



Making a difference...together

REPORT TO REGIONAL PARKS COMMITTEE MEETING OF WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2017

SUBJECT Lifeguards at Regional Parks

ISSUE

Injuries and a near drowning at Thetis Lake Regional Park in the summer of 2017 have raised questions about the need for lifeguards at regional parks, particularly at Thetis Lake.

BACKGROUND

Capital Regional District (CRD) Regional Parks provide access to beaches at 13 regional parks, including 6 freshwater lakes and 7 oceanfronts. The main freshwater swimming areas are Thetis Lake, Elk/Beaver Lake, Sooke Potholes, Durrance Lake and Matheson Lake. Island View Beach, Witty's Lagoon and Jordan River are popular oceanfront beaches.

There are inherent dangers associated with swimming in lakes, rivers and oceans. Physical hazards can include uneven and slippery surfaces, submerged objects, poor visibility, strong currents and deep water. It is important that swimmers using these natural areas understand the potential hazards and have the swimming abilities required for the area they are swimming in.

Since 1999, there have been 9 serious water-related incidents at CRD Regional Parks and its associated waters. Five people drowned at Thetis Lake (1999, 2004 [2 people], 2006, 2013) and 1 person drowned at Sooke Potholes (2011). In addition, there have been 3 serious incidents involving 4 people at Thetis Lake. One person was injured in 2014 while cliff jumping, 2 swimmers were in distress and 1 of them almost drowned in June 2017, and 1 person was injured while cliff jumping in July 2017.

Lifeguard services were provided at Thetis Lake from 1970 to 1990 when the park was operated by the City of Victoria. The City cancelled the services in 1991. Services resumed in 1994 when the park was transferred to the CRD and were provided until 2002. At Elk/Beaver Lake, the District of Saanich provided lifeguards from 1966 to 1976. When the park was transferred to the CRD in 1976, lifeguard services continued until 2003.

The Regional Parks Committee approved a motion in November 2003 to discontinue lifeguard services at regional parks. The main reasons for the decision were competing budgetary pressures, challenges in recruiting qualified lifeguards and the overall trend toward removal of lifeguard services from waterfronts by municipalities and other park agencies. As with other recreational activities in parks, visitors are encouraged to assess their surroundings, know their skill levels and take responsibility for their personal safety.

Since then, staff have put an increased focus on communicating water safety messages through signs at the parks and posting information on the CRD website.

ALTERNATIVES

Alternative 1

That the Regional Parks Committee recommend to the CRD Board:

That the staff report be received for information and that current service levels be maintained focusing on the use of signage and public information to address public safety concerns near swimming areas in Regional Parks.

Alternative 2

That staff be directed to bring forward a proposed service level adjustment and budget proposal to provide lifeguard services at Thetis Lake commencing in 2018.

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Lack of proficiency in English and unfamiliarity with common hazards in BC lakes are factors to consider. Three of the 5 people who drowned at Thetis Lake since 1999, and all 4 of those involved in the serious incidents in 2014 and 2017, were international visitors with limited knowledge of the English language. The coroner's report following the drowning in 2006 observed that visitors to BC might not realize that the lakes can be colder than where they are used to, and that there can be underwater hazards they are not familiar with. In response to, and in compliance with, the coroner's recommendation, staff added symbols to warning signs in 2006, then in 2013 changed sign standards to include images, shapes and colours that are internationally recognizable, to better communicate potential hazards to non-English-speaking visitors.

Before the service was discontinued, lifeguards were stationed at the main beach at Thetis Lake and Beaver Beach at Elk/Beaver Lake. Although people swim at those beaches, many swim at other parts of the lakes. For example, there are at least 8 places around the perimeter of Thetis Lake where swimmers enter the water. Even if a lifeguard service is provided at a park, incidents can happen outside guarded areas and/or when lifeguards are not on duty.

The coroner's reports on file made no recommendations regarding reinstatement of lifeguards at Thetis Lake. Commentary was made on the importance of signs being posted and of parental/guardian supervision. The 1999 coroner's report commented on lifeguards, stating "While lifeguards are not provided at Thetis Lake during all of the park's opening hours, neither are they provided at most natural swim areas throughout the capital region. The presence or absence of lifeguards at a swim location does not preclude parental or guardian supervision."

ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

Costs to provide lifeguards vary depending on the season and number of days per week lifeguard services would be provided. At Thetis Lake, when beaches are busiest in high season from Canada Day to mid-August, 4 lifeguards would be required, with an additional 2 on staff to cover days off. For the shoulder seasons, Victoria Day to Canada Day and mid-August to Labour Day, 3 lifeguards would be required, 2 on-duty and 1 to cover days off. The increase in lifeguards in the high season reflects the increase in number of visitors to the beach area.

Based on the above, and providing lifeguards 7 days per week, it is estimated that \$75,000 per beach is needed to set up and provide lifeguard services. This includes \$68,000 for salaries, \$7,000 for equipment and training. At Thetis Lake Regional Park, a minimum of 3 lifeguards would be required in the shoulder season (salary cost: \$28,000) and 6 lifeguards would be required in July/August (salary cost: \$40,000). Ongoing annual costs would be \$70,000.

INTERGOVERNMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

Lifeguard services are not provided at beaches in the capital region by any other municipality or electoral area. The Cowichan Valley Regional District has lifeguards at 1 of its 22 beaches and Nanaimo has lifeguards at 1 of its 18 beaches. Vancouver has lifeguards at all 10 of its city beaches. Lifeguards are not provided at any BC provincial parks. Gulf Islands National Park Reserve does not have lifeguards. Pacific Rim National Park Reserve discontinued its surfguard services in 2012.

CONCLUSION

Lifeguard services have not been provided at regional parks for the past 14 years. As with other recreational activities in the regional parks, visitors are encouraged to assess their surroundings, know their skill levels and take responsibility for their own personal safety.

RECOMMENDATION

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

That the staff report be received for information and that current service levels be maintained focusing on the use of signage and public information to address public safety concerns near swimming areas in Regional Parks.

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

KStC:km