

Date: April 16, 2007



TO: Board Members – Vancouver Park Board
FROM: General Manager – Parks and Recreation
SUBJECT: Queen Elizabeth Observation Tower

RECOMMENDATION

A. THAT the Board refer the concept of a privately developed and operated viewing tower in Queen Elizabeth Park to a public review process as described in this report.

OR

B. THAT the Board not pursue the concept of a privately developed and operated viewing tower in Queen Elizabeth Park at this time.

POLICY

The Board approves park development projects. The Board's Strategic Plan includes direction to "pursue alternative sources of funding to meet future needs".

BACKGROUND

Queen Elizabeth Park is the highest point in the City of Vancouver at 501 feet above sea level. Historically this viewpoint offered unobstructed views of the North Shore mountains, the harbour, downtown, Vancouver Island, Gulf Islands, Fraser delta and Mount Baker. With the gradual growth of trees planted as part of the arboretum on the slopes of Little Mountain, many angles of what was a 360° viewscape have become obscured or simply eliminated.

In the 1950's and 1960's a significant effort was undertaken to develop this site as a tourist attraction. The North Quarry Gardens were built and in the late 1960's when the water reservoir was capped, and the Bloedel Conservatory, the Plaza, fountains and the Henry Moore sculpture were added. All these features made Queen Elizabeth Park a more interesting attraction for residents and visitors alike.

To the tourist industry, Queen Elizabeth Park was a "must see" destination. The gradual loss of the view as the principal attraction in conjunction with construction activities related to the water reservoir, the revitalization of the reservoir roof and the Canada Line have reduced tourist visits and their attendant contribution to Park Board revenue. As an example, attendance at the Bloedel Conservatory has declined from 119,000 visitors of which 28,000 were tour bus admissions in 2001, to 65,000 visitors of which 940 were tour bus admissions in 2006.

In the early phases of the recently re-opened park, an exploratory review of a viewing tower was undertaken, but not pursued since the capital costs of the facility appeared beyond the Board's capability.

The Board has directed staff to be more entrepreneurial in their thinking and development of additional revenue streams. This proposal was initially received by the Planning Committee at its March 6, 2007 meeting. It was referred to the whole Board for their consideration.

DISCUSSION

Proposed Concept

In recent months a private group, Observation Tower Inc., has approached the Board with a proposal to develop and operate a viewing tower adjacent to the Plaza and the Bloedel Conservatory. The essence of the proposal is to restore the views without significantly modifying the Little Mountain woodlands and revitalize a tourism asset.

Proposal/Project Selection

The proposed project is illustrated in Appendix I, and its capital cost is in the order of \$10 million.

Since the proposal is based on a privately operated model, there needs to be a competitive aspect to the selection of a private developer/operator. This selection could be by the way of an Expression of Interest (EOI) and/or a Request for Proposal. This process could lead to a number of designs and operating models being put forward and a detailed evaluation of the siting, design, operation and financial return to the Park Board of the (competing) proposals would have to be undertaken.

Once a preferred proponent would be selected by the Board, the business arrangements would have to be fine tuned, captured in a legal agreement, and the design would need to receive Board approval as well as a City Development Permit.

There would be no point in engaging in such a process unless there is support in principle for the concept of a privately operated viewing tower. For this reason it is suggested that a public process be undertaken to assess community reaction to the advantages and disadvantages of such a concept. This process would need a variety of stakeholders to offer opinions and advise on the concept, including such issues as siting, the design, scale, impact on the tourist industry, impact on park and neighbourhoods, transportation as well as potential financial impacts on Board revenues.

Proposed Public Consultation

Since at this time there is only one proposal, illustrative materials to test the concept would be drawn largely from the current proposal.

The following steps are recommended:

1. Place information sign on site.
2. Develop website based on proposals with specific questions and an opportunity for open ended comments.
3. Arrange for concept to be presented to and solicit feedback from stakeholder groups (tourist industry, park users, neighbourhood residents).
4. Conduct open house at Riley Community Centre.
5. Report back to Board on feedback received.

The direct costs associated with this program are about \$4,500. Staff will work with the current proponent to generate appropriate presentation materials and take the lead in all aspects of the program. Consistent with other proposal reviews the non-staff cost of this program are recommended to be borne by the proponents.

SUMMARY

The Board has been approached by a private developer to develop and operate an observation tower near the Plaza at Queen Elizabeth Park. This is a very significant proposal with potential impacts on the tourist industry, the park, the neighbourhood and Park Board revenues.

The Park Board's Planning Committee has referred this matter to the Board for consideration, and staff recommendations provide a choice of proceeding or not further considering this proposal.

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