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REPORT TO PLANNING AND PROTECTIVE SERVICES COMMITTEE MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, JUNE 21, 2023

SUBJECT **Update on Foodlands Access Service**

ISSUE SUMMARY

To provide an update on the proposed Foodlands Access Service.

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.

The proposed service objective is to support new and young farmers by providing affordable access to productive farmland. A Foodlands Access Program would deliver the proposed service through two delivery streams:

- **Stream #1 – Surplus Land Conversion:** Convert surplus publicly owned land to agricultural use and offer affordable leases to new and young farmers. A qualified non-profit operator (NPO) would provide farm site management and offer incubator services. Incubator services include new farmer education and support for matters such as production and marketing. The CRD would secure surplus properties, manage leases, provide capital investments to bring land into production and provide program oversight.
- **Stream #2 – Grants:** Provide a granting function to support agricultural lease agreements. The granting function would leverage an existing land matching initiative offered by Young Agrarians that connects landowners with new farmers.

The proposed program is based on a 2022 business case by Kwantlen Polytechnic University (KPU). The business case examined the costs and potential operating models to convert three properties to agricultural use. The business case recommended a new farmer incubator model, delivered by an NPO, as the most cost-effective option.

The CRD needs new service and funding authorities to deliver this work. Specifically, the new service must be able to hold and manage land through lease agreements, enter into contracts with service providers, administer grants and raise and spend funds to pay for operating and capital expenses. The decision-point for new service establishment is to approve these general authorities and set a requisition limit that caps how much money the service can raise. Staff would develop detailed program direction at the operational level and seek Board approval through the annual service and financial planning process.

Phased Implementation: Trial Site at Bear Hill Regional Park

Staff propose to phase the implementation of the Foodlands Access Program. A trial phase would help manage start-up risks associated with investments needed to bring land into production and build program delivery capacity. Lessons learned from the trial phase would inform future decisions about program expansion to other sites and the level of capital investment needed to bring land into production. This would allow the CRD to phase in costs and prudently manage the operational impacts associated with a new service.

The preferred trial site is the eastern portion of Bear Hill Regional Park, which is in the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). The site has existing agricultural assets, land use designations that permit farming, and is estimated to have the lowest overall costs to bring the land into food production. The proposed program could be facilitated through a license agreement in accordance with the Regional Parks Bylaw.

The proposed farm concept is to create 10 to 15 farmer plots of 0.25 to 0.5 acres each. The CRD would undertake capital investments at the site to support farming efforts and an agriculture NPO would provide farm site management and farmer incubator programs. At the end of the five-year trial phase, the program will have proven experience running a farm site and have the capacity needed to convert additional sites to productive agricultural use.

Next Steps

On June 28, 2023, staff will seek conditional approval for use of the Bear Hill site from the CRD Regional Parks Committee. The portion of the site under consideration is not currently in use as a public park and the park management plan does not contemplate expansion of park use to the site. Staff must also confirm NPO availability through a request for qualifications process. These are operational decision points for the service. The proposed service would need to be re-scoped if these operational requirements cannot be met.

Staff will next draft the service establishment bylaw, canvas local governments and electoral areas for interest in service participation and finalize the funding approach. Once these matters are confirmed, staff will seek direction from the Board to initiate the service establishment process.

Timing is anticipated as follows:

- Q2 2023**
 - Seek CRD Regional Parks Committee conditional approval for use of the Bear Hill site for agriculture.
- Ongoing**
 - Engage First Nations on use of Bear Hill site and participation in the proposed Foodlands Access Program.
- Q3 2023**
 - Confirm availability of farm site NPO.
 - Seek input from agricultural stakeholders and local government staff.
 - Prepare draft service establishment bylaw.
- Q4 2023**
 - Present draft service establishment bylaw to CRD Board.
 - Canvas local governments for interest in participating in service.
 - Seek Regional Parks Committee approval for use of the Bear Hill site.
- Q1-Q2 2024**
 - Finalize service establishment bylaw and deliver service establishment bylaw process.
- 2024-2025**
 - Develop detailed operational requirements and activate Bear Hill site for agriculture and initiate grant program.

IMPLICATIONS

Alignment with Board & Corporate Priorities

CRD Corporate Plan initiative 8b-1 is to consider establishment of a new Foodlands Access Service. Work to date advances delivery of this initiative.

Alignment with Existing Plans & Strategies

Development of a new Foodlands Access Service responds to direction from the CRD Food and Agriculture Strategy (2016) and the Regional Growth Strategy (RGS). Initial service design has been informed by the CRD Regional Foodlands Access Program Feasibility Study (2019) and the KPU Foodlands Trust Business Case (2022).

Financial Implications

Financial implications will be addressed through the service establishment process. There will be two financial implications to consider. The first implication is the requisition limit for the new service. The requisition limit identifies the maximum amount of money that can be raised by requisition for the service. Depending on service aspirations, the requisition limit may be set higher than the cost of initial service delivery to allow the program to be phased over time. The decision about requisition limit is made through the service establishment process.

The second implication is the annual cost to deliver the service. The proposed trial program would seek to test service delivery and allow for decisions about program expansion to be made in the future. Decisions about operating costs are made through the annual service and financial planning processes.

A key financial assumption is that purchasing agricultural parcels would be cost prohibitive. Instead, the service would seek to use a mechanism such as a lease agreement to secure surplus public land that could be converted to farming. This would allow the service to prioritize spending on land improvements to bring the land into production.

First Nations Reconciliation

Through the service establishment process, First Nations will be engaged to determine interest in program participation. This includes any engagement with respect to Regional Parks land, as First Nations have expressed an interest in being more involved with CRD Regional Parks during the land acquisition and disposition process.

Intergovernmental Implications

Staff will canvas the region's 13 local governments and three electoral areas for interest in program participation in Q4 2023. Knowing the number of interested service participants helps prepare the service funding strategy and scope the service establishment approval process.

Regional Growth Strategy Implications

The proposed service supports implementation of RGS 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.

Service Delivery Implications

The proposed Foodlands Access Program would be a new CRD service, introducing a new service level to the Regional and Strategic Planning Division. A key service delivery assumption is that farm site management and incubator farm programming is provided by a qualified NPO. The CRD does not have agricultural specialists who can manage a farm site and offer incubator programming to new and young farmers.

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. Staff are preparing a Foodlands Access Program to confirm operational requirements, identify interested participants and develop a funding strategy. Should all requirements be met, the CRD Board will be able to consider establishing a new service in Q1 2024.

RECOMMENDATION

There is no recommendation. This report is for information only.

Submitted by:	Emily Sinclair, MCIP, RPP, Senior Manager, Regional and Strategic Planning
Concurrence:	Kevin Lorette, P. Eng., MBA, General Manager, Planning & Protective Services
Concurrence:	Larisa Hutcheson, P. Eng., General Manager, Parks & Environmental Services
Concurrence:	Ted Robbins, B. Sc., C. Tech., Chief Administrative Officer