

Metro Vancouver examines options to hand over control of some parks to municipalities

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 23, 2013



Some regional parks could be handed over to local municipalities if a proposal by Metro Vancouver goes ahead. The local control could allow expansion and improvement of parks facilities, proponents say.

Photograph by: wayne leidenfrost, Vancouver Sun

Metro Vancouver is looking at potentially handing off some of its regional parks to municipalities because of the rising costs to maintain and expand them.

The move, suggested as part of a parks service review, follows a staff report last year that found Metro parks were “under stress” — with aging infrastructure and congested trails — and required a doubling of its current \$6.3 million annual budget to improve those services.

It also needs between \$12 million and \$15 million per year to fulfil a \$1.1 billion wish list of park projects by 2041.

Metro plans to release a draft report this spring on the review, which will “examine the long-term regional parks function, relevance of the parks function in the future, and how the growth of this function will be managed.”

But Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan argues Metro shouldn’t be involved in the parks function at all, calling it a “relic of a long past era.” In many cases, he said, Metro duplicates services already delivered by municipalities.

His city, for instance, had to cover the costs to dredge Burnaby Lake Regional Park after Metro said it couldn’t afford it.

“For a lot of us the parks function is one that was picked up because five decades ago there was a real dearth of availability of municipal funds to acquire parks in the district municipalities,” Corrigan said. “It was desirous to protect them. Now (Metro) runs operations in parks side by side with existing municipal

operations. It means our resources are spread all over the Lower Mainland.”

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.

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 2012.

Most mayors 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.

But some directors say some more urban parks would be better off under city control. “Maybe we should confine our efforts to those areas or parks that still require our protection,” Corrigan said, noting “there are some that aren’t manageable.”

Belcarra, for instance, is hardly equipped to manage Belcarra Regional Park, he noted, while Pacific Spirit Park would be the responsibility of Electoral Area A, or the University of B.C., unless the city of Vancouver took it over. But he questioned why Sumas Mountain and Matsqui Trail, in Abbotsford, for instance, were still part of Metro’s parks network.

Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts agreed, saying it would be reasonable for her city to take control of Tynehead Regional Park because it already has the parks maintenance staff. “We have to look at efficiencies,” she said. “That analysis should be done.”

Heather Deal, chairwoman of Metro’s environment and parks committee, said the parks review will look at defining a regional park in terms of regional significance, ecological value and destination/recreation services.

She noted it’s unlikely Burnaby Lake would go back to that municipality, noting it was of regional significance because of the rowing clubs that use it, while parks like Kanaka Creek in Maple Ridge have ecological significance. “It’s certainly appropriate to look at where the parks system is and look at those values,” she said.

Delta Mayor Lois Jackson said she has no issue with parks being returned to municipalities “as long as they are left as parks in perpetuity.”

“We’re very happy to have the region take care of Deas Island and Centennial Beach,” she said. “In our case it works really well. We wouldn’t want to pretend we can do a better job.”

North Vancouver District Mayor Richard Walton noted his municipality couldn’t afford to take over Capilano River Park or Lynn Headwaters, which have a disproportionately high number of visitors.

“If North Vancouver District had to take back full responsibility for those areas, we simply could not afford to maintain them,” he said. “That’s a situation nobody wants to see. We want to try to increase public enjoyment of those areas. It makes sense to look at the current arrangement, but I wouldn’t be in favour of changing the existing model without a lot of thought.”

The review comes as Metro continues to solicit companies to provide services in parks to boost revenue. Metro is also floating the idea of selling sections of parkland with “low-recreational value” as well as fundraising, borrowing money and raising rental fees to maintain and acquire parks over the next 30 years.

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