

**REPORT TO PARKS & ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27, 2019**

SUBJECT Land Acquisition Fund Priorities Survey

ISSUE

To present the results of the Land Acquisition Fund (LAF) Priorities Survey and consider next steps.

BACKGROUND

The regional park system has grown from just over 8,400 hectares in 2000 to over 13,000 hectares in 2018. Visits to regional parks and trails have also increased by more than 40%, from 5.2 million in 2010 to 7.5 million in 2018. Some high-value facilities, such as trestles, bridges and dams, need to be repaired/replaced in the near future to ensure the safety and enjoyment of park visitors. Planning and development of newly-acquired land needs to be conducted prior to opening new parks for public use. Pressure on park facilities is expected to increase with population growth, increased visitation and acquisition of more parkland.

In 2018, the Capital Regional District (CRD) Board directed staff to undertake an online public opinion survey to obtain preliminary information on the public's views regarding whether to renew the Land Acquisition Fund beyond 2019 and, if it is renewed, whether some portion of that fund should be used to support capital facility development and maintenance in regional parks. An online survey was made available to the public for 14 weeks in the summer/fall of 2018. The CRD website, social media and information posted in regional parks were used to promote the survey and to encourage public participation. A survey report has been prepared and offers an in-depth analysis of the opinions and suggestions received from self-selected survey participants (Attachments 1 and 2).

Key highlights of the survey results are:

- 89% of participants were in favour of extending the Regional Parks LAF for another 10 years.
- 57% of respondents support continuing to use the LAF only for land purchases and associated costs, such as legal fees and appraisals.
- 39% supported using the LAF for other purposes.
- 77% of respondents supported using the fund to buy parkland, even if facilities for public use might not be developed for many years.

Other findings:

- The following three actions were ranked as priorities for regional parks and trails over the next 5 years: 1) acquire more land; 2) protect natural environments and species; and 3) restore and conserve natural environments and species.
- The majority of respondents (57%) disagreed that there was enough land set aside in the CRD for environmental protection and outdoor recreation.
- The majority (60%) of respondents were in favour of buying land that would only be used for conservation purposes.

ALTERNATIVES

That the Parks & Environment Committee recommend to the CRD Board:

Alternative 1

1. That staff bring back criteria for future land acquisitions that reflect regional park significance, representing the diverse geography and environments within the context of the entire region;
2. That staff report back to committee on the status of the Landscape Evaluation Project; and
3. That staff report back on options during the 2020 budget process for service level adjustments to sustain the Regional Parks service.

Alternative 2

1. That staff be directed to carry out further research to confirm findings from the 2018 survey regarding the public's opinion of how those funds should be used in the future; and
2. That staff report back to committee on status of the Landscape Evaluation Project.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There is strong evidence that the public supports the continuation of the LAF for another 10 years from the 2017 Resident's Survey, as well as from this more informal survey. The public's views on how these funds should be used is less clear from available survey evidence. The 2018 survey was not designed to provide responses that are statistically representative of the CRD as a whole. Questions about how to use the LAF have not been asked of a representative sample of CRD residents in the past. Therefore, the results of this survey for these questions have not been validated through previous public engagement.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

The LAF was established in 2000. During this time, with the support of its partners, the regional parks system has grown from 8,400 hectares to more than 13,000 hectares. Current Board direction is to focus future regional park system expansion in areas west of the Sooke River. A Landscape Evaluation Project that includes analysis and public consultation is currently underway to identify priority areas for potential regional parks in that area. Continuation of the LAF, focused on acquisition of new lands, is expected to result in the protection of new habitats and ecosystems that are currently not well represented in the regional parks system.

The current Board-approved Land Acquisition Strategy is due to expire at the end of 2019 and an updated one is required for 2020-2021. The Regional Parks Land Acquisition Strategy provides the Regional Parks and Environment Committee, and the CRD Board, with the principles that guide land acquisition, the process for land acquisition, and a set of land acquisition criteria. These criteria need to be re-established for the 2020-2021 Land Acquisition Strategy.

The concept of regional park significance plays a fundamental role in acquiring land for regional parks and identifying an area as having regional park potential. Regionally significant areas for regional park purposes are natural areas that represent examples of the diverse geography and

environments in the context of the entire region. These areas also provide opportunities for residents to connect with nature and attract people from throughout the region.

For an area to be recommended for acquisition, it must be considered to have regional park significance in the environmental category. An exception to this may be made where an acquisition serves important operational or land management needs.

Some of the criteria that will be included in the 2020-2021 Land Acquisition Strategy are:

- naturalness of an area, including connecting to natural environments and protected areas
- the role the property in addressing climate change mitigation and adaptation
- the significance of an area for outdoor activities and visitor experiences
- the contribution the area makes to the regional growth strategy
- rationalizing existing park boundaries.

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

The LAF is currently set at \$20 per average household assessed value. The fund, if it is continued, is proposed to remain at this level for the 10-year term of the extension. The Fund now generates approximately \$3.7 million per year. As the regional population expands and assessed values increase, revenues to the fund will also increase somewhat over this 10-year period. However, it is probable that the purchasing power of the LAF will diminish relative to property values, if recent trends in land values continue into the future.

As the park system expands and the number of people who enjoy our parks grows, resources are no longer sufficient to meet either current or future demands. There are increasing pressures to build new, and maintain and replace existing, facilities for park visitors. Actual costs to build and maintain these facilities are often 20%-50% above original estimates due to the time lag between planning and commencing construction and annual cost inflation. In order to complete these projects, CRD Parks is borrowing from the future to address the highest priorities. Without significant additional funding at some point within the next 5-10 years, parks staff anticipate that facilities will have to start shutting down due to public safety. Of particular concern are the upcoming maintenance and replacement costs of large assets, such as dams, bridges and trestles. There is also a need for improved staffing levels in the field for managing assets and service delivery. If the LAF continues to be used exclusively for land purchases, there is a need to address the increased operational costs that arise from those acquisitions as well as the maintenance and replacement of existing park and trail infrastructure through future budget processes.

NEXT STEPS

Prior to the Board making a decision on the renewal of the LAF for another 10-year period, staff will bring back the following information for consideration:

- the criteria for future land acquisitions beyond 2019
- a listing of priority opportunities for future acquisitions beyond 2019; and
- options on service level adjustments to maintain the Regional Parks system as a whole.

Board direction on the above will provide the information that will be incorporated into the strategic approach for the LAF and establish a supporting, sustainable funding model for the overall Regional Parks Service.

CONCLUSION

The survey allowed for the collection of preliminary information on the public's views regarding regional parks and trails funding priorities and the future of the LAF. The survey results should not be interpreted as being statistically representative of the views of the CRD's residents. Results concerning support for the renewal of the Regional Parks LAF for another 10 years are consistent with previous statistically valid surveys.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Parks & Environment Committee recommend to the Capital Regional District Board:

1. That staff bring back criteria for future land acquisitions that reflect regional park significance, representing the diverse geography and environments within the context of the entire region;
2. That staff report back to committee on the status of the Landscape Evaluation Project; and
3. That staff report back on options during the 2020 budget process for service level adjustments to sustain the Regional Parks service.

Submitted by:	Jeff Leahy, RPF, Senior Manager, Regional Parks
Concurrence:	Larisa Hutcheson, P.Eng., General Manager, Parks & Environmental Services
Concurrence:	Robert Lapham, MCIP, RPP, Chief Administrative Officer

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Attachments: Attachment 1 – CRD Regional Parks Funding Priorities Survey 2018
Attachment 2 – Priorities for Land Acquisition Fund Survey