

Metro in talks to return parks to cities

Burnaby Lake among those to be handed over to municipalities

KELLY SINOSKI

VANCOUVER SUN

Metro Vancouver is preparing to hand over Burnaby Lake, and potentially Sumas Trail and Matsqui regional parks, to the local municipalities as it seeks to focus more on protecting eco-sensitive and regionally significant park lands.

The move comes as Metro is preparing a new land acquisition strategy that reaffirms two goals: to preserve sensitive wetland conservation and connect people with nature. A regional parks service review, commissioned by Metro Vancouver in 2014, also suggests the regional district rejects further requests for park transfers to Metro from local municipalities.

"In our land acquisition strategy, it's very clear that we want to focus on threatened lands that are regionally important and significant," said Mitch Sokalski, Metro's director of regional parks. "We will look at all our holdings and make sure they fit the framework and criteria for regional parks."

Metro's park system, launched in 1966, has 22 regional parks, five greenways, two ecological conservancy areas and four regional reserves, totalling more than 14,500 hectares.

“

We have made our intentions known that we would like to take it back under our own parks and recreation program. We have the capability to really look after it.

**BURNABY COUN.
SAV DHALIWAL**

ON THE RETURN OF
BURNABY LAKE TO
THE CITY

CONTINUED ON A2

FROM PAGE A1

Metro in talks to return parks to cities

Regional parks, which tend to be larger than municipal parks, with rustic trails and facilities, are intended to provide access to nature close to home in an increasingly urban region. More than 10 million people visited regional parks in 2013.

Greg Moore, chairman of Metro Vancouver, acknowledged the regional district is negotiating with both Burnaby and Abbotsford to return their local parks to those municipalities. Burnaby has requested that it take control of Burnaby Lake once Metro's lease runs out in 2021, while Metro is working with Abbotsford to determine whether it should transfer those parks out of Metro and into the Fraser Valley parks authority.

"That's a conversation we're having with Abbotsford right now," Moore said. "When we look back historically, Abbotsford has been in the parks system because the Fraser Valley didn't have a parks function."

Burnaby Coun. Sav Dhaliwal said the transfers make sense. Burnaby, which owns 75 per cent of 140 hectares that comprise Burnaby Lake Regional Park, had requested that the city be given control of Burnaby Lake once Metro's lease runs out in 2020.

The lease, first signed in 1978, gives Metro the right to develop, operate and maintain the regional park, but Dhaliwal noted there was a clash a few years ago when Metro refused to provide \$5,000 to dredge and

clean up the lake.

"We have made our intentions known that we would like to take it back under our own parks and recreation program," Dhaliwal said. "We have the capability to really look after it. We are able to absorb that with reasonable costs. We also feel we would be more in the driver's seat in the development of the park."

Dhaliwal argues all of Metro's large cities should take more responsibility for their regional parks, while Metro focuses on eco-sensitive areas that benefit the region, such as Burns Bog and Widgeon Park, as well as parks in smaller municipalities such as Belcarra Regional Park.

"I see no reason for small local governments to contribute to park developments in Surrey," he said. "Surrey has the means and the resources to do it. I really support the (regional) parks function but only primarily for preserving natural, eco-sensitive areas."

Moore said Metro has no intention of releasing any more of its regional parkland or acquiring any existing parks in local municipalities. The regional district maintains it is also looking to ensure parks such as Burnaby Lake are kept as parks and not developed, he said, while investigating whether Metro will retain some of the lands it owns in the Burnaby park. A portion of the park is also owned by the federal government.

Most mayors also maintain there's a benefit to the parks

system, which is funded by taxpayers and includes trails and facilities on mountains, in forests and on dikes and beaches.

Surrey, for instance, said it has no plans to take over the three regional parks in that city, which include Surrey Bend, Tynehead and Campbell River Regional Parks.

Owen Croy, Surrey's manager of parks, said the city has no ownership in Tynehead, for instance, while it has developed a good partnership with Metro to operate the new Surrey Bend Regional Park, which is owned jointly by the city and the region.

Surrey Coun. Judy Villeneuve added the city is working to acquire more conservation areas to enhance its parks plan as its population grows.

"Burnaby, with due respect, is a city that's pretty fully developed, when other cities are expanding residential and commercial and industrial areas," she said.

As part of its land acquisition strategy, Metro intends to develop a scoring system to each prospective site to ensure it fits the criteria of a regional park.

This could include a higher value on sites with ecosystems such as wetlands and old-growth forest that are considered at risk or rare, or that support outdoor activities that are in high demand and low supply, such as outdoor swimming and related beach activities.

ksinoski@vancouversun.com