Pay parking debated for District of North Vancouver's busiest parks

Brent Richter / North Shore News
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The Fromme Mountain parking lot, popular with mountain bikers. The District of North Vancouver is considering charging to park in its busiest parks. file photo Mike Wakefield, North Shore News

District of North Vancouver council is considering putting a price on parking at its busiest parks during peak season.

The plan to charge $2 per hour, $6 per day or $20 for a season pass at Mount Fromme, Cates Park, Panorama Park and Lynn Canyon Park is still very much conceptual – but some on council are eager to test the idea out as a means to manage demand for limited spots and to raise revenue to help cover the parks department's growing costs.

The district surveyed visitors to the parks in 2015 and found that 50 per cent of people parking in the Fromme and Cates Park lots were coming from outside the North Shore. Less than a quarter of Deep Cove's visitors were North Shore residents and at Lynn Canyon, only 20 per cent reported being local.

All of those areas are experiencing record attendance, which has meant higher maintenance costs for trails, which are taking a beating, more cleanup crew attention as well as an increase in the number of seasonal park rangers on patrol.

If all the existing parking spots at those parks were to become user-pay, it would raise about $1.3 million per year, staff estimate, about 15 per cent of which would go into administration.

While free parking would return in the off season, commercial visitors, like tour buses, would be expected to pay year-round, staff have suggested.

Council, however, is far from unanimous on whether park visitors ought to be paying to park. The debate ranged from

the philosophical to the pragmatic.

Coun. Lisa Muri pushed council to opt for a plan that would bring in the most revenue – as long as none of it was coming from district residents.

"I don't think pay parking is a new phenomenon. I think you know what happens. You put a meter in. People go up and buy a ticket. They pay for it and you generate revenue. I think it should go in all four of the parks," she said. "I think all revenues should be channelled back into the parks system. As well, I think all district residents should receive a free parking pass as they've already paid for these parks over and over again."

Raising extra cash wouldn't be the only benefit to enforcing pay parking, Mayor Richard Walton added. Giving people an incentive to visit parks at off-peak times or finding another way to get there would manage demand for the scarce spots, he said.

"I'm not crazy about pay parking but I think we have reached a tipping point with these four locations." he said. "I'm not doing this just because I think we need to raise additional revenue."

But Coun. Roger Bassam argued pay parking would amount to taking "a lot of money out of people's pockets for very little public benefit."

"I think parks should be free access for everyone," he said, noting he visits parks and recreation facilities around the Lower Mainland without having to pay for parking. "If there's a budgetary need for parks ... the most cost-effective way to address that is a property tax levy."

Creating free passes for district residents would be another costly layer of administration that would be rife with problems, he added.

Coun. Jim Hanson agreed that parking should be free on principle.

"There are fairer ways of collecting money. This is, at its heart, a regressive tax. It will hurt those that have the least ability to pay," he said. "That could impose a financial hardship on exactly the type of working family that I think this council needs to give a helping hand to."

Couns. Mathew Bond and Doug MacKay-Dunn both warned of people attempting to game the system, spreading farther out into residential neighbourhoods in search of a free spot.

District staff are expected to report back next Monday with a more detailed plan for a pilot project to start this summer.