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REPORT TO REGIONAL PARKS COMMITTEE MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2024

SUBJECT Regional Parks Internal Inclusion and Accessibility Audit

ISSUE SUMMARY

To provide a summary of the ongoing accessibility audits and enhancements taking place across the regional parks and trails system.

BACKGROUND

Enhancing health and well-being by providing equitable access to regional parks and regional trails is a priority for the Capital Regional District (CRD). Goal five under Strategic Priorities of the CRD Board-approved Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan 2022-2032 identifies that regional parks and regional trails are inclusive and accessible.

In 2003, a Universal Access Plan for Regional Parks was developed. This plan identified approaches to establish facilities and services for the widest possible range of park and trail visitors and set out a five-year plan to implement changes. Between 2003 and 2022, projects related to inclusion and accessibility were undertaken on an ad-hoc basis, as resources allowed. Projects included: upgrades to the accessible Elsie/King Trail and Nature Centre in Francis/King Regional Park; accessible building upgrades as facilities were replaced; construction of accessible fishing piers at Elk/Beaver Lake and Mount Work regional parks; installation of mobility mats at Thetis Lake and Elk/Beaver Lake regional parks; numerous trail surface enhancement projects across the system; the development of the User-Friendly Trail Guide, a partnership with the Intermunicipal Advisory Committee on Disability Issues and West Shore Parks & Recreation.

In 2019, Regional Parks introduced a new position to the staff complement, an Outdoor Recreation Specialist. This position, and the subsequent Outdoor Recreation Technician, greatly increased the capacity of Regional Parks to assess access and equity initiatives across the parks and trails system and to help prioritize projects.

Recognizing that user objectives for visiting regional parks and trails is unique to each individual and depends on the characteristics of the recreation setting, the CRD set out to improve park and trail accessibility through the curation of quality experiences. In 2022, the CRD retained consulting firm, McElhanney, in partnership with RC Strategies and the Recreation Adaptive Society, to undertake a review of accessible nature-based outdoor recreation opportunities within CRD regional parks and trails. Five parks with high visitation, proximity to urban centres and that provided a range of recreational activities were reviewed. Potential enhancements to these parks were identified through consultation with stakeholders and subject-matter experts. The full report can be found in Appendix A.

In 2023, a number of projects were undertaken to enhance accessibility within regional parks and trails:

- Completion of an initial annual regional parks and trails accessibility audit, focusing on built infrastructure.

- Completion of 52% of the recommended maintenance improvements identified by the internal accessibility audit.
- Development of an accessible parking facility standard that meets current guidelines and the recognized Canadian Standards Association accessible design standards.
- Establishment of a partnership with the not-for-profit Power to Be to provide staff resources, and equipment to deliver accessible regional park nature programs.
- Updating the information provided for all regional park nature programs to include detailed trail and facility information for each event.
- Creating accessibility information documents for four high-visitation regional parks, including Thetis Lake, Elk/Beaver Lake, Francis/King and Island View Beach. These accessibility information documents can be found on the respective park pages on the CRD website.

In 2024, the CRD will retain a consultant to develop accessibility guidelines for regional parks. These guidelines will provide specifications for built infrastructure within regional parks and trails, along with standardizing what visitor use information is provided.

IMPLICATIONS

Alignment with Existing Plans & Strategies

Priority action 5-1b of the Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan 2022-2032 provides direction to conduct an Inclusion and Accessibility Assessment of regional parks and regional trails that assess barriers and deterrents to access. To accompany the 2023 staff-led regional parks and trail accessibility audit, in 2024 staff will undertake a subsequent regional parks and trails inclusion audit.

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

Statistics Canada estimated that in 2018, 20.5% of BC's population aged 15-64 years old was living with one or more disabilities and 41.7% of BC's population is living with one or more disabilities. Accessibility and inclusion are about creating communities and offering services that enable everyone to fully participate without barriers.

Following the development of the *Accessible Canada Act, 2019*, and the subsequent formation of Accessibility Standards Canada, a technical committee is developing a national accessibility standard for Outdoor Spaces (CAN-ASC-2.1). This standard is anticipated for publication in summer 2024 and will provide specifications for outdoor path and trails, seating and picnic areas, accessible parking and outdoor play spaces.

The *Accessible British Columbia Act* requires the CRD to establish an Accessibility Advisory Committee, which was implemented in fall 2023. This committee will provide recommendations to inform the CRD Accessibility Plan and help improve the livability, inclusivity and accessibility for persons working and interacting with the CRD.

Service Delivery Implications

Environmental and topographical limitation will prevent accessible access to all areas of regional parks and trails. The CRD will prioritize providing unique and meaningful accessible opportunities that represent the regional parks and trails system.

CONCLUSION

Regional parks and regional trails are a public good that belong to everyone in the region. CRD Regional Park staff have completed numerous projects to improve access and equity within the context of regional parks and trails. In 2023, projects focused on enhancing the visitor experience for park users with diverse abilities, providing more detailed information online for accessible trip planning, and removing physical barriers that deter access to regional parks and trails. Staff will continue to identify opportunities to improve park and trail accessibility, inclusion and equity.

RECOMMENDATION

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

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ATTACHMENT

Appendix A: Accessible Nature-Based Outdoor Recreation Opportunities Study – April 10, 2023