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REPORT TO REGIONAL PARKS COMMITTEE MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 2024

SUBJECT **2024 Capital Regional District Regional Parks and Trails Resident Survey**

ISSUE SUMMARY

To provide the results of the 2024 Capital Regional District (CRD) Regional Parks and Trails Resident Survey (Resident Survey).

BACKGROUND

The Resident Survey assesses residents' opinions, values, attitudes, satisfaction and patterns of visitor use over time, providing comprehensive insights into how the community perceives the CRD's regional parks and trails services. Key data points from the survey highlight which parks and trails residents visit, their purposes and their modes of travel. This information supports the CRD's planning and operational decisions and tracks progress toward the 2022-2032 Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan (Strategic Plan) priorities. The 2024 Resident Survey results are provided in Appendix A.

The survey covers the entire regional planning area, including the CRD's 13 municipalities, the Juan de Fuca Electoral Area, the Southern Gulf Islands and Salt Spring Island. It is statistically representative, with 7,650 households contacted and 1,762 valid surveys completed, achieving a response rate of 23%, above the target of 20%. The 2024 Resident Survey methodology was updated to reflect administrative, societal and technological changes since 2017, as well as to better align with other regional studies and with strategic planning priorities. The updates include:

- questionnaire reviewed with a diversity, equity and inclusion lens
- offered the survey online, with options for telephone and physical questionnaires
- expanded the options for gender
- added a question about dwelling tenure (rented or owned)
- added a question about household income
- added a question about accessibility
- added a question about access to e-bikes and e-micromobility devices
- distinguished barriers specific to regional parks and trails
- added questions aligned with five strategic priorities

Although it followed the same general procedure as previous surveys, the 2024 Resident Survey is unique in that it took place following severe pandemic-induced impacts on regional parks and trails visitation levels, and a period of rapid regional growth. As a result, the report notes differences in satisfaction levels from previous surveys and how the pandemic or other factors may have influenced these changes.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board:
That the Resident Survey results and final report be adopted and published on the CRD website.

Alternative 2

That the Resident Survey results and final report be referred to staff with direction for revision.

IMPLICATIONS

Alignment with Board & Corporate Priorities

New survey questions on reconciliation, climate resiliency and access and equity align with the CRD Board's regional priorities of Climate Action & Environment and First Nations. The updated survey now includes more nuanced questions about use, barriers and transportation modes specific to regional trails, which also supports the CRD Board's strategic priority of Transportation.

Delivering the 2024 Resident Survey meets the CRD Corporate Priority 7-d2 in the 2023-2026 CRD Corporate Plan to "Undertake the Resident Survey."

Alignment with Existing Plans & Strategies

Delivering the 2024 Resident Survey meets Priority 3-1c in the Strategic Plan to "Undertake Resident Surveys to assess visitor use satisfaction and emerging trends related to regional parks and regional trails (every 5 years)."

Climate Implications

To better understand visitor use of regional parks and trails, the 2024 Resident Survey separated questions about barriers, travel methods and frequency of use for regional parks and trails.

The Resident Survey collected additional information on electric bicycles and e-micromobility devices. It found that 29% of households own, or are planning to own, a micro-mobility vehicle (e.g., e-bike, electric scooter, etc.) and 19% are unsure. This number is higher than was reported in the 2022 Capital Regional District Origin Destination Household Travel Survey, which found 11% of residents' adult bicycles were electric, representing 30,490 bicycles, and that 2.3% of households had access to an e-micromobility device.

Climate Action & Resiliency is one of the updated Strategic Plan priorities. In addition to historical survey questions on climate action, the 2024 Resident Survey included new questions on climate resiliency. Most CRD residents recognize the important role parks play in contributing to regional climate resiliency (80%), meeting Canada's protected area targets (63%) and the role trails play in reducing greenhouse gas emissions (75%). Reducing greenhouse gas emissions is viewed as a medium-to-high priority for regional park and trail management for most residents (64%). Enhancing infrastructure throughout the region to promote active transportation, such as cycling and walking, is also largely supported by CRD residents. Residents largely view the use of the Land Acquisition Funds to expand both urban (62%) and rural (63%) bike and pedestrian trails as medium-to-high priority.

Environmental Implications

Management and acquisition of regional parkland and protected natural areas as a way of mitigating climate change is also largely supported by CRD residents. The Resident Survey results indicate residents' prevailing support for the conservation mandate of regional parks and trails.

Conservation remains one of the core missions and a Strategic Plan priority of the CRD's Regional Parks Service. Residents' support for conservation remains strong and consistent across survey years. The two highest reported benefits of regional parks were "a place to experience natural environment" (95%) and "a place for the conservation of natural environments" (94%). Additionally, residents rate protecting the natural environment and conducting restoration projects aimed at conserving natural areas as two of the top three priorities for managing regional parks and trails.

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion Implications

The 2024 Resident Survey methodology and questionnaire changes were reviewed with an equity, diversity and inclusion lens. The survey methodology was offered by multiple means for the first time to allow for a range of response methods. However, year over year, there is a higher response rate from older, wealthier homeowners in the region. Younger people remain underrepresented. Similarly, more residents that self-identify as women, versus men, respond to the survey. In future survey years, offering incentives like gift certificates for groceries may help increase survey response rates from a broader demographic. It is also recommended that future surveys explore barriers to visitor use for people who have and have not visited a regional park and trail (while collecting distinct data between the two groups).

Access & Equity is one of the updated Strategic Plan priorities. The 2024 Resident Survey included new questions about access and equity. Most residents view the CRD's parks as welcoming and accessible to all (82%) and recognize the benefit of regional trails for providing accessible routes for residents (81%). Many view regional parks and trails as contributing to equitable access (63%). However, this percentage is lower (54%) among households in which at least one member has a permanent accessibility requirement. The survey results do show that households where at least one member has a permanent accessibility requirement (20%) are less likely to have visited a regional park or trail in the past year. This suggests that enhancing equitable access to regional parks and trails is needed, and that CRD residents are in support of these efforts (65% of residents identify accessibility enhancements as a medium-to-high priority).

Financial Implications

The results from the Resident Survey inform regional parks and trails planning, operation and maintenance activities and residents' priorities for conservation and restoration. Over half (65%) of participants supported increasing funding to operate regional parks and trails (up from 57% in 2017).

First Nations Implications

Since the 2017 Resident Survey, the CRD has adopted a statement of reconciliation, committed to building strong and enduring relationships with neighbouring First Nations governments and added reconciliation as one of the five strategic priorities in the Strategic Plan. The 2024 Resident Survey is the first survey year to include questions on reconciliation, and the results will serve as a baseline to measure residents' perceptions of the CRD's progress towards the short, medium and long-term reconciliation actions identified in the Strategic Plan. The new questions about reconciliation were included in the values, benefits, management and acquisition category of questions. While reconciliation is a new strategic priority, many residents acknowledge the

importance of parks (61%) and trails (51%) for respecting and preserving First Nations cultural heritage. Additionally, residents see parks (53%) and trails (44%) as valuable places for learning about these traditions. Two-thirds of residents (67%) feel expanding Conservancy Areas (a new park classification that protects cultural values) is a medium-to-high priority. Currently, no regional parks are classified as conservancies, so this number likely speaks to the public's awareness of Indigenous Guardian programs and other park agency conservancies (e.g., BC Parks). When asked about whether regional parks and trails are effectively contributing to reconciliation with First Nations, most residents did not know whether the region's parks and trails are effectively contributing to reconciliation and responded with the "neutral" statement (61%). This result indicates that the majority of CRD residents are likely unaware of the efforts the CRD has undertaken to foster reconciliation in regional parks and trails, and that future awareness building in this area is needed.

Social Implications

The Resident Survey is a randomly selected, statistically valid survey, and a valuable tool to measure residents' satisfaction over time. The 2024 Resident Survey did indicate a drop in satisfaction from 2017. The drop might be attributable to pressures on CRD regional parks and trails that have developed or worsened since 2017 (Appendix A – Executive Summary). This is an important result, since satisfaction ratings remain high in other self-selecting visitor or resident surveys. The Resident Survey supports and complements other CRD regional parks and trails public engagement processes by providing a broader understanding of satisfaction and identifying gaps in user groups to improve the regional parks and trails services for everyone.

Visitor experience remains one of the core missions and a Strategic Plan priority of the CRD's regional parks service. The survey confirmed that regional parks and trails are popular destinations, with 91% of residents visiting a regional park and 83% visiting a regional trail. The top five activities in regional parks and trails are walking (79%), hiking (71%), viewing nature (43%), cycling (42%) and dog walking (38%). Consistent across survey years, residents value parks and trails for their contributions to residents' health and wellbeing, the conservation of natural environments and providing space for outdoor recreation. Like previous survey years, the top visited regional parks were Elk/Beaver Lake (66%), Thetis Lake (57%) and Island View Beach (52%). The most visited regional trails were the Galloping Goose (72%), Lochside Regional Trail (56%) and the E&N Rail Trail (37%).

CONCLUSION

The CRD Regional Parks and Trails Resident Survey is conducted approximately every five years and provides valuable insights into residents' opinions, values, attitudes (benefits), satisfaction and visitor use patterns over time. The changes to the methodology and the questions added in relation to the five priorities of the 2022-2032 Strategic Plan and other CRD Board's strategic priorities will make it possible to measure and track user satisfaction with the work done in these areas. In this regard, the results seem to reflect that the priorities in the Strategic Plan also align with users' concerns.

The underlying reasons for the observed differences in overall satisfaction between the 2017 and 2024 studies are unclear at this time. Consistency in methodology will be essential for accurately assessing the impact of a partial return to normalcy and the influence of more intrinsic factors.

The CRD will use the results to support planning, land use decisions, guide operations and track progress towards the regional Strategic Plan priorities.

RECOMMENDATION

The Regional Parks Committee recommends to the Capital Regional District Board:
That the Resident Survey results and final report be adopted and published on the CRD website.

Submitted by:	Mike MacIntyre, Senior Manager, Regional Parks
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ATTACHMENTS

- Appendix A: 2024 CRD Regional Parks and Trails Resident Survey Report – November 2024
- Appendix B: Resident Survey Fact Sheet – Regional Parks – November 2024