



COMMUNICATION UPDATE

TO:	Mayor and Members City Council
DATE:	March 24, 2026
SUBJECT:	Birch Avenue Dog Park Soil Testing Results
WARD(S) AFFECTED:	Ward 3
SUBMITTED BY:	Cynthia Graham Director, Environmental Services Public Works Department
SIGNATURE:	

PURPOSE

This communication provides Council with an update on the temporary closure of the Birch Avenue Leash-Free Dog Park, an overview of the completed independent expert review, and the next steps Environmental Services will undertake.

Information related to the temporary closure was initially communicated to Council through Communication Update ES2508

<https://www.hamilton.ca/sites/default/files/2025-06/comm-update-birch-ave-leash-free-park-soils-findings-June13-2025.pdf>

INFORMATION

Birch Avenue Dog Park has been temporarily closed since June 13, 2025, as a precautionary measure following environmental testing and in response to resident concerns about dog health. The independent expert review received in March 2026 confirmed that the overall risk to dogs using the park is low and below levels known to cause health effects.

However, areas of worn or exposed soil in high-use areas of the park require measures beyond routine maintenance to better support sustainable, long-term use. These measures could include more extensive remediation, ongoing maintenance protocols and additional resources.

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OUR Mission: To provide high quality cost conscious public services that contribute to a healthy, safe and prosperous community, in a sustainable manner.

OUR Culture: Collective Ownership, Steadfast Integrity, Courageous Change, Sensational Service, Engaged Empowered Employees.

At this time, Environmental Services does not have an approved or funded solution to implement any of the identified measures, and given the timing of the expert report, a 2026 budget request was not able to be advanced. As a result, the park will remain closed out of an abundance of caution while next steps are determined.

Results of the independent expert review

Following the park's temporary closure, the City commissioned a detailed expert review of the environmental testing, with a specific focus on potential impacts on dog health. The City retained G2S Consulting Inc. to conduct environmental assessments and comprehensive inspections of the soil quality. This work included Phase One and Phase Two Environmental Site Assessments (ESA), an inspection of the soil cover, and a review of the environmental risks of the site through a Due Diligence Risk Assessment (DDRA).

The Phase One ESA confirmed that the site has a history of industrial use, including oil works operations beginning prior to 1875, followed by its use as a scrap yard and later redevelopment into parkland in the late 1980s.

The Phase Two ESA identified that while a surface layer of topsoil and grass exists, the underlying fill material contains elevated levels of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) – environmental contaminants sometimes found in soil due to past industrial activity – and metals within soils below the surface.

The Due Diligence Risk Assessment (DDRA), which included a specific focus on potential impacts on dogs, determined that the overall risk to dogs is low and below levels known to cause health effects.

The assessment found that regular use has worn down parts of the park, exposing soil underneath — a common occurrence in dog parks. Areas of worn or exposed soil in high-use areas of the park require measures beyond routine maintenance to better support sustainable, long-term use.

Options for remediation

The expert's report outlines a range of potential approaches to address worn-down parts of the park. These include measures focused on maintaining or enhancing the separation between park users and underlying soils, as well as more comprehensive approaches involving the removal and replacement of soil. These options vary in terms of cost, complexity and long-term effectiveness. Some options rely on ongoing operational maintenance and monitoring, while others require capital investment, providing a more permanent solution.

The options outlined in the report include:

- **Maintain Soil Cover (Cap Management)**
This approach ensures that soil is covered with grass or other surface materials, such as asphalt or concrete, to limit contact with the exposed soil areas. This option presents challenges for a dog park due to the nature of use, where high traffic and digging can result in worn or exposed areas over time. This approach would require ongoing monitoring, maintenance, and the implementation of specific protocols for staff when undertaking any work that may disturb soils at the site.
- **Soil Excavation and Replacement**
Removal of impacted soils and reestablishment of a grass surface through the import of clean fill, followed by seeding or sodding. This option would address the contamination and support continued use of the site as a dog park, while eliminating the need for ongoing soil management protocols. This approach would involve greater investment and require a future capital budget request.
- **Hard Surface Treatment (Full Site)**
Installation of a hard surface across the site, such as asphalt, concrete, or paving stones, to provide a barrier between users and underlying soils. This option is not considered desirable for long-term dog park use, as hard surfaces may increase the risk of injury to dogs and reduce user comfort, particularly during warmer months. A future capital budget request would be required.
- **Targeted Hard Surface Treatment (High-Traffic Areas)**
Installation of hard surface materials in localized, high-wear areas of the park to limit contact with the exposed soil areas, while maintaining grass areas elsewhere on the site. While this option may reduce exposure to the regularly used areas of the park, it would still require ongoing maintenance and may not fully address long-term use.

Additional Consideration:

While not included as an option in the expert's report, as part of a broader review of service delivery, the City may also consider changes to the current use of the site, including potential closure.

Any such consideration would require further analysis of community impacts, access to alternative leash-free areas, and future service needs within Ward 3, and would be brought forward to Council for direction.

Next steps

These options are currently being assessed, and until a recommended solution is determined, the park will remain closed out of an abundance of caution.

Staff are currently evaluating the feasibility, costs and operational impacts of each option to determine a recommended path forward. This work will inform whether the site can be reopened with enhanced maintenance measures, require capital remediation or whether alternative approaches should be considered.

A recommendation report is expected to be brought forward to Council in the fall of 2026, following completion of this analysis and associated costing, to inform budget consideration for 2027. In advance of that, staff will continue to update Council as needed if additional information is available.

Should the option to remove the contamination and restore the grass surface be identified as the preferred approach, staff will bring forward a future budget submission for consideration to support the removal of impacted soils and reinstatement of the park surface.

Given the scale of potential remediation, this work would be considered through the City's capital budget process. While this may align with future budget cycles, staff are actively reviewing options to determine if any interim or phased approaches may be feasible in an effort to reopen the leash-free park on an expedited timeline.

At this time, no timeline for reopening has been established.

In the meantime, the City is exploring options to create a temporary leash-free space for local dog owners and encourages residents to use nearby parks, such as the Ward 2 Dog Park at 371 Wellington Street North and the Rail Trail Dog Park at 175 Ferguson Avenue South.

The City recognizes the Birch Avenue leash-free park as an important space for residents and their pets, and we appreciate the community's patience as this work continues.

APPENDICES AND SCHEDULES ATTACHED

Appendix "A" – Due Diligence Risk Assessment (DDRA), Birch Avenue Dog Park, Intrinsic Corp., January 22, 2026