



Governance & Services Committee

TO: Governance and Services Committee
FROM: Parks Services
DATE: October 3rd, 2019
SUBJECT: 2018 – 2019 Regional Parks Visitor Services and Park Visits Update

Purpose: To provide the Governance and Services Committee an update on the programming and events provided by Visitor Services and the estimated number of annual park users that use Regional Parks.

Executive Summary:

The Visitor Services division of the Regional Parks Service Program seeks to engage the public to encourage recreating in our parks and connecting to nature. Specific programming, events, and volunteer opportunities are developed to reach these objectives.

In addition, the collection of trail count information is providing staff information to be able to estimate the number of visitors to Regional Parks. In total, it is estimated that in 2018 more than 845,000 people had visited Regional Parks. In 2019 over 43,000 have taken part in a park interpretive program or events and an additional 358 volunteers (including 273 new volunteers) have given their time to volunteer in a Regional Park this year.

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT the Governance and Services Committee receive, for information, the 2018-2019 Regional Parks Visitor Services and Parks Visits update.

Respectfully Submitted:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Murray Kopp".

Murray Kopp,
Director – Parks Services

Approved for Committee's Consideration

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brian Reardon".

Brian Reardon, CAO

Prepared by: Wayne Darlington, Manager – Park Planning & Capital Projects

Implications of Recommendation:

Strategic Plan:	The delivery of Visitor Services programming and events is part of the overall parks services being delivered to our residents and meets the strategic priorities of the board, particularly through the sustainable communities and environment identified priorities. In addition, Regional Parks and the services provided support the other two priorities of transportation and mobility and economic development by making our region more liveable and attractive to outside business and through the provision of park amenities to support these priorities.
General:	The provision of Visitor Services programming as part of the Regional Parks service provides an avenue for engaging citizens to be more active and connect to nature.
Financial:	There are no further financial implications. The delivery of the Visitor Services portion of Regional Parks is accounted for within the RDCO 5 Year Financial Plans approved by the Regional Board each spring.
Legal/Statutory Authority:	The delivery of the Regional Parks service and associated programming and services follows the Letters Patent for the Regional District.

Background:

The Visitor Services component of Regional Parks Services has been operating for 25 years and is staged from the Environmental Education Centre for the Okanagan (EECO). Visitor Services programming in the community provides opportunities for the public to get into parks and connect with nature, and to learn and understand about the importance of nature and wild spaces in our shared landscape.

The programming that is being provided is meant to be inclusive of all demographics in society, from children and teenagers to young adults and the oldest members of our community. It is also meant to be inclusive for those with physical and mental challenges and accessible to people from a wide range of incomes. Our programming and our parks are open to one and all.

In 2019, parks staff developed a visitor services program that brings the services to the people and makes it easier for our residents to become more engaged in recreating in parks, connecting to nature, and volunteering. We offered a number of programs for children, including our ever-popular Story Time in the Park, Roll and Stroll, and Go Fish to name just a handful of our many children's program offerings. For families, we offered a roster of Families in Parks programs, including Geocaching, Nature Power Hour, and our popular Reptiles & Amphibians talk. For adults both young and old, we offered Tracks, Wild Walks, Forest Bathing, and Art in the Park. These programs are inclusive for all members of our community. To support inclusion, we work in partnership with the Community Recreation Initiatives Society (CRIS), which supports getting those with physical and mental challenges into the parks through programs such as Wild Walks.

In addition to our specific dedicated programming and events, we were able to harness the collective power of our increased staff numbers during peak season (May through August), when our team grows from 10 to 14 staff with the addition of highly enthusiastic post-secondary students, to change the focus of our seasonal Visitor Services program. Instead of focusing on

day camps as in years past, we offered a large and varied roster of point duties, family programs, roves, and pop-up programs which took place in the busiest parks at peak visitation times. This allowed our staff to not only engage with park visitors in a meaningful way, but also to offer a dedicated RDCO Parks presence in our busiest parks and an opportunity for park patrons to connect with staff in an approachable, casual, and positive manner. Not only were we able to showcase a wide variety of topics – from Birding 101 and Geology to Squirrels, Bats, and so much more – but we were able to visit more parks and regions than ever before during the summer months and engage with patrons in new, exciting, and immersive ways. In fact, throughout 2019 and especially during the summer months, we offered park programs in 25 out of 30 of our regional parks. This was a resounding success and in their feedback our community members were appreciative of the increased staff presence and programming options. Our department also received an unprecedented amount of funding for these crucial positions from both the Canada Summer Jobs initiative and the CPRA Youth Green Jobs pilot program. In total, we received over \$22,000 of funding toward wages for our six summer student positions.

We also support our non-profit groups through dedicated staff and funding at events such as the Kalamoior Pancake Breakfast, or through volunteering efforts such as trail building in Black Mountain - sntsk'il'ntən Regional Park. Although our volunteer program is still in its infancy, it is robust enough to engage residents who want to volunteer and provides opportunities for community residents to become trail ambassadors, to assist with programming, maintain trails, and collect GPS information, to name a few volunteer options. We've had the good fortune to engage both our Friends of groups and local students in two large-scale volunteer projects, with 75 middle school students volunteering in a forest floor clean-up in Woodhaven Regional Park to support the new Woodhaven Forest Pre School and 180 middle and high school students participating in trail construction in Black Mountain - sntsk'il'ntən Regional Park.

In total, from January through September 30, 2019, 43,215 park users were engaged in a park program or event, and 358 (including 273 new volunteers) took part or provided a volunteer service back to Regional Parks. In order to support these programs and dedicate our resources toward increasing opportunities for engaging our residents and park users in a meaningful way, the EECO is being renovated to become a central hub not only for park services but also for connecting visitors with our parks system, inspiring them to go outside and be active in our park system. We will continue offering both staff-led programs and self-guided opportunities for connecting with the natural world – this change will allow us to offer even more programs and services than in previous years.

It is critically important to provide events, programming, and nature education opportunities to our community; however, it is also important to gain an understanding of how many people use our Regional Parks. Over the past few years, parks staff have been steadily building a system of trail counters in a variety of Regional Parks to count and collect the amount of use occurring within those parks and the overall Regional Parks system.

In total, we have 23 trail counters situated in select Regional Parks and we intend to continue to expand the program to gain better information. Since we do not cover all 30 Regional Parks with trail counters or other counting devices, our data set is extrapolated to provide an estimate on the number of park users. For 2018, it was estimated that more than 845,000 people utilized a Regional Park, with the largest number of visits occurring in Mission Creek and Mission Creek Greenway Regional Parks, where approximately 240,000 people used those 2 parks over the course of the year.

This type of information is helpful in the park planning and visitor use process. Knowing where and what parks are being utilized the most, and which parks are used the least, will guide park operations and capital investment in the financial budget process. In parks with lesser visitation, we can identify ways and methods of increasing park use through capital development or promotion of Visitor Services programming. And, for our busiest parks, we can plan how best to meet operational and capital demands, as well as explore ways of moving our park users toward some of our lesser-used parks so as to spread out our visitation and lessen the impact of park overuse.

In the attached report, a summary of park visits from 2018 is provided, along with a summary of Visitor Services events, programming, and volunteer accomplishments from January through the end of September 2019.

External Implications:

Parks Services staff are continually seeking out partnerships to assist with the delivery of Visitor Services programming in an efficient and respectful manner which assists to engage not only residents but our local, provincial, indigenous, and non-profit partners.

Alternative Recommendation:

None.

Considerations not applicable to this report:

- *Policy*
- *Organizational*

Attachment(s):

1. 2018-19 Regional Parks Visits, Visitor Services and Volunteers by the Numbers Summary Report