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The City of Sydney will this month consider creating more off-leash parks for dogs and modifying off-leash arrangements at existing off-leash parks to enhance people's ability to allow their pet to play unrestricted.

Under the proposal, parks which are currently off-leash on a time share basis may become off-leash at all times. Dogs will still be prohibited from near children's playgrounds and food preparation areas.

The council invited residents and park visitors to comment on the proposal. Australia's pet care industry indicated its support of the City of Sydney's proposal to increase the number of off-leash dog parks. Australian Companion Animal Council president Kersti Seksel said in a statement that more than 40 per cent of Australian households owned a dog, and research showed that the benefits of people exercising their dog were felt by the community as a whole, not just the individual owner and their dog.

"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," Dr Seksel said.

Dr Lisa Wood from the School of Population Health at the University of Western Australia said that non-pet owners spontaneously identified people walking dogs as one of the ways in which they learned to recognise and know neighbours and other residents within their suburb. Dog owners also identified that social contact resulted from being out with their dogs.

Other key findings from the research show that:

- 40 per cent of pet owners said that they had got to know other people in their suburb through their pet, with dog walking being the activity that was most likely to initiate contact;
- 84 per cent of dog walkers talked to other pet owners while out



walking their dog;

- pet owners were 57 per cent more likely to be civically engaged than non-pet owners;
- pet owners were 74 per cent more likely to have a high social capital score compared with non-pet owners;
- 82 per cent of dog owners felt safer in their homes because of owning a dog; and
- the odds of feeling lonely more frequently were twice as high among non-pet owners as pet owners.

“With other research showing that dog owners are more likely to achieve the recommended physical activity guidelines than non-dog owners, any proposal that will get people out into parks and talking with each other can only be a good thing,” Dr Seksel said.