



Governance & Services Committee

TO: Governance and Services Committee
FROM: Murray Kopp
Director – Parks Services Department
DATE: September 29, 2020
SUBJECT: 2020 Regional Parks Visitor Services Program Update

Purpose: To provide an update on the programs and events provided by Visitor Services in Regional Parks in 2020.

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 2020, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, 19,500 people and 54 volunteers have taken part in a park interpretive program or event in a Regional Park this year.

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT the Governance and Services Committee receive, for information, the 2020 Regional Parks Visitor Services Program update.

Respectfully Submitted:

Murray Kopp,
Director – Parks Services

Approved for Committee Consideration

Marilyn Rilkoﬀ, Deputy CAO

Prepared by: Isabella Hodson – Supervisor, Community Relations & Visitor Services

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 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 Parks Services has operated for 26 years and is staged from the Environmental Education Centre for the Okanagan (EECO). Visitor Services programming in the community is inclusive of all ages and abilities and provides opportunities for the public to get into parks and learn about the importance of nature in our shared landscape.

Although the continuing COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges to the Visitor Services division, after an initial pause on programs and facility bookings, parks staff modified programming with new protocols and procedures, and offered the most diverse array of online and in-person interpretive programming in a regional district in British Columbia in 2020.

From January 2nd to September 10th, 2020, Parks Visitor Services programs, events, and volunteering attracted a total of 19,500 participants. This number represents a significant decline from previous years, which average 43,000 program and event contacts, but the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing shutdown of schools, public centres, and large gatherings accounts for this sharp decrease in numbers. We expect to reach an additional 3,000 contacts through virtual and in-person programs in fall and winter 2020.

Beginning in late March, visitor services staff shifted to using online programs such as Instagram and Zoom to connect with people who would usually have come to public programs, school interpretation programs, guided hikes, and events. We had a great response from the community. Visitor Services staff will be including regular online content to continue to build this method of keeping in touch with our park users and the public.

Events in Regional Parks were affected by COVID-19 protocols, primarily due to group size limitations. Instead of our usual large events, we hosted a handful of virtual events and in-person, registration-only events. Our new online registration software was a great help in this process.

This year was the first full year where we saw our vision of the EECO as a central hub for the community and our staff come to fruition. We renovated the building last fall to decrease the size of the public exhibit space and instead showcase our beautiful regional parks system to inspire residents and visitors to explore all of our 30 regional parks, as well as to house our full staff contingent. We reopened the EECO in January but closed it from March to June due to COVID. We have been open in a limited capacity since June with strict protocols in place. Due to the closures and continuing pandemic, as well as the change in focus at the EECO, we've seen a 90% decrease in visitation in 2020, and expect a limited number of visitors through the end of the year. We expect our visitor numbers to increase in 2021 but not to pre-pandemic/pre-renovation levels.

In terms of environmental education, from January to mid-March we successfully delivered a full range of school programs. Come March and pandemic challenges, we pulled together to turn three of our most popular spring environmental programs into virtual field trips. These were offered at no charge to SD23 over the Zoom platform. This fall, with ever-changing guidelines, we expect to reach students primarily through virtual programs, outdoor presentations at schools, and modified in-person field trips offered in our parks.

We recruited 4 Student Park Interpreter positions in 2020 for a reduced summer term, and are approved to receive a generous funding package from the Canada Summer Jobs initiative that will cover almost all of the costs associated with these positions. We were able to harness the collective power of our increased staff numbers during peak season to offer a large and varied roster of pandemic-modified point duties, family programs, roves, and pop-up programs which took place in the busiest parks at peak visitation times. Distancing protocols were in place as were increased sanitation measures, and many programs did not allow for drop-in participation and instead required registration, health checks, and waivers. Despite all of the mental, physical, and other challenges brought about by the current situation in British Columbia, the 2020 Parks Visitor Services program season has been a resounding success. Our staff continue to receive feedback from community members who are appreciative of the increased staff presence and programming options throughout our regional park system.

Our volunteer program also continued to engage local residents who have a desire to give back to the community. Although no new volunteers were trained this year due to COVID-19, existing volunteers continued to report. Stewardship activities, where volunteers could get outside and complete tasks while being physically distant, were a priority this year. Partner projects of note include trail construction and improvement projects in Glen Canyon Regional Park in March, July, August, and September and a rock picking trail project and a bluebird nesting box monitoring project in Black Mountain sntsk'il'ntən Regional Park. Our VIP program offered regular weeding events along Mission Creek. Our program continues to grow, with a focus this autumn on the VIP - Stewardship Team which is for people looking for regular opportunities to complete a variety of stewardship activities in the parks.

In total, from January through September 10, 2020, 19,500 park users were engaged in a park program or event in Regional Parks. We will continue offering both staff-led programs and self-guided opportunities for connecting with the natural world, and will continue adapting to change and inspiring residents and visitors alike to explore the beauty, wonder, and year-round recreation opportunities of our glorious regional park system. In the attached report, a summary of Visitor Services events, programming, and volunteer accomplishments is provided and covers the period from January through early September 2020.

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. 2020 Regional Parks Visitor Services and Volunteers by the Numbers Summary Report