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

SUBJECT **Regional Parks and Trails – 2023 Strategic Plan Progress Report**

ISSUE SUMMARY

To present the Capital Regional District's (CRD) 2023 Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan Progress Report, which identifies progress toward the CRD's Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan 2022-2032.

BACKGROUND

The CRD has managed the regional parks service since 1966 and remains committed to providing exemplary regional park and trail services and facilities.

In November 2021, the Board initiated an update of the 2012-2021 Regional Parks Strategic Plan to integrate Board priorities and commitments made since the plan was approved in 2012, as well as to address emerging challenges to the regional parks and trails system. The initial direction for the Strategic Plan update was set by the Board in February 2022, including that a lens of conservation and protection of biodiversity be applied to the priorities and process and that early ongoing and meaningful engagement with First Nations occur. A public engagement process was undertaken in spring 2022.

In July 2022, the Board approved the Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan for 2022-2032 (Strategic Plan) on an interim basis while engagement with First Nations continued. During this period, 15 First Nations contributed their insights and perspectives into the final plan, which was approved by the Board in July 2023. The Strategic Plan guides the CRD toward its desired vision for regional parks and regional trails and sets out five goal areas where the CRD will focus its efforts. Each of these goals includes strategic priorities with supporting actions and timelines for implementation. Overall, there are 13 strategic priorities and 57 supporting sub-actions over the ten-year plan horizon. The CRD has committed to annually reporting on the progress toward achieving its goals for regional parks and trails.

The 2023 Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan Progress Report (Progress Report) provides a summary of the Strategic Plan activities undertaken between January and December 2023 (Appendix A). The report also provides several annual indicators used to track progress of the Strategic Plan. Some of the key highlights include:

- The CRD's *Exploring Indigenous Perspectives* programming was offered to over 2,000 park visitors in 2023—an increase of nearly 100% over 2022 numbers.
- The CRD acquired nearly 21 hectares of new regional park land in 2023, including 10 hectares at East Sooke Regional Park and almost 11 hectares near Elk/Beaver Lake Regional Park.
- CRD restoration volunteers and staff spent a total of 3,696 hours (47% increase over 2022) restoring and enhancing 11.75 hectares of land in regional parks.

- A Resident Survey was developed and approved in 2023 to launch in early 2024.
- Trail standards were developed to guide trail operations and maintenance within CRD regional parks.
- There were 3.9 million visits to regional trails in 2023 compared to 3.3 million in 2022.
- A feasibility study was completed related to installing electrical vehicle charging stations in regional parks.
- Accessibility improvements were undertaken in 11 regional parks and construction was completed on an accessible washroom facility at Hamsterly Beach in Elk/Beaver Lake Regional Park.

The Progress Report also includes a report card that compiles self-reported progress metrics from staff responsible for advancing each of the plan's 57 sub-actions. These metrics were used to produce a status measure for several informative categories, such as overall action plan progress and the five goal areas of the strategy.

This systematic evaluation provides an indication of where focused efforts need to be made or increased to achieve targeted actions and outcomes within the Strategic Plan. The overall status for the 2023 year was calculated as 'on track', meaning 75%-100% of the annual targets were progressed as envisioned within the Strategic Plan's ten-year action plan.

The Progress Report also includes a list of reporting indicators that provide additional information of trends relevant to the regional parks and trails service, as well as progress made towards the strategic priorities. These indicators will be updated annually.

IMPLICATIONS

Environmental & Climate Implications

Regional parks and regional trails are vital in helping to achieve the region's climate action, natural resource protection and active transportation goals. Progress made in 2023 toward the conservation and climate action goals identified in the Strategic Plan include implementing an Environmental Impact Assessment Process and undertaking significant work to inventory, monitor, restore and enhance habitat for species at risk. In addition, a 0.3-kilometre section (Phase 4) of the E&N Rail Trail was completed, and construction of the Mayne Island Regional Trail continued. Looking ahead to 2024, work will focus on developing a Stewardship Plan, an updated Land Acquisition Strategy, developing a Traditional Use & Access Agreement and reconciliation work plans with two First Nations, and advancing priority regional trail expansion and enhancement projects.

First Nations Reconciliation

Working toward reconciliation with First Nations in the region is a foundational principle of the Strategic Plan. First Nations in the region have been invited to engage in the Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan renewal and implementation in an ongoing and meaningful manner to determine how to strengthen relationships, and what key priorities and initiatives are most important to work on together over the next 10 years. In 2023, all new CRD staff in the Regional Parks Division received cultural awareness training, and cultural monitors from eight First Nations were involved in regional parks and trails projects.

Intergovernmental Implications

Continuing collaboration with First Nations governments, municipalities, park agencies and stakeholders will be integral to implementing the key priorities within the Strategic Plan. These priorities are met through initiatives such as participation on the Regional Transportation Working Group, where transportation engineers and planners from across the region seek collaborative solutions to addressing regional transportation challenges, or the review and confirmation of the Lochside Trail Agreement, where municipal, regional and provincial governments are coming together to provide an active transportation and recreation corridor. Other initiatives, such as work on addressing mosquito issues around Island View Beach, are the result of the collaborative efforts of Central Saanich, the CRD and Tsawout First Nation. Many other examples of collaboration exist and will continue to be identified and implemented.

Equity, Diversion & Inclusion Implications

Equity is one of the guiding principles within the Strategic Plan. In the implementation of the Strategic Plan, staff will work to ensure that actions are taken to increase inclusiveness and accessibility to residents across the region. A focus on improving access to, and visitor experiences in, regional parks and trails is also a key element included in the Strategic Plan. The CRD will continue to offer compatible outdoor recreation experiences in regional parks and trails that are enjoyable, healthy, safe and immersed in nature, and that foster stewardship through program delivery, knowledge sharing and collaboration. In 2023, staff offered 48 accessible programs and events throughout regional parks, and detailed trail and facility descriptions were added to online and printed nature program materials.

Financial Implications

In 2022, the regional parks and trails service operated on an annual budget of approximately \$17.5 million, primarily funded through regional property tax requisition and supplemented by non-tax revenue, including external grant funding and permit fees. Acquisition of new park land is conducted through a separate Land Acquisition Fund requisition. Financial implications associated with service level adjustments identified to implement priority actions in the Strategic Plan will be considered by the CRD Board in future service planning processes.

Alignment with Board & Corporate Priorities

The 2023-2026 CRD Board Priorities of First Nations, Transportation, Climate Action, and Environment align with the priorities identified in the Strategic Plan.

Alignment with Existing Plans & Strategies

The Strategic Plan is in alignment with recent Board-approved strategies: Regional Growth Strategy, Regional Transportation Plan, Climate Action Strategy, and the Special Task Force on First Nations Relations Final Report.

CONCLUSION

The CRD's 2023 Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan Progress Report outlines actions that the CRD has undertaken to advance its Strategic Plan since it was approved in July 2023.

Overall, in 2023, the CRD progressed on several initiatives and has identified where focused efforts need to be made or increased to achieve targeted actions and outcomes. The overall status for the 2023 year was calculated as 'on track', meaning 75-100% of the yearly target of actions were progressed as envisioned within the Strategic Plan's 10-year action plan. Efforts will focus on continuing engagement with First Nations, increasing protection of biodiversity, offering compatible outdoor recreation, improving accessibility and equity, and advancing priority regional trail expansion and enhancement projects in the coming year.

RECOMMENDATION

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

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ATTACHMENT

Appendix A: 2023 Regional Parks and Trails Strategic Plan Progress Report