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

SUBJECT **Regional Parks and Trails – Compliance and Enforcement Program**

ISSUE SUMMARY

To update the Regional Parks Committee on the Capital Regional District's (CRD) Regional Parks and Trails Compliance and Enforcement Program.

BACKGROUND

Recognizing that an education-first Compliance and Enforcement Program is one of the best tools to protect park values and help manage growing visitation in regional parks and on regional trails, the CRD Board supported the creation of a park ranger position with the first permanent park ranger hired in early 2018.

Over the last six years, the program has responded to the growth of the system resulting from land acquisitions and to the steadily increasing visitation in the parks, through park rangers educating park visitors about the *CRD Parks Regulations Bylaw* and visitor safety. Rangers also serve as ambassadors in regional parks and on regional trails, helping to enhance visitor experiences while monitoring and protecting the ecological integrity of regional parks and regional trails.

At present, the park ranger program consists of one senior ranger and five full-time rangers, augmented by six auxiliary rangers who work over the peak visitation period of May to September.

With close to nine million visits to regional parks and regional trails in 2023, CRD park rangers were busy throughout the year patrolling regional parks and regional trails, engaging with park visitors, and ensuring compliance to park regulations. Their duties span the diverse regional parks and trails system managed by the CRD, ranging from more densely visited urban interfacing locations to more remote backcountry wilderness areas.

Park rangers support, participate in, and address a broad range of events, activities and issues, including:

- patrolling and being present in regional parks and on regional trails, building relationships and rapport with user groups and providing direction to park visitors
- mitigating harmful or dangerous activities through a uniformed, diplomatic presence
- promoting voluntary compliance to the *Capital Regional District Parks Regulation Bylaw No. 1, 2018* by educating park visitors
- monitoring and supporting permitted events within regional parks and regional trails, whether it be special use, commercial, access or otherwise
- assisting with regional park public awareness campaigns by spreading key messages around responsible dog ownership, safe regional trail use and the importance of good park etiquette
- conducting wildfire mop-up duties within regional park land to support local municipal fire departments and BC Wildfire Service

- supporting regional parks and regional trails as a culturally safe place for Indigenous community members to practice their traditional rights
- investigating serious park regulations bylaw violations, such as illegal fires, tree cutting, off-road vehicle use and park encroachments

The CRD's Regional Parks Division continues to supplement compliance and enforcement patrols with CRD bylaw officers. In 2023, bylaw officers allocated approximately 1,430 patrol hours to regional parks and regional trails at a cost of \$136,000. The bylaw officer patrols were primarily focused on Thetis Lake Regional Park and the Galloping Goose Regional Trail. Park rangers and bylaw officers worked in conjunction to prioritize presence at Thetis Lake Regional Park to address regulatory issues and dangerous behaviors, such as alcohol/drug consumption and cliff jumping. A combined total of 1,883 hours were allocated on patrols at Thetis Lake Regional Park in 2023 and a similar focus will continue for 2024.

In 2023, CRD park rangers made a concerted effort to collaborate on joint educational and enforcement patrols within regional parks with multiple key-partner agencies, including BC Parks, Parks Canada, Island Health, Transport Canada, BC Conservation Officer Service, RCMP, municipal bylaw enforcement and municipal police agencies. Working toward common goals of enhancing park visitor safety and enjoyment, while also preserving ecological integrity within regional parks alongside these partner agencies, has been extremely beneficial.

Collaborating with external agencies helped to protect the park system and keep park users safe in 2023. With the extreme fire danger rating being in effect during the summer months, patrolling with Island Health tobacco enforcement officers to educate park visitors on smoking regulations throughout the park system was an effective strategy for mitigating wildfire risks. Additionally, joint patrols with the boating safety officer from Transport Canada proved to be an effective way of educating those recreating on the water about the requirements for personal floatation devices (PFDs) and ensuring PFDs were not out of date and were in satisfactory condition. Continuing these partnerships is a priority for 2024.

One of the emerging tasks that CRD park rangers face is addressing camps erected by unhoused or transient individuals. This is most frequently observed along the regional trail corridors and within the most accessible regional parks, such as Thetis Lake and Elk/Beaver Lake. Park rangers spent over 210 hours investigating 76 different encampments in 2023. This is an issue not specific to regional parks and is complex and nuanced. Park rangers regularly work with local police, municipal bylaw officers, and other resources to ensure encampments do not become entrenched on regional park land and that individuals who desire resources have the opportunity to obtain them.

The CRD's Regional Parks and Trails Compliance and Enforcement Program piloted the use of long form prosecution to address a significant violation of timber theft from regional park land during 2023. Long form prosecution involves the laying of multiple charges, along with seeking additional court orders to remedy the harm created by the regulatory violation. Gathering evidence to support this process was essential. Staff worked with BC Natural Resource officers, the Ministry of Forests, RCMP and CRD Bylaw Enforcement Services to achieve a successful outcome. Having access to these legal mechanisms to address significant violations or acts of egregious harm to park land is valuable in deterring similar future behaviors.

Appendix A provides a summary of compliance and enforcement actions in 2023 within regional parks and trails in comparison to the previous year and reflects the increased patrol hours achieved in 2023.

IMPLICATIONS

Alignment with Existing Plans & Strategies

The CRD's Regional Parks and Trails Compliance and Enforcement Program supports CRD Board priorities and aligns with the Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan 2022-2032 by striving to achieve enhancement of visitor experiences, First Nations reconciliation, environmental stewardship and protection of ecological values.

First Nations Reconciliation

Local First Nations have the right to safely harvest resources on their traditional territory in CRD regional parks. A priority for the CRD is to improve cultural safety by supporting Indigenous communities to feel safe engaging in cultural practices within regional parks. Park rangers are trained in cultural awareness and First Nation harvesting rights in order to support this important reconciliation goal.

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

Recognizing that a uniformed presence can be a barrier for certain equity-deserving groups, such as racialized Canadians, immigrants and refugees, park rangers receive training on effective communication and cultural awareness and aim to engage these groups with a friendly educational approach. In 2023, staff created a webpage on the CRD website to explain the park rangers, their role and what their uniform looks like to help increase public awareness, understanding and public comfort levels.

Intergovernmental Implications

Park rangers work closely with other government agencies to enhance visitor safety and experience in regional parks and regional trails and to meet broader community goals. Working with partner agencies to have a consistent and coordinated approach to issues such as dogs, fires, smoking, water safety, emergencies, enforcement and more, improves service delivery and efficiency throughout the regional park system.

Social Implications

Parks are an essential outlet for community members to embrace, explore, appreciate and recreate in nature. This is demonstrated by the continually increasing annual visitation counts. Providing educational opportunities and fostering stewardship among park visitors through voluntary compliance with park regulations is an everyday aspect of a park ranger's role. This work contributes to park resiliency and empowers visitors to continue to respect and appreciate the parks they love to visit.

CONCLUSION

CRD park rangers play an integral role in identifying and addressing compliance and enforcement issues across the regional parks and regional trails system. This work aligns with the prioritization of enhancing park visitor experience and providing safe and welcoming environments for visitors. Working with partner agencies, important park issues are addressed, such as wildfires, smoking,

water safety, encampments, and emergency response. The CRD's Regional Parks and Trails Compliance and Enforcement Program will continue to focus on compliance education as one of the best tools in alleviating the pressures and challenges the system faces on an annual basis.

RECOMMENDATION

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

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ATTACHMENT

Appendix A: 2022-2023 CRD Regional Parks and Trails Compliance and Enforcement Summary