TOWN OF COMOX
PARKS AND GREENWAYS ASSESSMENT

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Town of Comox is currently updating its Official Community Plan which includes the development of policy for planning open space and ensuring the future needs for park and trail users are met. These policies must also support land use and development goals and be consistent with other economic, social and environmental objectives. This report provides an assessment of issues, deficiencies and needs associated with the current park and greenways framework and provides policy alternatives to be considered for the OCP.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Existing Park Policy

The current Official Community Plan (OCP) states broad planning goals and policy for protection and acquisition of open space, including parks (active and passive, and greenways). These emphasize preservation of natural areas and features as a priority. These goals include:

- Providing natural areas, parks and greenways to meet the broad range of active and passive park user needs;
- Preserving and creating additional public open spaces;
- Establishing greenways to enhance connectivity;
- Maintaining parks;
- Ensuring accessibility to open space through active (non-motorized) transportation and transit;
- Preserving the scenic and environmental values of the waterfront and marina for passive and active users.

2.2 Issues

2.2.1 Type of Use

Parks are an important component of the urban landscape and serve a variety of functions. Frederick Law Olmsted, who was responsible for many of North America's first urban parks established in the mid to late 19th century, advocated for "bringing nature into the city" as a means to improve public health. Park creation has also been used as a tool to develop urban character, change land use patterns and encourage new development (Garvin, 2002). Currently there is an emphasis on the preservation and acquisition of open space to support ecological objectives (e.g. carbon sequestration, stormwater management, and habitat protection). Regardless of the rationale, a comprehensive park system improves community health and well-being for all citizens by providing a variety of accessible, recreational opportunities.

Parks can be viewed as providing recreation (active and passive uses) and/or protecting ecological integrity (Drescher and Franco-Wills, 2001). Generally, active parks support sport and other organized activities which require playing fields and related infrastructure. Parks supporting passive recreation such as hiking, bird-watching and nature appreciation provide infrastructure with a smaller footprint such as trails and picnic grounds. The type of use varies with the size or classification of a park. Smaller park designations, such as pocket or neighbourhood parks, are generally more limited in their facilities compared to larger community or regional parks.

2.2.2 Population Demographics

The Town of Comox has a higher than average proportion of seniors. Approximately 23% of residents are over the age of 65, compared to the provincial average of 17%. This trend is expected to continue. Comox has a projected 2031 population of between 18,000 and 21,000 people, of which 30% will be over the age of 65. Seniors have more time available for recreation and are engaging in more active pursuits including hiking, bicycling, picnicking, and nature appreciation. Bird watching is one activity in particular that tends towards the middle to older demographic. In the United States, bird watching generates billions of dollars of economic activity and is an important component of some local economies (Pullis La Rouche, 2002).

The percentage of citizens in younger age classes is significant but less than the provincial average. Providing a variety of active recreation options for this younger demographic (e.g. playgrounds, sports fields, skate parks) will attract young families and youth to the town of Comox.

Comox is expected to remain a primarily residential community where people enjoy a high quality of life that is strongly associated with its waterfront and natural areas. Seniors and young families tend to be attracted to higher density developments that are more affordable, require less maintenance and offer more opportunities for socialization. As these types of developments are built in the Town, there will be increasing demand for neighbourhood parks and recreation facilities. Future management of open space must reflect these demographic realities and lifestyle choices. Parks and greenways should be developed to address issues such as access, walkability, environmental protection, active lifestyles, and community health and sustainability.

2.2.3 Future Growth and Development

The Town of Comox is facing increasing pressure for residential development with a limited available land base. There are scarce opportunities available to develop large parks and it is expected that the majority of new parks will coincide with future development. Opportunities should be pursued to develop parks as part of larger restoration initiatives, brown/greyfield remediation or site renewal projects. Pursuing higher density community living models (such as townhouses, cluster housing) provides opportunities to preserve or develop larger communal open spaces. These can be either privately operated as part of the development or shared as a public commons. Municipal incentives should be provided to encourage expanded park and trail development.

2.2.4 Accessibility and Connectivity

Maintaining and enhancing existing habitat and providing natural connections on the landscape is important for both wildlife and people. The Town of Comox has begun to establish a system of greenways; however, many of these greenways incorporate existing roads and sidewalk infrastructure which lacks the natural features required for wildlife movement.

Parks and greenways initiatives in adjacent jurisdictions (such as CVRD Lazo North, City of Courtenay, K'omox First Nation) must be considered and incorporated into future open space plans. Opportunities should be explored to create larger contiguous natural areas through joint protection and the development of linkages to expand regional greenways. Lazo Marsh is one example of a joint effort by multiple jurisdictions and agencies to manage a significant natural area. This approach ensures that ecosystem functions and values are protected at a landscape level and are protected over the long-term.

2.2.5 Protection of Environmental Values and Sustainability

Parks play a critical role to protect environmental values associated with natural areas. Loss of these areas is a major threat to ecological integrity and biodiversity and can cost the municipality through the loss of "free" ecological services. For example, trees and forests can improve air quality (absorbing pollutants), reduce energy costs (heating and cooling), sequester carbon (reduction of GHGs), improve water quality (rainwater interception and infiltration) and increase property values. Wetlands and intact forests also act as natural filters and can reduce the need for expensive stormwater management systems.

New development models are also prompting communities to rethink traditional approaches to land use. The Sustainable Sites Initiative, which is currently being led by the American Society of Landscape Architects as a sister compendium to the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) guidelines, will have further implications for park planning. The intent of SSI is to develop criteria and benchmarks for landscape design, construction and maintenance to protect ecological values. Park managers should be prepared to integrate these new approaches to protect environmental and community health.

2.2.6 Funding and Policy Development

There are significant costs associated with parks, including acquisition, development and maintenance. The case for park funding should be linked to cost savings and other benefits that are realized with greater investment in green infrastructure. These include ecosystem benefits associated with more trees and natural areas; reduced health care costs; greater work productivity; higher quality of life; and increased real estate values and tax revenue.

There is a strong linkage between investment in park and greenways and improved community health. However, municipal budget restrictions can limit opportunities to purchase land for open space dedication. Dedications of municipal reserve land, use of existing right-of-ways, or land donation are less expensive options. Park land can also be acquired through development subdivision. Currently, the BC *Local Government Act* (under the Subdivision and Development Requirements) permits up to five percent of land to be allocated for park when a property is subdivided (with certain provisos). Cash in lieu may also be paid to the municipality at a fair market value. Another option is instituting Development Cost Charges to raise money for parks. Density bonusing or rezoning provides incentives to developers to provide additional open space (WCEL, 2009). In all cases, a park and greenways plan should be established ahead of time so that new acquisitions contribute to a cohesive framework, rather than following an ad hoc approach that can result in a random distribution of fragmented parks and greenways.

3 PARKS AND GREENWAYS ASSESSMENT

Determining the appropriate amount and type of open space within an urban area is challenging. Many jurisdictions develop park classes based upon size (e.g. pocket, neighbourhood, community and regional) and distance to a given population. Loose standards for park development do exist (see Table 2); however, these must be considered within the context of an individual City's needs and conditions.

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is an American advocacy and policy development group dedicated to the advancement of public parks and recreation. The NRPA recommends 10 acres (4 hectares) of park be provided per 1000 people. This standard has been used by many jurisdictions as a basis for park planning; however, it is more often adapted to reflect

individual communities. These targets are often not achievable in cities with high densities and limited land base.

3.1 Inventory

The Town of Comox currently has approximately 114 hectares of designated park area (Table 1). Based upon a population of 13,444 (2009 BC Stats), this works out to approximately 8.5 hectares of open space per 1000 people, which is twice the NRPA standard of 4 hectares/1000. 84 hectares (74%) supports natural ecosystems and passive recreation (e.g. trails). The remainder (30 hectares) is designated for active recreation. These numbers have changed somewhat from the 1996 Parks and Recreation Plan, which indicated Comox had approximately 96 hectares of designated open space (76 hectares of natural wooded/passive park, 13 hectares of unorganized recreational park and 6 hectares of active park).

Table 1: Current Open Space Inventory by Planning Area

Planning Area	Area (ha)	Passive (Natural)	Active	Total	Percent
West Comox	235	7	4	11	4.7
East Comox	75	1	1	2	2.6
North Comox	931	57	8	65	6.9
Central Comox	265	19	8	27	10.2
Downtown	160	0	9	9	5.7
Total	1666	84	30	114	6.8

Park planning targets can also be based on a percentage of the total land base. In 1987, the Brundtland Report was commissioned by the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development in response to deteriorating environmental conditions resulting from unsustainable development. The report recommended tripling the percentage of the world's protected areas from 4% to 12%, a target which has been adopted by numerous governments worldwide including the Province of British Columbia. Although flawed in some respects, it does represent a benchmark for comparison. Currently, 6.8% of land within the Town of Comox is designated as open space (passive and active).

On a landscape level, the current land inventory highlights some potential issues and opportunities for future open space acquisition and development:

- East Comox (2.6%), West Comox (4.7%) and Downtown (5.7%) have the lowest proportion of land area designated as open space;
- Opportunity for future open space acquisition in Downtown is limited due to current build-out;
- East Comox is a small area with low population density. However, it contains a high percentage of sensitive ecosystems (coastal bluffs, mature forest, and coastal vegetation communities). Development Permit Areas have been established to protect some environmentally sensitive features;
- Future growth potential is expected to occur in West Comox, North Comox, and Central Comox. These are the largest planning areas and have the highest infill and development potential to accommodate future population growth (575, 556 and 327 dwelling units respectively);
- Comox recently incorporated a large section of ALR (~63.5 ha) located southeast of the intersection of Knight and Anderton Road. Approximately half of this is forested. A small forested area (~9.3 ha) is located on municipal ALR west of Lazo Marsh. An additional four

hectares of ALR exists south of the airport and Glacier Greens Golf Course. The Town also borders ALR land to the north, east, and west.

Parks can be defined according to specific criteria including size, service radius, and use. Classifications vary from small and locally accessible pocket and neighbourhood parks to larger community and regional parks. These contain a wider range of amenities and service a larger catchment area. Table 2 provides a summary of average open space and facilities use across Canada.

Table 2: Average Open Space and Facilities Use Across Canada*

Area	Hectares per 1,000 Population	Service Radius	Size – Hectares or Population Threshold
Tot lot (vest-pocket park)	0.2	0.2 to 0.4 km	Typically 0.20 ha or less (½ acre or less)
Neighbourhood Park	0.4 to 0.8	0.8 to 5.0 km	0.10 to 8.1 ha (1/4 to 20 acres)
Community Park (active and passive facilities + playfields)	0.4 to 0.8	0.8 to 5.0 km	1.6 to 40 ha (preferably 10 ha or larger) (4 to 100 acres)
City Park – includes municipal and sub-regional park	2.0	0.8 to 5.0 km (or ½ hour driving time)	10 to 80 ha (25 to 200 acres)
Regional Park	1.6 to 4.0	32 km (or one hour driving time)	10 to 400 ha (25 to 1,000 acres, usually 100 to 250 acres)
Nature Parks	Variable		Variable depending on amenity
Soccer field	With community park or secondary school playfield		1 per 20,000
Baseball field	Neighbourhood facility		1 per 5,000
Softball field	Part of school playground		1 per 5,000
Neighbourhood Centre	With elementary school or neighbourhood park		1 per 5,000
Athletic field, fastball	In community park or with secondary school		1 per 20,000
Indoor ice arena	Not indicated		1 per 20,000

*Adapted from Appendix 5 of Mill Bay/Malahat Parks and Trails Master Plan

Currently, the Town of Comox operates (through Comox Recreation) a number of parks and recreation facilities, some of which are located on school grounds. The Town also operates a municipal marina and provides two boat launches. Table 3 and 4 provide a summary of open space and facility use.

Table 3: Open Space and Facilities Use in Comox

Name	Size (ha)/Type (Active, Passive)	Location		Name	Size (ha)/Type (Active, Passive)	Location
Anderton	1.2/A	Downtown		MacDonald Wood	5.2/P	Central
Aspen	3.0/A-P	West		Mack Laing	2.1/P	Central
Brooklyn Cr.	4.7/P	Central		Marina	4.7/A	Downtown
Civic	<0.5/P	Downtown		N.E. Comox	13.6/P	North
Condor	3.7/P	West		Park Drive	<0.5/P	Downtown
Filberg	3.3/A	Downtown		Pioneer	0.5/P	West
Foxxwood	0.8/P	North		Port Augusta	1.6/P	Downtown
HarbourWood	0.6/A	West		Salish	4.7/P	Central
Highland	3.2/A	North		Skeena	0.7/P	Central
Highwood	0.8/P	North		Tot Lot	1.6/A-P	Central
McKenzie	0.7/A	Central		Village	3.3/A	Central

Table 4: Comox Sports Fields

Field	Baseball Diamonds	Soccer Fields
Comox Community Centre	2	2
Highland Field	3	3
Aspen Field	2	1
Brooklyn Elementary	2	2
Cape Lazo Middle School		1
Comox Elementary	1	1
Ecole Robb Road Elementary		1
Village Park Elementary	2	2
Total	12	13

The Town of Comox has a greenways network that provides linkages to the City of Courtenay and CVRD. Most greenways are located adjacent to local road or arterial/major collector routes and present concerns related to safety and traffic noise. In addition, wildlife habitat value is lower due to increased human presence, narrow corridor width, and low tree cover and understory vegetation.

Dedicated walkways and waterfront walks (Comox Harbour, Kye Bay) have been established primarily within the existing open space network. The most significant is located within the Brooklyn Creek riparian corridor which has been identified by the Comox Valley Land Trust as a priority recreation trail that could provide linkages to the CVRD and City of Courtenay. Dedicated walkways are generally more pedestrian friendly and protect more ecosystem values; however, accessibility and isolation (safety) of some trails can be a concern.

The CVRD is currently developing a Park and Greenways Strategic Plan for 2011 – 2020. Greenways have been identified that can provide potential linkages to the Town of Comox and the City of Courtenay (Appendix 3). A regional approach will result in an expanded network of greenways that link communities, businesses, parks and other amenities as part of an expanded recreation and active transportation strategy.

3.2 Recommendations

The following policy recommendations address park and greenway management issues within the Town of Comox:

- Develop a parks and greenways framework (based upon an analysis of ecosystem, recreation and community health values) to identify target areas and types of open space prior to proceeding with future land development;
- Identify types of parks that are currently under-represented in each neighborhood;
- Identify and prioritize opportunities for the development of open space in future growth areas;
- Plan higher density, senior-oriented developments in close proximity to natural areas, parks and greenways to improve accessibility;
- Develop active playgrounds in close proximity to residential developments with young families;
- Identify and prioritize natural areas and Environmentally Sensitive Areas for protection (e.g. Lazo Marsh, mature forest ecosystems and remnant patches, coastal bluffs, riparian and foreshore areas);
- Identify opportunities to create larger contiguous natural areas as part of a regional open space strategy with CVRD, the City of Courtenay and K'omox First Nation;
- Look for opportunities for the ALR to complement the parks and greenways framework (i.e. adjacent trails on public roads and retention of lands within ALR);
- Identify opportunities for ecological restoration as part of the parks and greenways framework;
- Encourage higher density housing to preserve and create shared, communal open space;
- Establish marine foreshore protection zones that allow for safe recreation facilities while ensuring the long term ecological integrity of these areas;
- Develop a greenways plan that considers linkages with CVRD and the City of Courtenay;
- Develop a network of connected pedestrian trails to help support active transportation, community health and sustainability initiatives;
- Establish wildlife corridors that link open spaces and provide a larger network of contiguous wildlife habitat;
- Encourage restoration of riparian areas; and
- Pursue opportunities to protect and establish riparian buffers that include recreation trails;

APPENDIX 1 - REFERENCES

Drescher, David and Paulette Franco-Wills. 2001. Assessing Parks Deficiency in an Urban Environment. http://ksumail.kennesaw.edu/~mpatters/4405/parks.pdf <accessed January 28, 2010>

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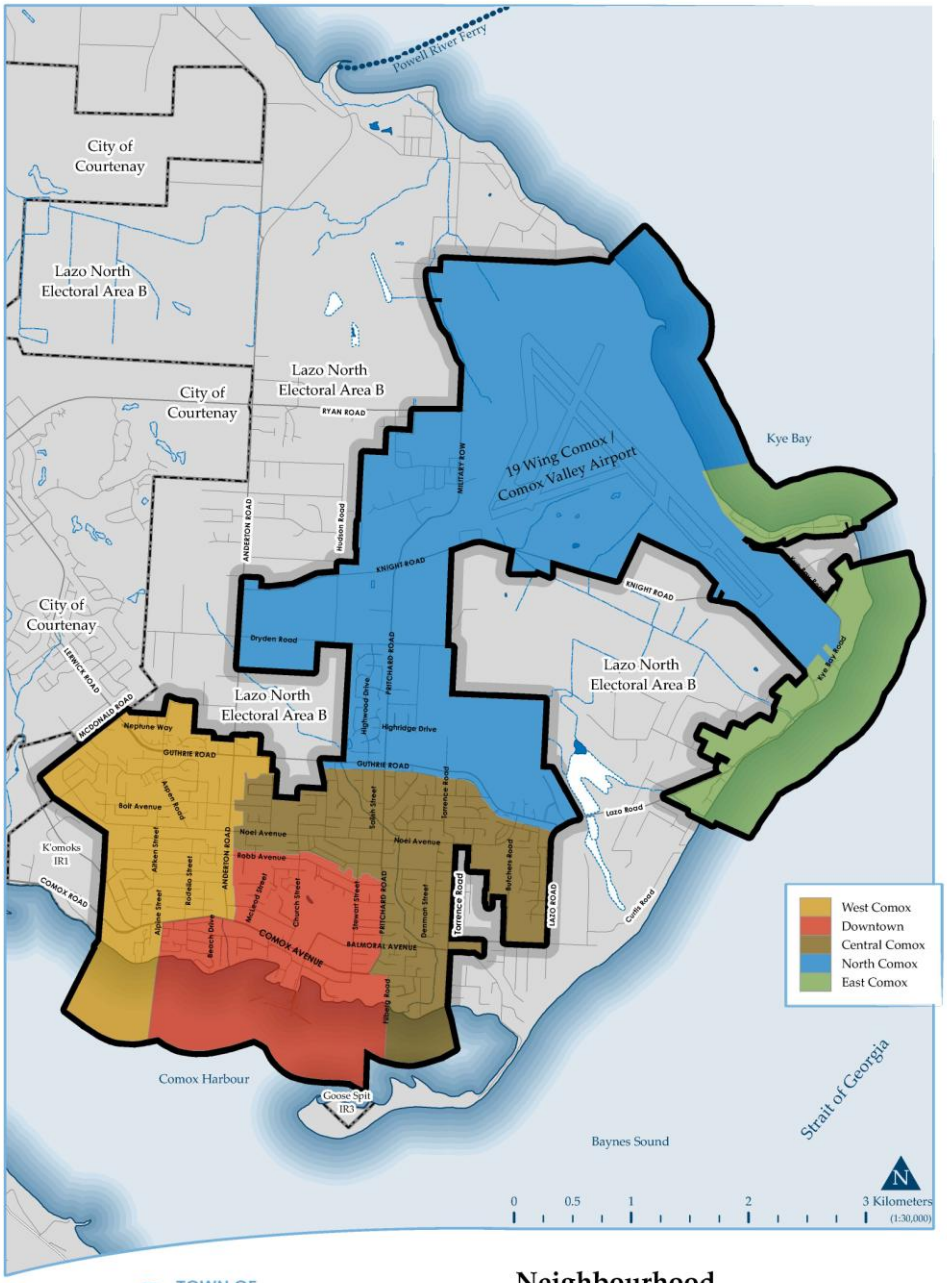
Pullis La Rouche, Genevieve. 2002. Birding in the United States: A Demographic and Economic Analysis. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Washington, D.C http://www.fs.fed.us/outdoors/naturewatch/start/economics/Economic-Analysis-for-Birding.pdf <accessed May 4, 2010>

West Coast Environmental Law (WCEL). 2009. BC Guide to Watershed and Planning. http://watershedguide.wcel.org/z-misc/local-government-parks-o22-7/ <accessed May 4, 2010>

APPENDIX 2 – TOWN OF COMOX PLANNING AREAS



TOWN OF Comox Official Community Plan UPDATE

Neighbourhood Planning Areas

January 2010

map created by the Arlington Group for the Town of Comox

data provided by:
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NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING AREAS

APPENDIX 3 – TOWN OF COMOX GREENWAYS NETWORK