

PHASE 2

OPTIONS FOR DOGS IN THE YORK REGIONAL FOREST

WHAT YOU SAID IN 2021

FORESTRY
1-877-464-9675
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York Region



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes residents' and visitors' thoughts about options for dogs in the York Regional Forest gathered through *York Region's Options for Dogs in the York Regional Forest Phase 2 Survey*.

This survey was available from June 17 to July 9, 2021 at york.ca/dogsurvey and promoted through social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), e-Newsletters, road signs, newspapers, posters at the York Regional Forest and on the Region's website. Three virtual information sessions were also held for the public to learn more about the options and to ask questions.

Survey Background

The purpose of this survey was to explore options related to managing dogs in the York Regional Forest. This was Phase 2 of a comprehensive review to determine the future of dogs in the Forest. The survey provided an opportunity for the community to share their thoughts about the recommended options.

Prior to COVID-19, dogs were required to be on-leash or under control. Since COVID-19, dogs must be on-leash at all times except when in the fenced off-leash area at Bendor and Graves tract in the Town of East Gwillimbury.

The Region previously conducted a Phase 1 Survey in the fall of 2020 to better understand the experiences of people using the York Regional Forest with respect to dogs.

Executive Summary *(continued)*

The Phase 1 Survey found while about one-third of respondents reported no concerns with dogs in either fenced or unfenced parts of the Forest, about two-thirds identified a range of concerns. The top concern, shared by 41% of respondents, was about dogs not being under control.

Other top concerns included dog waste not being picked up and fear of being approached by an unfamiliar dog. See the full results in the Phase 1 [Managing Dogs in the York Regional Forest Survey: What You Said in 2020 report](#).

Following this initial survey, the Region conducted background research and additional engagement with stakeholders such as cities and towns in York Region, conservation authorities and the Regional Forest Advisory Team. Based on this engagement and the public engagement results from Phase 1, the Region then proposed the new rule going forward be:



Dogs remain on-leash at all times, in all York Regional Forest tracts, except in designated areas.

Notes

Rounding to the nearest whole number. The results for some of the survey questions were rounded to the nearest whole number, (e.g., 33.33% is rounded to 33%). As a result, the percentage total for questions (where the values were rounded) will not add up to 100%.

Some Response Percentages Exceed 100%. When questions allow survey respondents to select more than one response or answer, the total number of responses for that question will be greater than the number of survey respondents that answered the question. This will cause the total response percentages to exceed 100 percent.

Staff wanted to hear from the public about additional 'add-on' options to the proposed rule. The options were:



OPTION A: One to three tracts where dogs are permitted to be off-leash



OPTION B: One to three tracts where dogs would not be permitted (except for service dogs)



OPTION C: One to two additional fenced dog off-leash area(s)

Note: These three options would not be mutually exclusive. All, some or none of these options may be selected for implementation along with the **general dogs on-leash at all times** rule. The current rules - such as having to stay on the trails and picking up and carrying out your pet's waste - would remain in place. In addition, the fenced off-leash area in place at Bendor and Graves Tract would remain.

Residents were invited to participate in the Phase 2 Survey which asked them for their thoughts on these options as well as considerations for implementation of the options.

Results outlined in this report will help to frame the selection of options and presentation to York Regional Council in early 2022.

2,258 residents and Forest visitors completed surveys during Phase 2.

More than 95% of survey respondents lived in York Region

80% of survey respondents indicated that they were either dog owners and/or caregivers

The majority of survey respondents (65%) were between 35 and 64 years old

SUMMARY OF WHAT WE HEARD IN PHASE 2

The Phase 2 Survey asked residents and Forest visitors a series of questions related to the three proposed options. Participants were asked about their level of support for the options, potential frequency of use of the options and considerations for tract selection, including travel distance. Overall, there was demonstrated support for some type of off-leash option for dogs in the Regional Forest, including designating one or more tracts for this purpose. Some other key takeaways from the survey results include:

Respondents broadly support Option A and have mixed opinions on Options B and C



OPTION A

Over half of all survey respondents (57%) indicated a very high or high level of support for having **one to three tracts where dogs would be permitted off-leash**

89% of these respondents were dog owners and/or caregivers and 11% were non-dog owners and/or caregivers



OPTION B

Approximately one-third of survey respondents (32%) indicated a very high or high level of support for having **one to three tracts where dogs would not be permitted (except for service dogs)**

68% of these respondents were dog owners and/or caregivers and 32% were non-dog owners and/or caregivers



OPTION C

Nearly half of all survey respondents (44%) indicated a very high or high level of support for having **one to two additional fenced dog off-leash area(s), in addition to the existing area at the Bendor and Graves Tract**

75% of these respondents were dog owners and/or caregivers and 25% were non-dog owners and/or caregivers

Summary of what we heard in Phase 2 *(continued)*

While there was support for all three options, not all respondents would choose to use all three options if they were available:



67% of all respondents indicated they would use tracts with off-leash areas



42% of all respondents indicated they would use tracts where dogs were not permitted



54% of all respondents indicated they would use a fenced dog off-leash area

Respondents identified the most important factors that shaped their level of support for options. The top factors were:

- 1 Providing an option for off-leash areas
- 2 Consistency with pre-pandemic rules (i.e., dogs may be off leash if under control)
- 3 Reducing risk of conflict
- 4 Protecting the Forest's sensitive ecological areas

Respondents wanted the Region to consider several factors when selecting which Forest tracts to implement each option. Top considerations across all three options included:

- Ability to protect ecologically-sensitive areas
- Tracts with fewer visitors
- Proximity to where the respondent lived
- Parking availability

A desire for preferred options to be as close to home as possible: 53% of survey respondents indicated their desire to travel no more than 30 minutes by car to visit a Forest tract, regardless of the option chosen.





Summary of what we heard in Phase 2 *(continued)*

These considerations were also reflected in the responses to the open-ended question which gave Forest users and visitors an opportunity to provide additional input. York Region received over 1,000 open-ended comments, generating ten common themes (described in further detail on pages 18 to 20). Some of the key take-aways include:

28% of those that provided comments expressed support for the pre-pandemic rules of dogs on-leash or under control at all times.



Some of those respondents stated that dogs need to be exercised off leash to maintain healthy growth and development

22% of the written responses included support for the current rule that dogs must be on-leash at all times (except) in designated off-leash areas.



Some comments referenced uncomfortable personal incidents related to dogs being off-leash and not under control in the Forest

16% of written responses expressed a desire for more off-leash dog tracts and areas in general.



Some respondents stated that off-leash tracts and areas would allow the dog owners and/or caregivers to exercise along with their dogs (and that dog parks do not allow for this)

Comments were also left requesting **better enforcement of forest rules (7%)** and expressing **concerns related to waste disposal and management (5%)**.

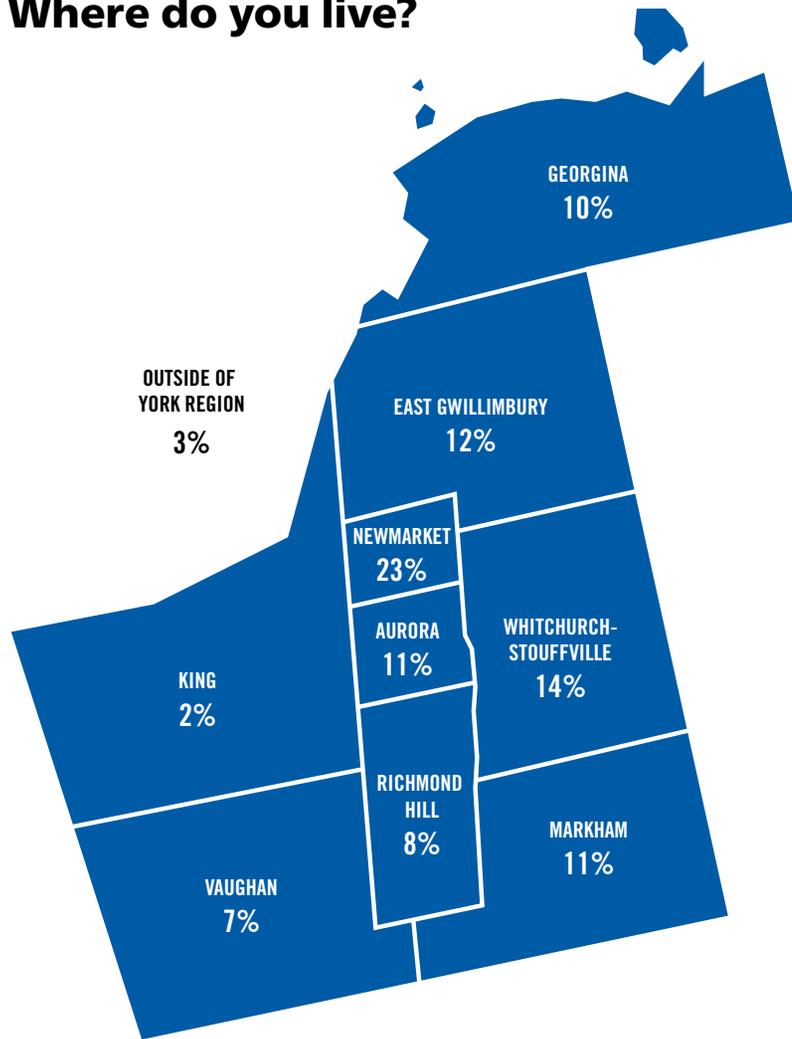
These sentiments were also raised in the Phase 1 Survey.



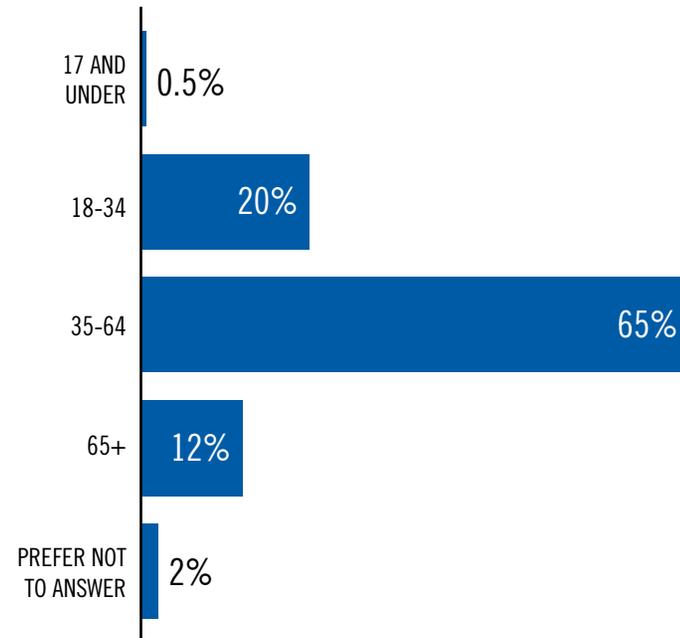
WHO WE HEARD FROM

The Options for Dogs in the York Regional Forest Phase 2 Survey had a total of 2,258 completed responses. A number of residents and visitors also shared questions and ideas during three information sessions, and 67 social media comments were received.

Where do you live?



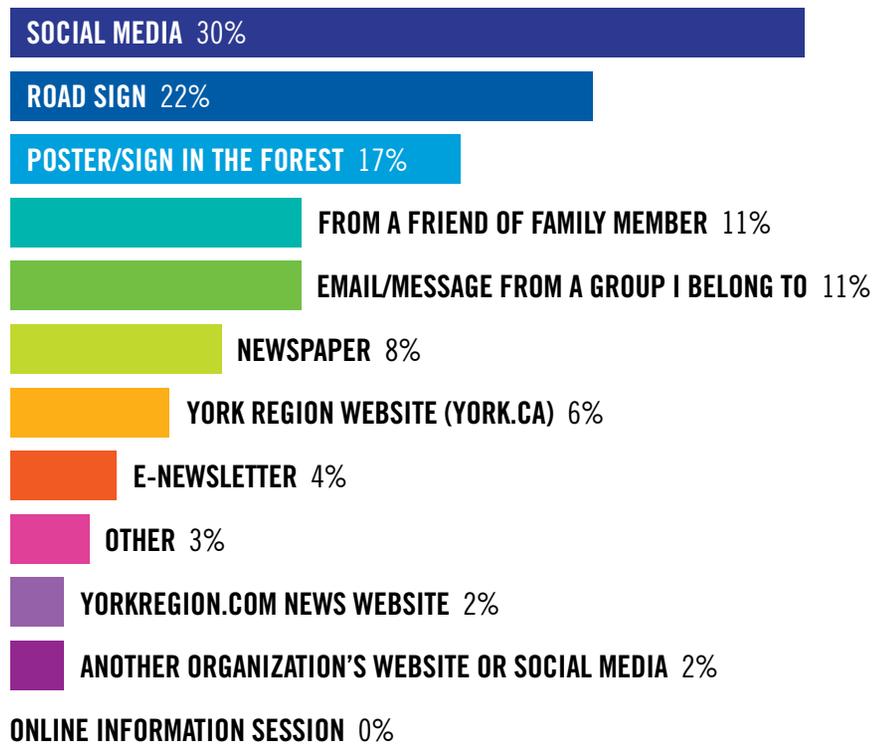
How old are you?



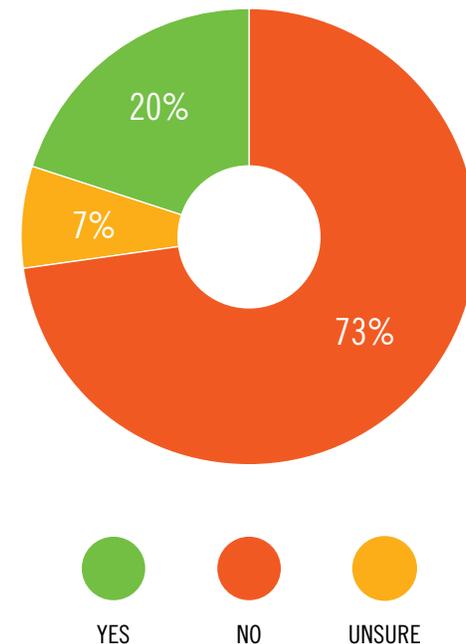
How did you hear about the survey?

The majority of survey respondents (30%) heard about the Phase 2 Survey through social media, with 22% indicating they found out about the survey through road signs. 73% percent of Phase 2 Survey respondents did not participate in the Phase 1 Survey.

How did you hear about the Phase 2 Survey?



Did you participate in the Phase 1 Survey?

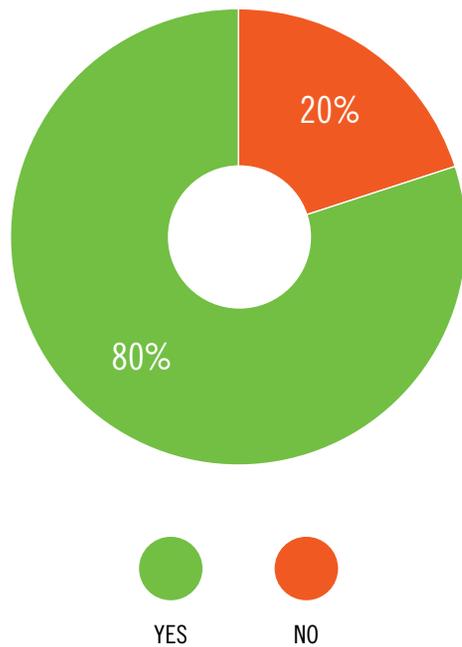


Note: Percentages have been rounded and may not total 100%

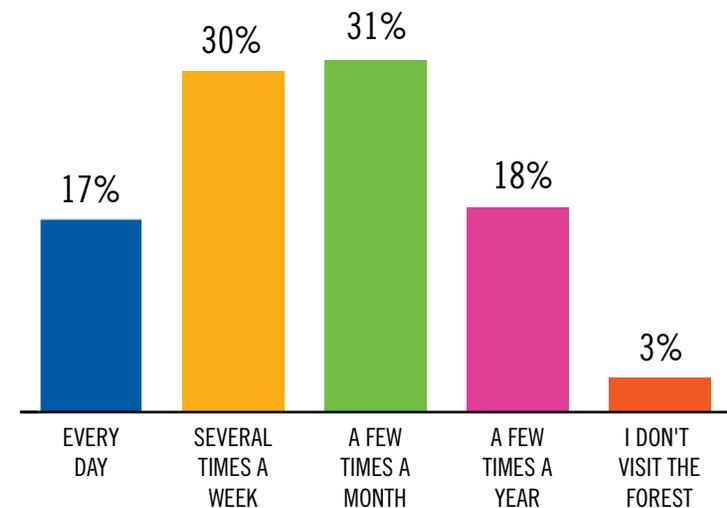
What you shared about being a dog owner or caregiver and Forest visitor

Approximately 80% of survey respondents are dog owners and/or caregivers. Of those who visit the Forest, 31% of survey respondents visit the York Regional Forest “a few times a month” and 30% “a few times a week”. 3% of survey respondents don’t visit the Forest.

Are you a dog owner or caregiver?



How often do you visit the York Regional Forest?

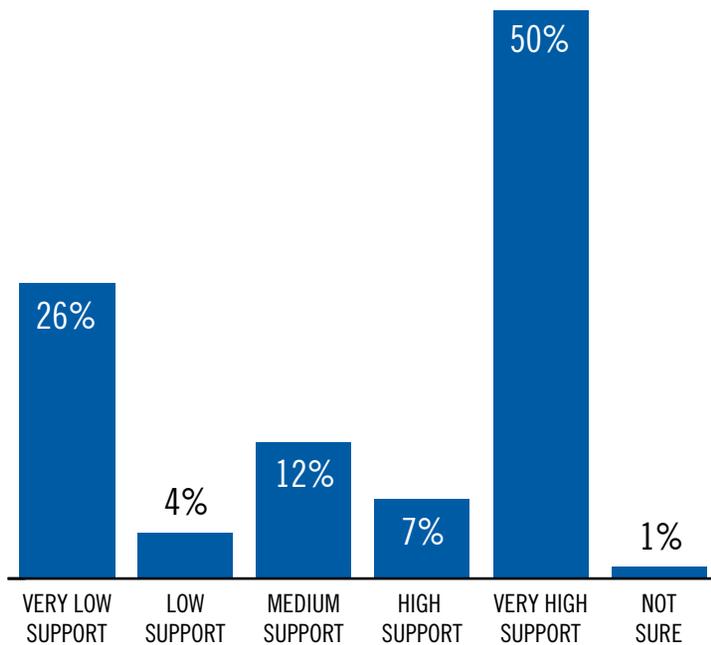


What you shared about Option A: One to three tracts where dogs are permitted to be off-leash

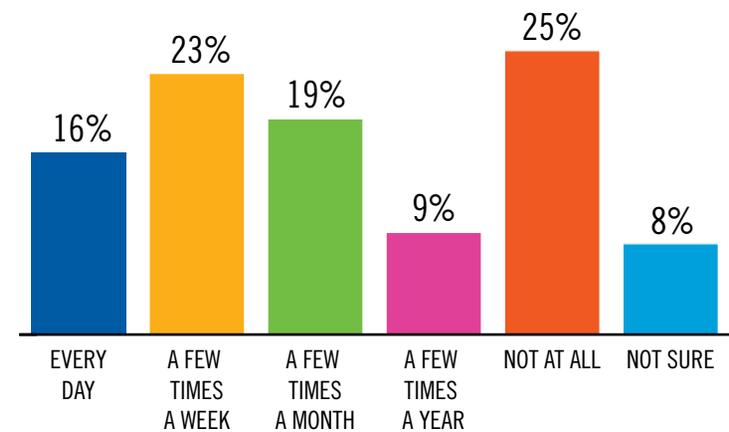
Of the survey respondents, 50% (1,125 respondents) indicated a very high level of support for Option A while 26% (579 respondents) indicated a very low level of support. 25% of respondents indicated that they would not use tracts with off-leash areas if Option A was chosen.



LEVEL OF SUPPORT

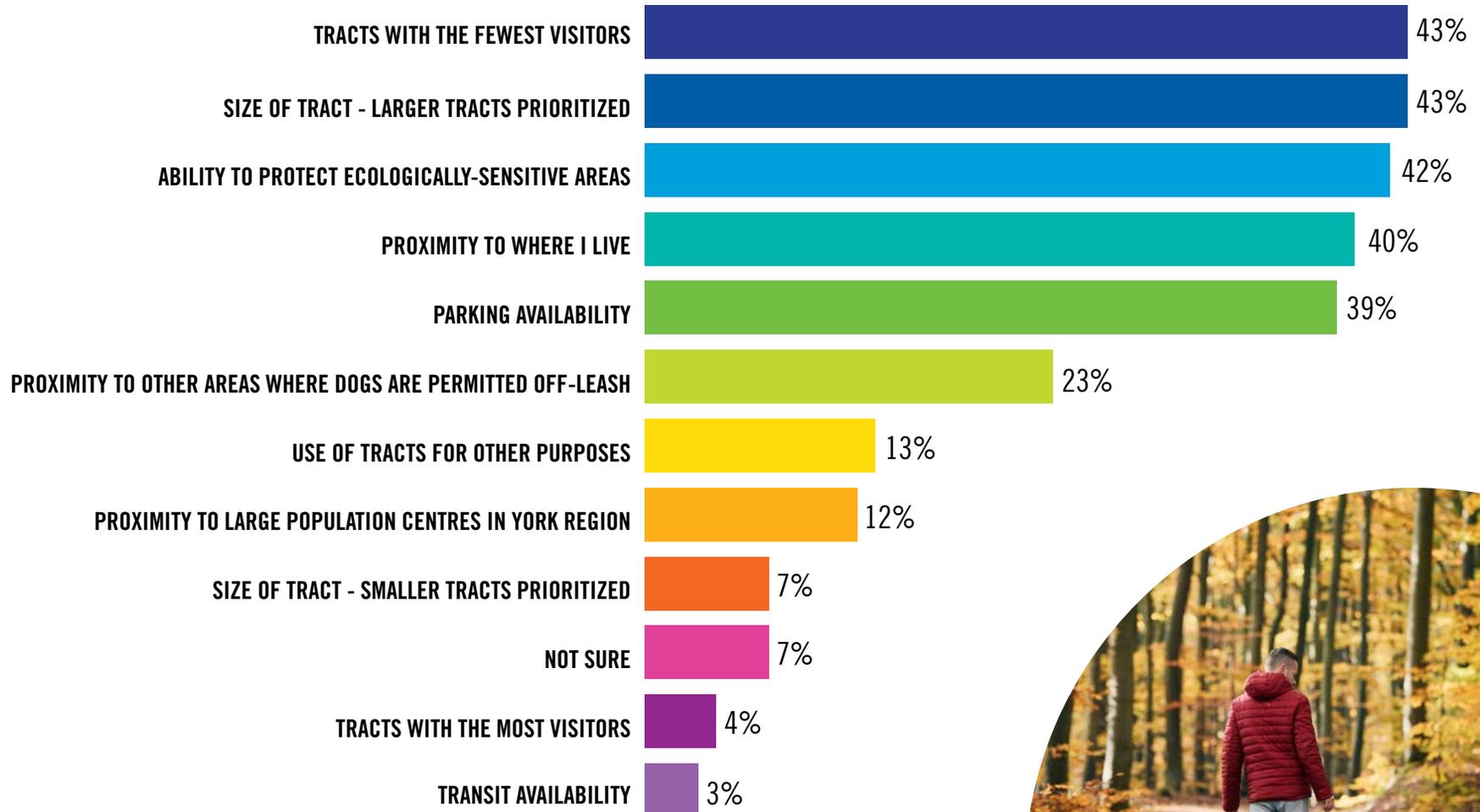


FREQUENCY OF USE (if Option A was implemented)



Considerations for selecting tract location(s) for Option A: One to three tracts where dogs are permitted to be off-leash

Survey respondents were asked to choose their top three priorities for selecting tract locations if Option A was chosen. The priorities for consideration if Option A was chosen are listed in descending order:



Note: Percentages will not add to 100% since participants were able to select up to three options.

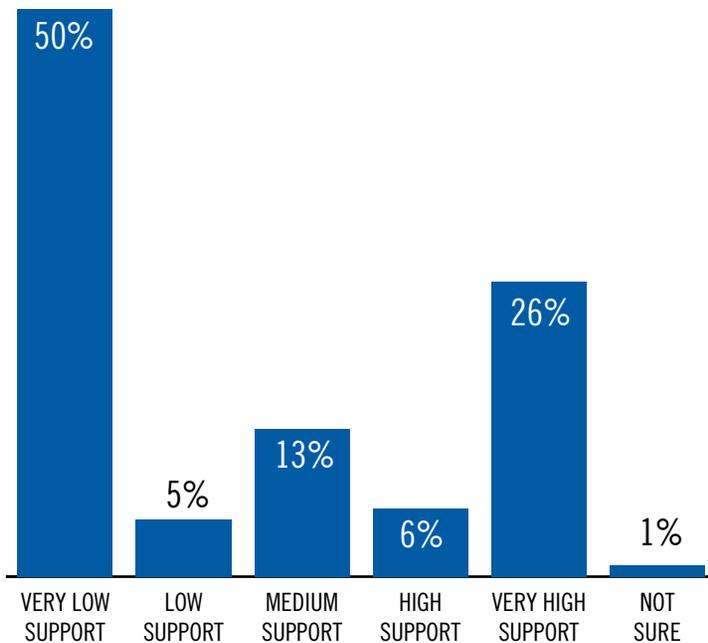


What you shared about Option B: One to three tracts where dogs would not be permitted (except for service dogs)

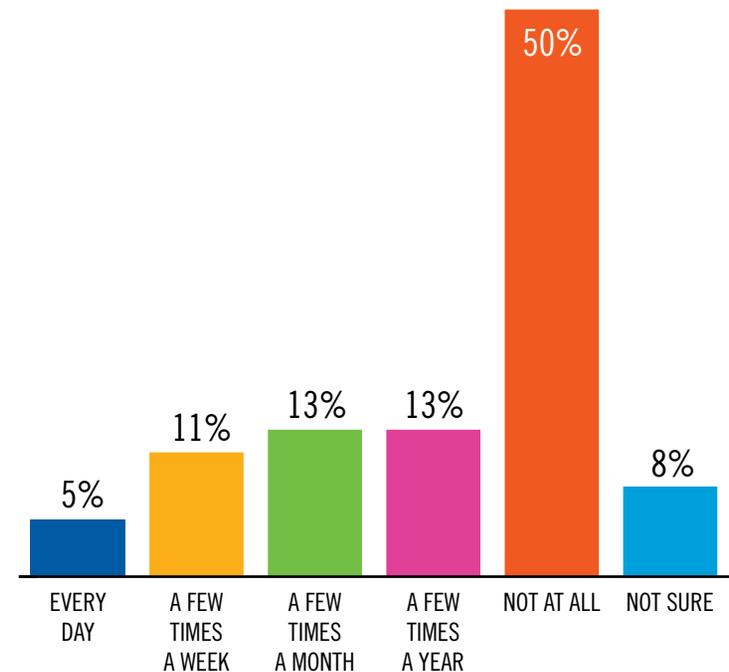
Of those who participated in the survey, 26% (579 respondents) indicated a very high level of support for Option B while the majority of respondents (50% or 1,119 respondents) indicated a very low level of support. 50% of survey respondents indicated that they would not use tracts where dogs were not permitted, if Option B was chosen.



LEVEL OF SUPPORT

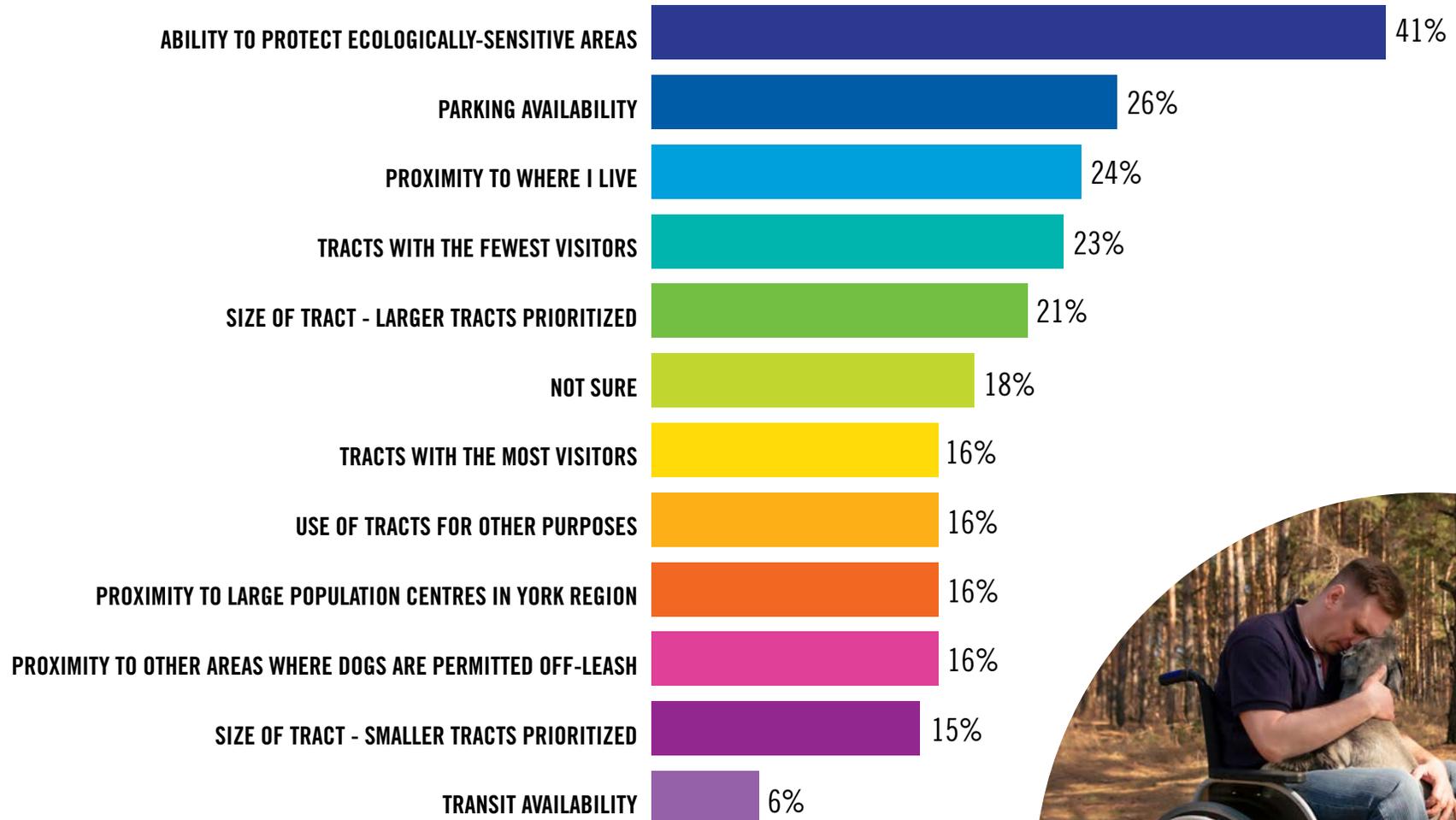


FREQUENCY OF USE (if Option B was implemented)



Considerations for selecting tract location(s) for Option B: One to three tracts where dogs would not be permitted (except for service dogs)

Survey respondents were asked to choose their top three priorities for selecting tract locations if Option B was chosen. The priorities for consideration if Option B was chosen are listed in descending order:



Note: Percentages will not add to 100% since participants were able to select up to three options.

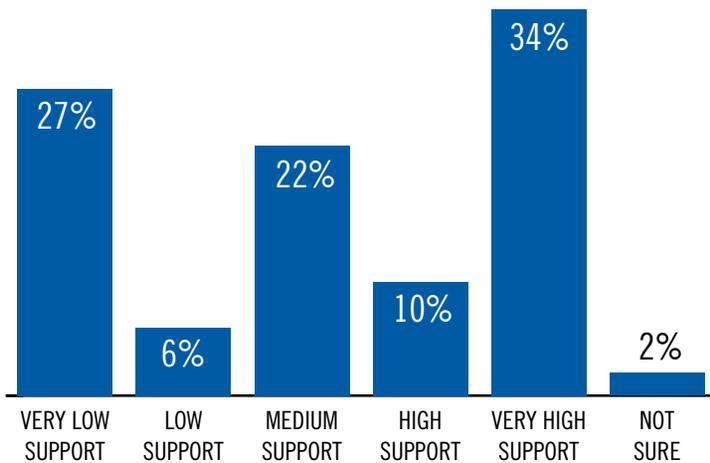


What you shared about Option C: One to two additional fenced dog off-leash area(s), in addition to the existing area at the Bendor and Graves Tract

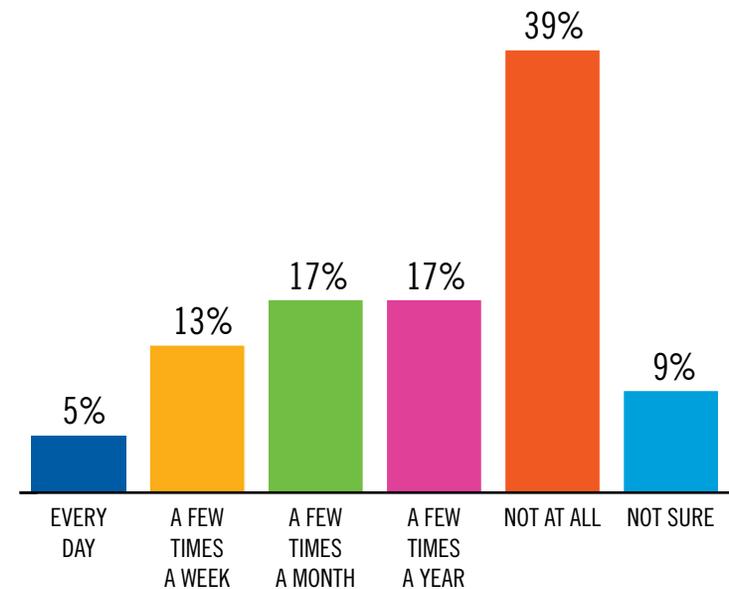


34% of respondents (758 respondents) reported a high level of support for Option C, while 27% (604 respondents) reported a low level of support. 39% percent of respondents indicated that they would not use a fenced dog off-leash area if Option C was chosen.

LEVEL OF SUPPORT

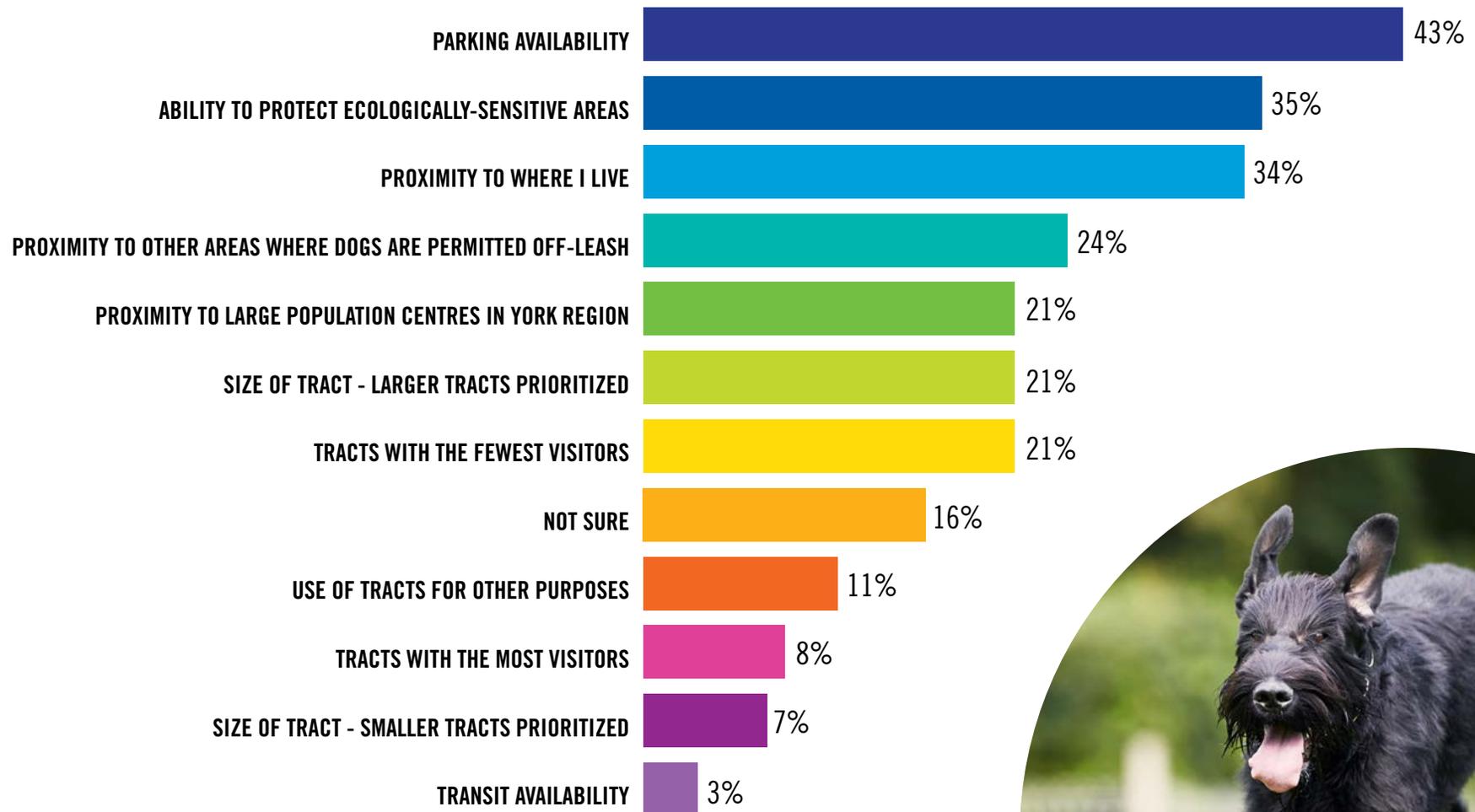


FREQUENCY OF USE (if Option C was implemented)



Considerations for selecting tract location(s) for Option C: One to two additional fenced dog off-leash area(s), in addition to the existing area at the Bendor and Graves Tract

Survey respondents were asked to choose their top three priorities for selecting tract locations if Option C was chosen. The priorities for consideration if Option C was chosen are listed in **descending order**:



Note: Percentages will not add to 100% since participants were able to select up to three options.



What factors are most important to you?

Survey respondents were asked what factors are most important when considering the three options. Participants were able to choose up to three responses. The percentage of respondents choosing each of these factors as one of their top three considerations are listed in descending order:

 <p>50%</p> <p>Providing an option for off-leash area(s)</p>	 <p>46%</p> <p>Consistency with pre-pandemic rules (i.e., dogs must be on-leash or under control)</p>	 <p>43%</p> <p>Reducing risk of conflict</p>
 <p>37%</p> <p>Protecting the Forest's sensitive ecological areas</p>	 <p>30%</p> <p>Balancing different preferences of Forest visitors</p>	 <p>27%</p> <p>Ensuring the rules are easy to understand</p>
 <p>24%</p> <p>Consistency with current rules (i.e., dogs on-leash at all times)</p>	 <p>18%</p> <p>Providing an option for no dog area(s)</p>	 <p>3%</p> <p>Not sure</p>

Additional factors to consider

Participants were provided the opportunity to suggest other factors for the Region to consider when selecting option(s). Ninety-seven additional comments were provided by survey respondents. While the vast majority of these comments were already reflected in the options in the multiple-choice list, additional factors suggested included:

- Possible overcrowding if dogs are only allowed on some Forest tracts
- Safety considerations
- Ability to ban dogs from all Forest tracts
- Ability to enforce the option(s)

Note: Percentages will not add to 100% since participants were able to select up to three options.

Your preferred travel distance to a preferred option

Survey participants were asked how far they would be willing to travel to their preferred option (A, B or C), should it be chosen for implementation. 53% stated that they would be willing to commute less than 30 minutes to visit their preferred option. Only 4% indicated that they would be willing to travel for more than 60 minutes to visit a Forest tract with their preferred option.



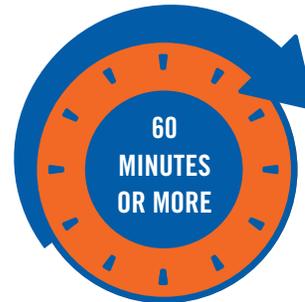
24%



53%



13%



4%



4%



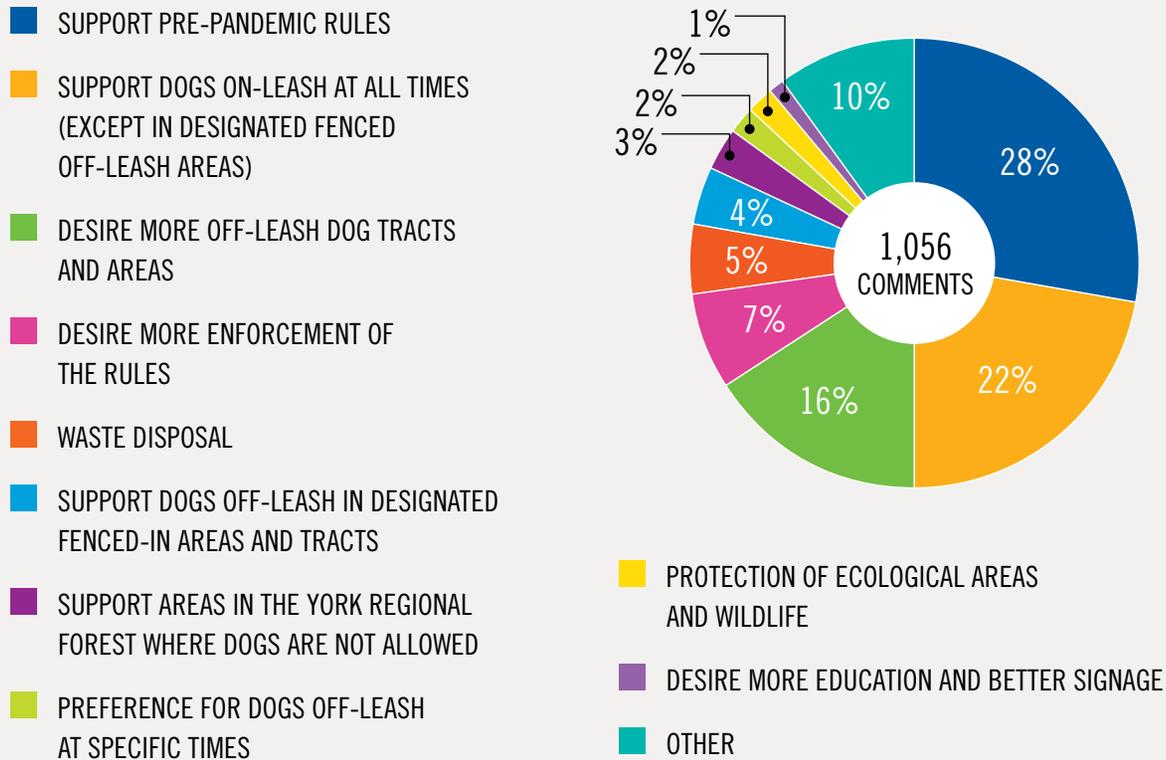
3%



Comments on options for dogs in the York Regional Forest

Survey respondents provided 1,056 comments about options for dogs in the York Regional Forest. These comments were analyzed and grouped by type; examples of comments left along with a percentage indicating the frequency of responses by theme are provided on the next few pages.

67 comments were also received via social media and email. These comments followed the same patterns as those received via the survey.



Note: Percentages will not add to 100% since participants were able to select up to three options.



SUPPORT PRE-PANDEMIC RULES – 28%

- Please return to pre-pandemic rules where dogs are allowed off-leash if under control! In our experience there has never been a problem.
- I was happy with the pre-COVID rules, and don't see any need to change them. I walk my dog off leash now.... especially now that the number of visitors to the tract that I use has dropped off significantly.
- The whole community shouldn't be punished for those that can't control their animal. Pre-pandemic rules will hopefully prevail.

SUPPORT DOGS ON-LEASH AT ALL TIMES (EXCEPT IN DESIGNATED FENCED OFF-LEASH AREAS) – 22%

- Dogs should be on leads at all times. Therefore, no problems would be encountered and no conflicts with horses and those who do not care for them.
- I walk 5x a week and we always meet a dog off leash. Please do something to make owners adhere to the rules to make it safe for everyone.
- I am a dog owner and I believe that all dogs should be leashed and under control. Too many people today say their dog is friendly and then it attacks.



Note: Comments may have been edited for clarity.

Comments on options for dogs in the York Regional Forest *(continued)*



DESIRE MORE OFF-LEASH DOG TRACTS AND AREAS – 16%

- Fenced trails gives more piece of mind to the owners. Make sure to include garbage at the entrance and exits.
- Please provide forest trails for off leash use for people to exercise their large dogs.
- York Region needs more off-leash options for dogs/owners. Please do not reduce access! Designated off-leash areas that are spacious and inviting will help balance needs of everyone and reduce conflicts.

DESIRE MORE ENFORCEMENT OF THE RULES – 7%

- Heavier fines for people who don't scoop their dog's poop and make people bring their trash out of the forest with them (just like campers).
- The Region needs to step up enforcement in these forests, many dog owners still treat it as off leash, with little control over their dogs until after they have jumped/pawed you.
- Enforcement of rules is required otherwise they are merely suggestions.

Note: Comments may have been edited for clarity.

WASTE DISPOSAL – 5%

- Providing waste bins. Nothing is worse than finding poo bags along the paths, left by people too lazy to take them away.
- It would be nice if dog bags were available at the start of the walk. Also maybe fines for those who leave their garbage on the trails.
- Readily available garbage receptacles for pet waist, recycling and garbage bins needs to be at all locations. If it isn't readily available, it will end up in the ecosystem.

SUPPORT DOGS OFF-LEASH IN DESIGNATED FENCED-IN AREAS AND TRACTS – 4%

- Dogs should be on a leash unless in a designated separate off leash area for safety reasons.
- To allow for that perceived right to exercise a dog in a public space, then it should be in a location that allows the dog to run free in an enclosed space such that the risk to the environment and people on the trails is limited.
- More dog parks please!

SUPPORT AREAS IN THE YORK REGIONAL FOREST WHERE DOGS ARE NOT ALLOWED – 3%

- The ability to know you can go to a nearby good-size tract with young kids and know for sure that they won't run into a dog, is really important.
- I understand not all patrons of the forest want to interact with dogs during their activity, so, please provide areas where these people can go and know dogs won't be there while leaving the other tracts open.
- Do not visit York Region parks because someone in household is afraid. Would 100% spend time in a forest where dogs are prohibited.



Comments on options for dogs in the York Regional Forest *(continued)*



PREFERENCE FOR DOGS OFF-LEASH AT SPECIFIC TIMES – 2%

- Most trails should have times where dogs are permitted off leash.
- Allow dogs at specific times, e.g. in spring/summer from 7 to 9 a.m. and 5 to 8 p.m. and in winter from 7 to 9 a.m. and 4 to 6 p.m.
- I would support an option where dogs could run free during certain hours, or days.

PROTECTION OF ECOLOGICAL AREAS AND WILDLIFE – 2%

- Off leash dogs frighten wildlife. The forests should be kept as wild as possible.
- Do not want dog owners that have no respect for the ecosystem and just want to walk their dogs.
- I am concerned that dog-owners who allow their pets to run off-leash through the forest don't understand the damage done to wildlife.

DESIRE MORE EDUCATION & BETTER SIGNAGE – 1%

- Under whatever new circumstances, there needs to be more signage and education about the responsibility of dog owners in the Forest.
- Maybe a basic course should be taken by public and dog owners, so they know how to behave in a forest.
- Courteous behaviour and education seems fairer than more rules and removing access for dogs.

OTHER – 10%

- ... Since ticks and fleas are becoming a problem, it would be nice if we are informed whether or not there are ticks and fleas found on the tract so we can be prepared.
- The access to the forest within walking distance to my home was a key factor in purchasing my previous home and current home. It means everything to my family including my dog.
- Access to water or a pond so dogs could cool off on a hot day.

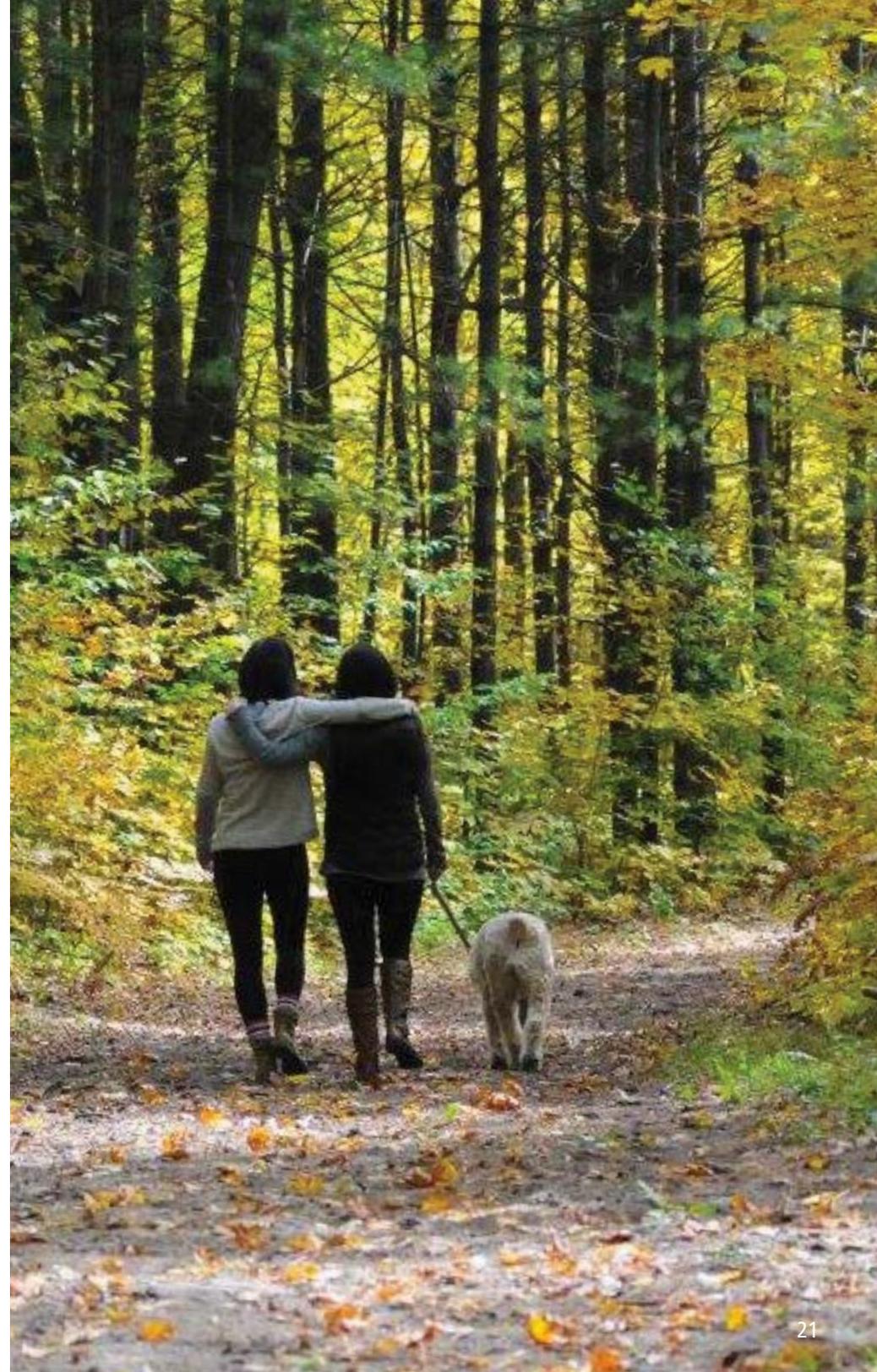
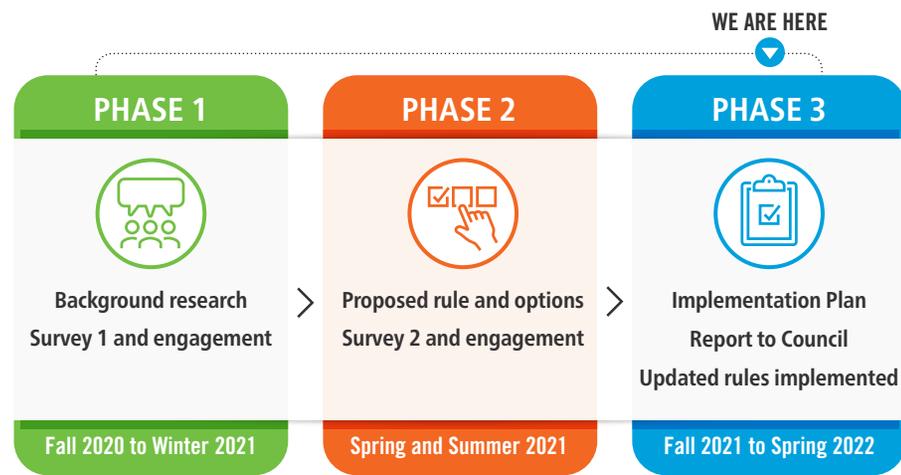


WHAT'S NEXT?

Feedback received from the Phase 1 and Phase 2 survey will be combined with research, technical guidance and feedback from stakeholders in late 2021, including representatives from cities and towns in York Region, conservation authorities and the Regional Forest Advisory Team. York Region staff will propose a management approach for dogs in the Forest, develop an implementation plan and present information to York Regional Council in early 2022.

The Region is committed to providing a variety of engagement opportunities that capture the diversity of opinions related to walking dogs on or off-leash in the York Regional Forest.

To receive updates about the project in the future, please sign up to our mailing list at york.ca/forestevents





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