenced-in space accessed through a locked gate. In contrast to those expressing concern, other respondents felt introducing a designated, fenced-in area would reduce the potential for conflict and make the proposed locations safer – highlighting that these parks are already frequented by community members who allow their dogs to run off-leash.
- **Concern for dog waste and additional noise:** Several respondents expressed concern that an off-leash dog area would result in an increased amount of dog waste in parks, as well as barking and noise that may disrupt nearby residents. It was suggested that the City post clear rules and reminders about picking up after your pet, place waste bins next to the off-leash area and consider adding a natural sound barrier to mitigate any additional noise.



*We must all do our part to ensure these new and improved facilities for dogs are offered to dogs that have all their vaccinations, are spayed and neutered, are friendly, have water fountains for dogs, be well light, all dogs must be licensed. There must be signs to display this so there is no confusion. Dog owners must be present to watch their own dogs.*

- **Consideration of coyotes, foxes and other wildlife:** Several respondents spoke to the presence of coyotes, foxes and other wildlife within the community. While some felt the introduction of a fenced-in area would provide a safe and secure space to exercise and socialize their dogs in the park, others were concerned an off-leash area would attract more wildlife.
- **Desired features within the off-leash area:** Regardless of location, respondents shared suggestions for the design of the off-leash area. Suggestions included providing water fountains for people and dogs, waste bins, signage to indicate proper use, additional trees and plantings, pathways and agility equipment. Surfacing preferences were mixed between stones, woodchips and grass. There was also a general desire for the off-leash area to be larger than what was proposed. Respondents liked the separated space for small dogs only.

## What we heard about York Hill District Park



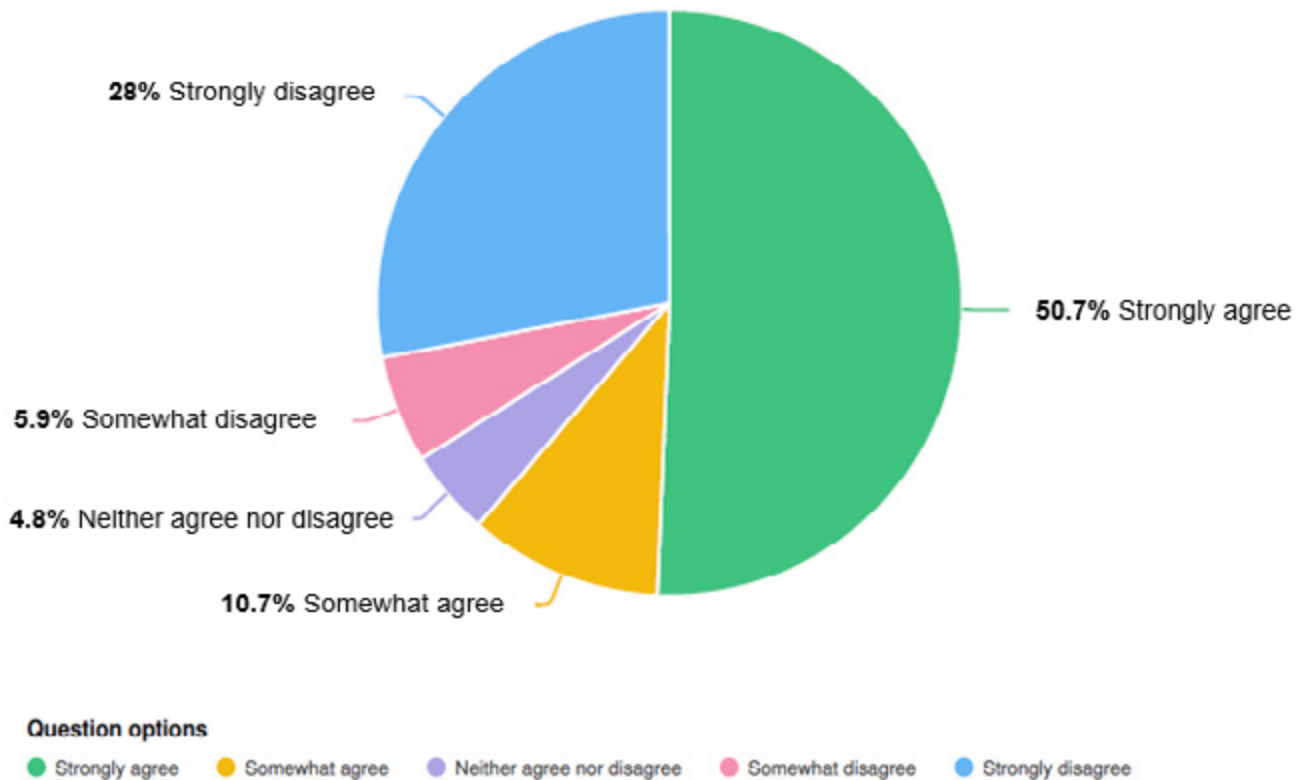
**Just over half (61.4 per cent) of survey respondents somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed off-leash area location at York Hill District Park.**

The remaining respondents somewhat disagreed (5.9 per cent), strongly disagreed (28 per cent) or did not have a strong opinion (4.8 per cent).

*I think this is a good central location, but there are too many other activities that take place there already.*

*Great choice! This is a perfect location and the adjacent parking makes it very accessible. This is a 'quiet' corner of the park and won't disturb other users of the park or nearby residences.*

## To what degree do you agree with the proposed York Hill District Park location?



Mandatory Question (1115 response(s))  
Question type: Radio Button Question

When asked how they would travel to the proposed off-leash area location in York Hill District Park, a large majority of respondents reported they would walk (717 people, or 64.3 per cent). Driving was the next most popular travel option (320 people, or 28.7 per cent), followed by biking (145 people, or 13 per cent) and public transit (14 people or 1.3 per cent). Other respondents reported they would not travel to this location (218 people, or 19.6 per cent). Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

### Summary of community feedback:

- **Central location:** Many respondents preferred York Hill District Park due to its central location, ample parking available at Garnet A. Williams Community Centre and proximity to other amenities.
- **Too busy:** While some felt York Hill District Park is ideal due to its large size – with the ability to accommodate an off-leash area while leaving space for other activities – others felt the park is already too busy, with too many competing uses in a single park.

- **Nearby Orthodox Jewish community:** Several respondents highlighted the large Orthodox Jewish community surrounding the park, with some noting that being within walking distance would be beneficial on Shabbat when community members can't drive. However, others felt members of the Orthodox Jewish community are less likely to own dogs and would not benefit from the off-leash dog area.
- **Proximity to homes:** While some respondents felt the York Hill District Park location was ideal as fewer homes are directly adjacent to the proposed off-leash area, others felt the proposed site is too close to residences that back onto the park.

- **Baseball diamond:** A few respondents expressed concern over baseballs landing in the off-leash area from the nearby baseball diamond, hoping the five-metre-high fence would be tall enough to mitigate this concern.



## What we heard about Winding Lane Park



**Less than half (44.2 per cent) of survey respondents somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed off-leash area location at Winding Lane Park.**

The remaining respondents somewhat disagreed (10.2 per cent), strongly disagreed (34.7 per cent) or did not have a strong opinion (10.9 per cent).

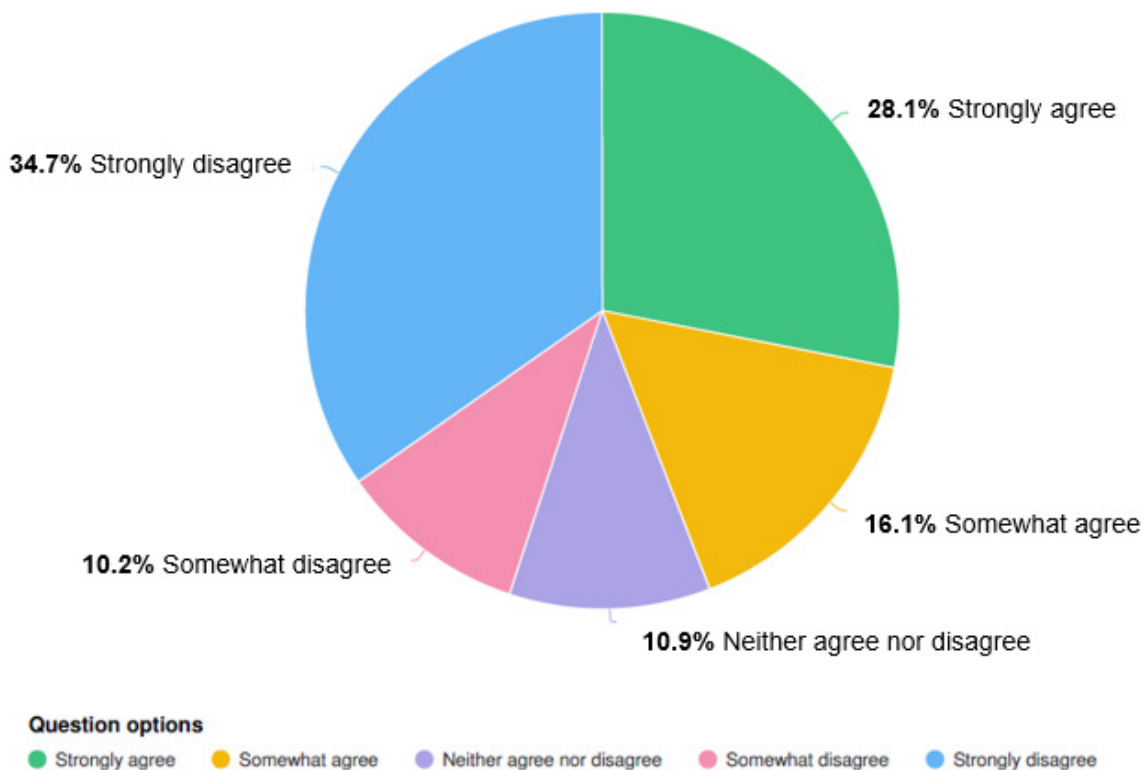
*This area is widely used by families to play sports. It's not a great spot for an off-leash park as families would lose that space.*

*Convenient location as there are lots of dogs in the area but might have the most homes surrounding the small park (potential noise concerns).*





## To what degree do you agree with the proposed Winding Lane Park location?



Mandatory Question (1115 response(s))  
Question type: Radio Button Question

When asked how they would travel to the proposed off-leash area location in Winding Lane Park, roughly half of respondents reported they would walk (557 people, or 50 per cent). Driving was the next most popular travel option (331 people, or 29.7 per cent), followed by biking (94 people, or 8.4 per cent) and public transit (13 people, or 1.2 per cent). Over a quarter of respondents reported they would not travel to this location (307 people, or 27.5 per cent). Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

### Summary of community feedback:

- **Larger off-leash area size:** Many respondents commented positively on the size of the proposed off-leash area at this location compared to the two other potential locations.
- **Current use by dog owners:** Several respondents noted that this location is used as an “informal off-leash area” currently, expressing both the need for a formal, secure off-leash area and the potential safety benefit it would bring.

- **Current use for sports and free play:**

Many respondents commented on the current use of the open greenspace for sports and free play and were concerned the off-leash area would take away too much of this highly-valued open space.

- **Lack of parking:** Winding Lane Park was seen as a less accessible location due to the lack of off-street parking. In addition, many cited concerns that off-leash area users would need to park on nearby local streets – increasing traffic and potentially posing a safety risk.

- **Proximity to homes:** This location was viewed as less ideal than the other two options due to the larger number of nearby residences on Joshua Court and Winding Lane.



## What we heard about Gallanough Park

**Roughly half (51.7 per cent) of survey respondents somewhat agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed off-leash area location at Gallanough Park.**

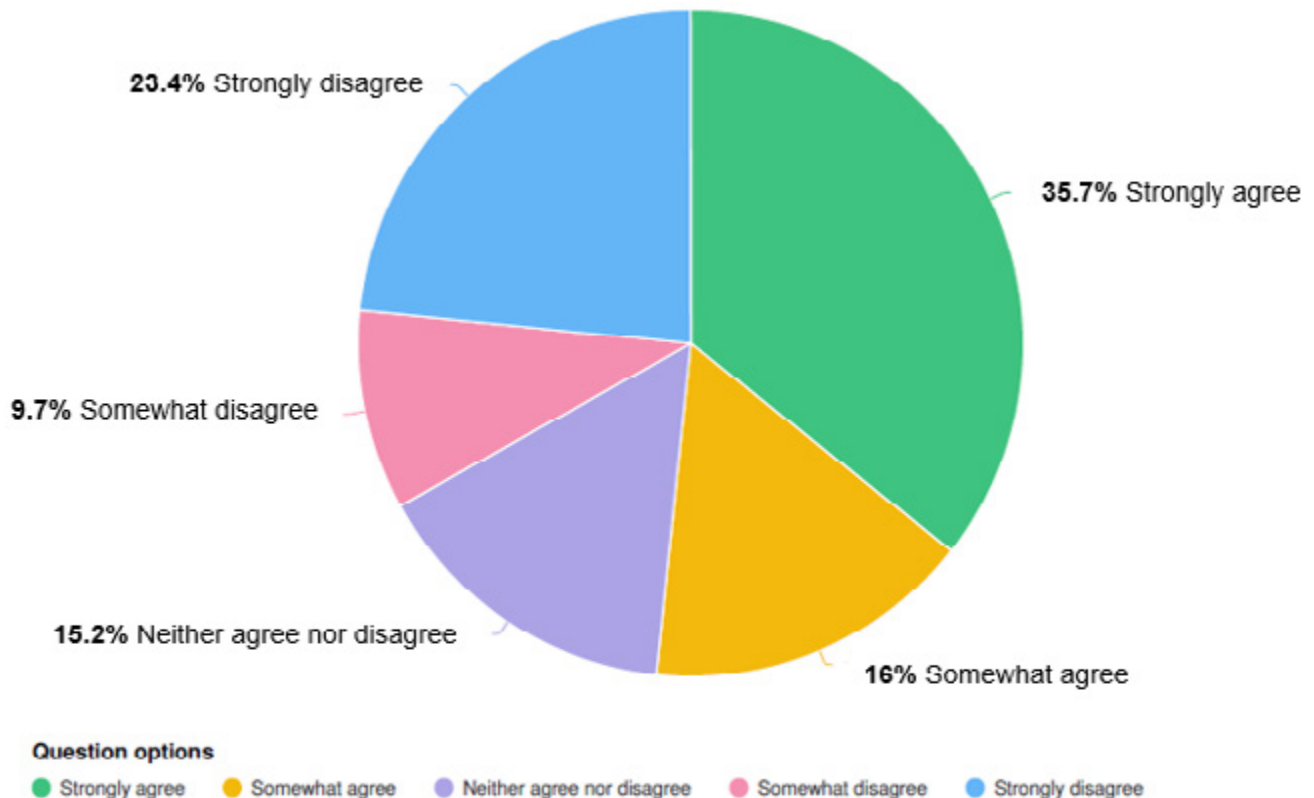
The remaining respondents somewhat disagreed (9.7 per cent), strongly disagreed (23.4 per cent) or did not have a strong opinion (15.2 per cent).

*I don't think it's central enough for the various neighborhoods so that walking would be possible.*



*This is a big and beautiful park that has been sorely under utilized for many years. I would love to see it put to good use for people and their pets. There are many people who walk their dogs in this area including a great number that are from outside the area. I think it would be a wonderful space for many!*

## To what degree do you agree with the proposed Gallanough Park location?



*Mandatory Question (1115 response(s))*  
*Question type: Radio Button Question*

When asked how they would travel to the proposed off-leash area location in Gallanough Park, roughly half of respondents reported they would walk (552 people, or 49.5 per cent). Driving was the next most popular travel option (356 people, or 31.9 per cent), followed by biking (125 people, or 11.2 per cent) and public transit (20 people or 1.8 per cent). A fairly significant number of people reported they would not travel to this location (314 people, or 28.2 per cent). Respondents were allowed to select more than one option.

### Summary of community feedback:

- **Good amount of space available:** Many respondents felt Gallanough Park is a good location due to the large amount of open space available and fewer existing park uses. Several comments noted that the park is relatively quiet and the proposed space is currently underutilized.
- **Current use by dog owners:** Similar to Winding Lane Park, several respondents indicated that this location is currently used as an "informal off-leash area" and would benefit from a formalized, secure dog area.

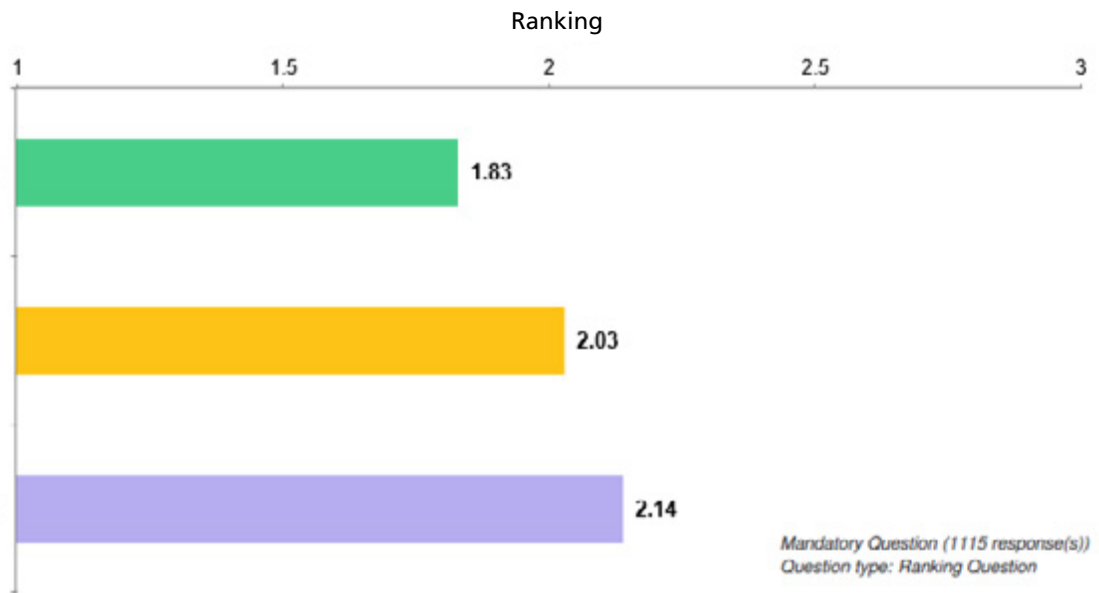


- **Potentially fewer children using the park:** While some respondents felt fewer children play in and travel through Gallanough Park, others noted the proximity to Thornhill Public School and the Montessori School.
- **Less walkable:** Many respondents felt Gallanough Park wasn't as central or walkable as the other proposed locations. However, others felt that the park's location next to Yonge Street increased accessibility (e.g. by transit).

- **Lack of parking:** It was noted that some off-street parking might be available nearby at the Gallanough Resource Centre; however, many would likely park on local streets. Some respondents expressed concern that the park's location next to Yonge Street would encourage Markham residents to use the off-leash area, further increasing parking needs.

## Location ranking

Please rank the three off-leash locations proposed in order of preference, where one is the most preferred and three is the least preferred.



After reviewing and commenting on each of the three proposed off-leash area locations, participants were asked to rank them in order of preference, where one was most preferred and three was least preferred. York Hill District Park was the most preferred, receiving an overall score of 1.83. Gallanough Park ranked as the second choice (2.03) and Winding Lane Park was the least preferred location (2.14).

### Local Off-leash Dog Area Stewardship Program

To establish a new off-leash area, a minimum of three Local Off-leash Dog Area Stewards must register with the City through the Local Off-leash Dog Area Stewardship Program. Stewards work collaboratively with City staff to:

- foster a positive social environment for dogs and people.

- educate others on local off-leash dog area regulations and etiquette.
- communicate any safety concerns to the City.
- share feedback about operations and maintenance.
- collaborate with the City on pilot studies and share input (e.g. what's working well or opportunities for improvement and enhancement).

When asked if they were interested in becoming a steward for one of the new Thornhill locations, 59 survey respondents said "yes," and 119 said "maybe."

# Next Steps

**Thank you to all who took the time to participate in the survey and share their views! The feedback collected will be used to determine the final location and design the new off-leash dog area in Thornhill.**

The survey results demonstrated that York Hill District Park is the preferred location – however, support for this location was mixed and concerns were raised. City staff will further review the configuration and design of the local off-leash dog area as part of a larger project to redevelop York Hill District Park. The design and redevelopment process is expected to start in 2023, and will include a comprehensive review of amenities within York Hill District Park and the overall park layout. Community members can expect another opportunity to share their views and participate in the park’s redevelopment in early 2023.

