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REPORT TO REGIONAL PARKS COMMITTEE MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28, 2023

SUBJECT **Consideration of Regional Parks Land for Foodlands Access Program**

ISSUE SUMMARY

To seek conditional approval for the use of the eastern portion of Bear Hill Regional Park as the site of a new foodlands access program.

BACKGROUND

On April 13, 2022, the Capital Regional District (CRD) Board directed staff to proceed with the next phase of work to consider establishing a regional foodlands access service by identifying the operational requirements, service participants and funding strategy needed to establish a service.

Regional and Strategic Planning is currently developing a Foodlands Access Program for the proposed service. The program would seek to support new and young farmers by providing affordable access to productive farmland.

In 2022, Kwantlen Polytechnic University completed a business case on behalf of the CRD that examined three potential properties for use as a new farmer incubator site. The eastern portion of Bear Hill Regional Park (Bear Hill) has emerged as the preferred site due to the existing agricultural assets, viability of farming on the site and the overall cost of getting the incubator farm operational on the site. See Appendix A for the site map.

The property was originally acquired in 1992 as a part of a larger acquisition of the wooded eastern slopes of Bear Hill. The portion of the land under consideration is in the Agricultural Land Reserve, has land use designations that permit farming, has deer fencing, an irrigation system, an untenanted house and other farming supportive equipment. Regional Parks staff have determined that this portion of the property is well suited for increased agricultural use.

The fenced portion of the property is encumbered until 2035 with a License Agreement granting user rights to the City of Victoria, which previously operated a nursery on the site. The City has not used the land since 2013. A portion of the property was sub-leased to the Garry Oak Meadow Preservation Society, which expired in 2019.

The five-acre Bear Hill farm site is a valuable CRD asset that is currently underutilized but has excellent farming infrastructure already in place. The Regional Parks Committee indication of support at this time is not a full commitment to the program. See Appendix B for a summary of the Foodlands Access Program.

Operational details will be determined through the service establishment process. Decision points in the service establishment process are: confirm availability of a non-profit operator for the site, prepare a draft service establishment bylaw, confirm service participants, seek formal Regional Parks Committee approval for the use of the site, discuss the status of the License Agreement with the City of Victoria and secure CRD Board approval for service establishment.

The first step in this process is to confirm that the Bear Hill site can be used on a trial basis to test program viability as a new farmer incubator site.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board: That conditional approval be given to use the Bear Hill site as a test location for the Foodlands Access Program's new farmer incubator.

Alternative 2

That the Bear Hill Farm site as a test location for the Foodlands Access Program's new farmer incubator be denied.

Alternative 3

That the Consideration of Regional Parks Land for Foodlands Access Program report be referred back to staff for additional information.

IMPLICATIONS

Intergovernmental Implications

First Nations have expressed an interest in being more involved with CRD Regional Parks during the land acquisition and disposition process. First Nations will be engaged through the service establishment process. Should a service be established, First Nations will be engaged on the implementation of the service to determine interest in program participation.

Regional Growth Strategy Implications

The proposed Foodlands Access Program supports implementation of the Regional Growth Strategy objective 6.1, which is focused on fostering a resilient food and agriculture system. It strives to protect the region's food and farmlands, enhances local food security, expands food system economic opportunities, and provides opportunities to new and young farmers to gain access to productive agricultural lands.

Financial Implications

At this time, there are no direct financial implications of this decision, as the proposal simply asks for conditional approval in concept. Financial implications of the full program will be addressed in the new service establishment process.

A key assumption is that the Foodlands Access Program can activate an underutilized CRD asset without the need to purchase the asset from the Regional Parks Service during the program viability testing phasing. A property appraisal estimates the market value of the site under consideration at \$1.6 million. The trade-off in allowing the proposed program use of the land is that it limits the Regional Parks Service from disposing of the asset and raising funds for future land acquisition. There would be significant financial implications for the proposed service should the land not be available.

A second assumption is that the Foodlands Access Program would be a fully funded initiative that will not require CRD Regional Parks resources to operate.

Service Delivery Implications

Use of the site under consideration for the proposed Foodlands Access Program will not have a significant impact on service delivery for CRD Regional Parks. The site is not currently in use as public park land and the park management plan does not contemplate expanding park uses to the site. The proposed program could be facilitated through a license agreement, similar in nature to the current agreement with the City of Victoria that lasts until 2035.

Alignment with Board & Corporate Priorities

Conditional approval for the use of the Bear Hill site supports delivery of CRD Corporate Plan initiative 8b-1: *consider establishment of a new foodlands access service*. Further consideration of service establishment cannot proceed without this conditional approval.

Alignment with Existing Plans & Strategies

Development of a new foodlands access service responds to direction from the CRD Food and Agriculture Strategy (2016) and Regional Growth Strategy objective 6.1 on Food Systems. Initial service design has been informed by the CRD Regional Foodlands Access Program Feasibility Study (2019) and the Kwantlen Polytechnic University Foodlands Trust Business Case (2022).

CONCLUSION

The CRD Board directed staff to consider establishing a foodlands access service. The purpose of the service is to support new and young farmers by providing affordable access to productive farmland. An underutilized portion of Bear Hill Regional Park is the preferred site for use as a new farmer incubator. Conditional approval for the use of the Bear Hill site is needed prior to considering any further requirements associated with service establishment.

RECOMMENDATION

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board: That conditional approval be given to use the Bear Hill site as a test location for the Foodlands Access Program's new farmer incubator.

Submitted by:	Jeff Leahy, Senior Manager, Regional Parks
Concurrence:	Larisa Hutcheson, P. Eng., General Manager, Parks & Environmental Services
Concurrence:	Kevin Lorette, P. Eng., MBA, General Manager, Planning & Protective Services
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ATTACHMENTS

Appendix A: Bear Hill Regional Park – Site Map

Appendix B: Foodlands Access Program Description