



October 7, 2021

TO: Park Board Chair and Commissioners
FROM: General Manager – Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation
SUBJECT: VanDusen & Bloedel Strategic Plan

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the Vancouver Park Board approve the proposed “VanDusen & Bloedel Strategic Plan,” attached as Appendix A, and direct staff to start the process of updating the existing Joint Operating Agreement (JOA) with the Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association (VBGA).

REPORT SUMMARY

VanDusen Botanical Garden (“VanDusen”) is cherished locally and renowned internationally for its beauty and is a green refuge in the bustling city. VanDusen inspires the local community to understand the vital importance of plants to all life through various botanical collections, programs, and practices. Surrounded by panoramic views of the mountains and framed by flourishing gardens, Bloedel Conservatory (“Bloedel”) provides a distinctive Vancouver experience. Over 50 years of local advocacy has established a well-visited tropical oasis in the heart of the city.

VanDusen and Bloedel are operated by the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation (Park Board) in collaboration with its non-profit partner, the Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association (VBGA). Starting in fall 2019, the VBGA and Park Board joined efforts to develop a Strategic Plan for VanDusen and Bloedel to guide long-range planning and to take on a collaborative approach to the update of the existing Joint Operating Agreement (JOA). This work included a significant amount of research and review of current state and engagement, as well as hours of collaboration and partnership. Guided by a Steering Committee, a project team engaged the community, stakeholders and staff to understand their hopes, aspirations and priorities for the Strategic Plan.

The proposed Strategic Plan includes shared values, vision, mission, and goals foundational to daily operations and the long-range planning of VanDusen, Bloedel and associated facilities. The content of an updated JOA will be supported by the robust process and outcome of the Strategic Plan. Subject to the Board’s approval of the Strategic Plan, the team will further develop actions and subsequently, the JOA content. Updates will be provided at critical points through the process, including the proposed content of the JOA.

BOARD AUTHORITY / POLICY / PREVIOUS DECISIONS

As per the [Vancouver Charter](#), the Park Board has exclusive jurisdiction and control over all areas designated as permanent and temporary parks in the City of Vancouver, including any structures, programs and activities, fees, and improvements that occur within those parks.

The proposed VanDusen & Bloedel Strategic Plan, including its values, vision, mission, and transformative goals, align with and activate the bold moves outlined in [VanPlay, the Parks and Recreation Services Master Plan](#).

VanPlay Bold Moves

Equity – The Strategic Plan is founded on the value of inclusion. Park Board and VBGA will strive to create an even more welcoming place so that every community member can enhance the human connection to nature, plants and each other.

Asset Needs – The Strategic Plan guides the development of actions regarding need assessments and service provision.

Connectivity – VanDusen and Bloedel's central location provide an opportunity to be a hub in the city-wide network of parks and recreation. There are many opportunities to create connections, including enabling access to nature and water flow, such as a connection between Queen Elizabeth Park and VanDusen Garden. VanPlay identifies the area as an important environmental corridor for accommodating natural systems into the city's infrastructure.

VanPlay Goals

Goal 2 - Protect existing parks and recreation spaces from loss, encroachment and densification;

Goal 4 - Focus on core responsibilities of the park board, and be a supportive ally to partners;

Goal 5 - Adapt our parks and recreation amenities to a changing climate;

Goal 6 - Create a green network that will connect our parks, waterfront and recreation areas;

Goal 7 - Restore Vancouver's wild spaces and vital biodiversity;

Goal 8 - Foster a system of Parks and Recreation spaces that are welcoming to all; and

Goal 9 - Seek truth as a foundation for reconciliation with Musqueam, Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh Nations.

VanPlay Playbook, Implementation Plan - the VanDusen Bloedel Strategic Plan directly fulfills the [Playbook initiative](#): F.2.6 identifies the VanDusen Botanical Garden and Bloedel Conservatory Strategic Plan as a short-term priority of action.

BACKGROUND

VanDusen Botanical Garden, designated as a permanent public park under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Park Board, is operated in collaboration with the Park Board's non-profit partner, the Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association (VBGA). The relationship between the Park Board and the VBGA is governed by the 1994 Joint Operating Agreement, amended in 2013 to add the Bloedel Conservatory located in Queen Elizabeth Park (also a permanent public park). The stewardship of these two community amenities is under the direction of the Park Board's Garden Director, in collaboration with the VBGA Executive Director. A need to update and modernize this JOA was identified to: reflect the priorities of a new shared vision and mandate; precisely define roles and responsibilities; and improve operations.

In October 2019, Commissioners were informed of the [VanDusen & Bloedel Strategic Plan Launch](#) via a briefing memo that also provided a general overview of the project. The project team conducted reviews, analysis, and engagement in early 2020. From March 2020 through to the end of the year, this work was interrupted as the COVID-19 pandemic impacted in-person meetings and staff capacity was reprioritized to pandemic response and recovery work. The

project was relaunched in January 2021, and a summary of engagement outcomes was shared with the Park Board and VBGA Board in April 2021.

The proposed VanDusen & Bloedel Strategic Plan defines the future vision and mandate for VanDusen Botanical Garden and Bloedel Conservatory. This new vision and mandate aligns the efforts to maximize the potential of these two entities and enables long-term planning and investment that supports an approved future direction. In support of this Strategic Plan, a review of the current state, governance, and financial model was completed. Located on the unceded lands of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations, there is a need to contextualize VanDusen and Bloedel in relation to this Indigenous land. This work needs to continue to formulate the reconciliation vision, identify what decolonization looks like in the gardens, and develop actions that are relevant for the gardens and conservatory.

VanDusen Botanical Garden

Opened in 1975, VanDusen is an approximately 22 hectare botanical garden showcasing 70 distinct plant collections comprising over 8,000 plant species and varieties from around the world. VanDusen is widely recognized in North America, serving as a living classroom for visitors from across the globe. With its mild temperate climate and ideal location on the south coast of British Columbia, a province with incredible biodiversity, VanDusen can grow a broad collection of cultivated plants in Canada.

The Park Board manages VanDusen and is responsible for horticultural operations; conservation of plant collections; visitor services (general admissions, gift shop, front of house, ticketing, etc.); marketing, special events and rental bookings; and overall garden and facility operations. The Park Board generates revenue through admissions, gift shop sales, rental bookings and special events. The Park Board also manages lease and licence agreements for two onsite restaurants.

The VBGA is responsible for garden programming, including education (school and family programs, guided tours, camps and continuing education for adults); a horticultural library; fundraising; and volunteer management. Through the years, VanDusen has received significant donations from W.J. VanDusen and many others for their advocacy for botanical gardens and community. VBGA generates revenue through memberships and educational programs.

Bloedel Conservatory

Opened in 1969 as part of an ambitious master plan for Queen Elizabeth Park, Bloedel is a 0.14 hectare triodetic dome located in the park atop Vancouver's highest point in the city. Bloedel is home to more than 100 birds and 500 exotic plants and flowers, and welcomes tens of thousands of visitors annually. Constructed through a generous donation from Prentice Bloedel, Bloedel was dedicated at its opening in 1969 and is designated as a heritage building.

Over the past number of years, there have been significant changes at VanDusen and Bloedel, with the conservatory coming under the same management portfolio as VanDusen. Public awareness has grown through strategic marketing initiatives, and various improvements have been made to enhance the visitor experience. These changes were made without a joint guiding document articulating a clear vision, mission, values, and goals for the Park Board and VBGA. The Park Board is currently undertaking a master plan for Queen Elizabeth Park to define the future vision for the park. The VanDusen & Bloedel Strategic Plan will inform the Queen Elizabeth Park Master Plan regarding the Bloedel Conservatory.

DISCUSSION

This report provides an overview of the proposed VanDusen & Bloedel Strategic Plan, attached as Appendix A. The plan provides a compelling future vision for the VanDusen Botanical Garden and Bloedel Conservatory, and aims to identify critical social, cultural, educational and environmental opportunities for both sites. It was developed collaboratively by Park Board staff and VBGA Board representatives and staff, supported by a consultant team of botanical garden, planning, and facilitation experts. The scope of work included review and analysis of current operations and comparable precedents. Engagement with staff, the community, and both internal and external stakeholders helped to inform a shared vision.

Project Process

Review and Research

Starting in late summer 2019, the project team worked to understand the current state of VanDusen and Bloedel by comparative analysis of international best practices in similar gardens and conservatories. Also, a series of meetings and interviews of over 50 individuals were conducted by the project team. These individuals included VBGA Board members, Park Board Commissioners, VanDusen and Bloedel staff, various stakeholders, and local subject matter experts. The project team completed a review of documents, from guiding policies to daily operations.

Engagement

Between October 2019 and February 2020, more than 6,000 people participated and engaged in the process of developing a strategic plan for VanDusen and Bloedel. The input collected through the engagement process was thoughtful, diverse, and demonstrated that Vancouver loves both of these community amenities. A sense of commitment, passion and a community legacy was evident in every engagement.

The analysis of the engagement input identified five overarching themes. These included:

- 1) **A garden for all:** VanDusen and Bloedel are Vancouver's gardens, and participants feel they should be welcoming to all. The accessibility highlights included making the garden and conservatory physically accessible, limiting barriers to entry and working to be inclusive of everyone.
- 2) **Connecting people, plants and community:** The gardens are recognized as a place of connection between people, community, plants and nature. Although different things brought participants together, there was a collective value around how the gardens are a place where memories are made.
- 3) **Responsible stewardship:** Protecting and advocating for the gardens and the biodiversity they support is critical for today and the long term. By acting locally and thinking globally about climate change, we will ensure the gardens play an important role in leading the charge in tackling the current climate crisis.
- 4) **The garden is our teacher:** The gardens are our classroom, a place of learning and excitement. Today and tomorrow's generation of gardeners can come and learn about and care deeply for the gardens, ecology and biodiversity so that they will act as custodians for generations to come.

- 5) **Rooted for future longevity:** The gardens are well-positioned with an appropriate governance model that ensures our long-term financial viability. The gardens aren't just "getting by", but are North America's premier botanical garden. Excellence is our culture.

Detailed information on the engagement process and outcomes is included in the Engagement Report attached as Appendix B.

Collaboration

Once the engagement process was concluded, a Steering Committee was established with membership comprised of Park Board staff and VBGA Board members and staff. The Steering Committee began its work with a commitment to solution-oriented, long-term focused discussions supported with open and honest communications.

Supported by a project team, the Steering Committee deliberated and collaborated through a series of several workshops, expert interviews, virtual site visits and online work. The Steering Committee and the project team developed this work thoughtfully with consideration for each other's values. The process was based on consensus with reflections and compromise.

Strategic Plan

The Strategic Plan includes values, vision, mission and transformative goals. These terms for the purpose of this Strategic Plan were defined as follows:

- Values represent the core of who we are, what we stand for and what we believe in. They are foundational-shared principles.

Strategic Plan Values: *Botanical Conservation, Discovery, Inclusion, Reconciliation, Respite, and Stewardship*

- Vision is an inspirational statement that simply states the aspirational future for both VanDusen Garden and Bloedel Conservatory. The vision articulates hopes and dreams, inspires and unites.

Strategic Plan Vision: *To be a leading garden of transformative experiences and botanical discovery.*

- Mission is a simple statement that communicates the why and how we do something.

Strategic Plan Mission: *To inspire a deeper understanding of plants and a passion for biodiversity, and to encourage generations to conserve, protect, and enhance the natural world.*

- Transformative Goals align with the values, help realize the vision, and advance the mission.

Strategic Plan Transformative Goals (in alphabetical order):

- *Achieve long-term financial sustainability*
- *Be a leader in conservation and sustainable practices*
- *Cultivate knowledge, understanding, and passion for the important role of plants, and gain commitment to promoting biodiversity*

- *Cultivate strong and active partnerships between City of Vancouver, Park Board, and Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association*
- *Facilitate a memorable experience for all visitors, members, and groups*
- *Increase horticultural and botanical relevance and significance*
- *Support understanding and appreciation of the relationship between nature, culture, and heritage while celebrating the relationship of Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh First Nations to the unceded lands on which the gardens are located*

The Steering Committee spent an extensive number of meetings and hours collaborating and deliberating on these key terms and what they meant to their respective organizations. The Steering Committee agreed that achieving these goals will require a number of specific actions. These actions will impact the work of staff in each organization, and it is important to develop these actions with the pandemic lens of staff capacity, time, and financial resources. The actions, roles, and responsibilities and the JOA content will be developed concurrently, and staff will provide an update on this work in the coming months.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although, there are no immediate financial implications with the approval of this Strategic Plan, depending on the steps forward, there may be financial implications in the future. Possible next steps, such as developing a business plan for both gardens, a master plan for VanDusen, and a curatorial plan for Bloedel, will require a direct future capital re-investment in the gardens. The goal of the Strategic Plan is to work with our community partners to achieve financial sustainability for both gardens.

NEXT STEPS

Subject to the Board's approval of the proposed VanDusen & Bloedel Strategic Plan as outlined in this report and attached as Appendix A, the plan will be presented to the VBGA Board to share and review with their members.

Staff will then focus on the work required for negotiation and ratification of a new Joint Operating Agreement (JOA) to govern the relationship between the Park Board and VBGA moving forward. This work will be led by Park Board staff, with discussions and JOA content to be informed by the values, vision, mission, and transformative goals of the Strategic Plan. Regular updates will be provided to both Boards as this work progresses.

CONCLUSION

Establishing a strategic plan for VanDusen & Bloedel is the first step in the journey to achieving the vision for the gardens and conservatory. It provides a foundation for future collaborations, and the Steering Committee believes that the strategic planning process set a new course for the relationship between the Park Board and VBGA.

VanDusen Botanical Gardens and Bloedel Conservatory are both legacies to be proud of that have an important future role in manifesting the vision set out in the Strategic Plan. The completion of the Strategic Plan will represent a significant and defining moment, planting the seeds for the betterment of both amenities. With joint commitment and leadership, the guidance of the Strategic Plan, and an updated and improved JOA, the two organizations can together

overcome the challenges of inequity, climate change, aging facilities, and post-pandemic stretched resources.

General Manager's Office
Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation
Vancouver, BC

Prepared by:
Leila Todd, Senior Planner – Planning, Policy & Environment

/lt/jk/clc

PROPOSED

VanDusen & Bloedel

Strategic Plan

Fall 2021



Land Acknowledgement

Vancouver is located on the unceded traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓ əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish) and səl' ilwətaʔt (Tsleil-Waututh) Peoples. Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples have been and are stewards of these lands and have deep knowledge and connection to the plants and the land that have sustained their people for time immemorial. We believe that Vancouver's parks and natural spaces are venues to foster new connections between the land and people and a place to learn from the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples. Contained within this Strategic Plan is a shared commitment between the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation and the Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association to advance reconciliation, working respectfully with First Nations and honouring the long history of stewardship of these special gardens.



A Letter From Both Boards

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Commissioner Camil Dumont

Park Board Chair

Janet Rhodes

VBGA President



Vancouver
Botanical
Gardens
Association

How We Developed this Strategic Plan

Our planning process, though interrupted by the global COVID-19 pandemic, sought to include those who were interested or impacted by the VanDusen and Bloedel Strategic Plan.

We began by listening to and learning from the community and interested and affected parties^[1]. We aimed to gather their insights into the Vision, Mission, and Values of VanDusen and Bloedel, and better understand the principles they believe should guide the gardens. We also explored key measures of success for the Strategic Plan with stakeholder parties, including botanical leaders. Through our internal and external engagement process (which included surveys, interviews, focus groups, workshops, and open houses), we heard from approximately 6,000 people.

Once we had concluded our engagement process, we established a Steering Committee, formed of VBGA Board and staff, and Park Board staff. Through a series of workshops, expert interviews, virtual site visits, and collaborative online work, we incrementally developed the contents of this strategic plan. Our approach was rooted in consensus: we reflected, considered, and compromised to arrive at this shared plan which sets the course for a vibrant future for the gardens.

¹ Through our process we engaged with: visitors to VanDusen and Bloedel, VBGA members, volunteers, VBGA and Park Board staff, donors, and educators.





Vision To be a leading garden of transformative experiences and botanical discovery.

Mission To inspire a deeper understanding of plants and a passion for biodiversity, and to encourage generations to conserve, protect, and enhance the natural world.

Values

Botanical Conservation: We are committed to and will advocate for conservation of plant biodiversity from the Pacific Northwest and ecosystems from around the world.

Discovery: We value discovery for all through transformative experiences, education and research. We want every visitor who comes to the garden or conservatory to discover something new about plants and nature in places of inspiration.

Inclusion: We welcome every community member and work to enhance human connection to nature, plants and each other by being inclusive and relevant to those we serve now and in the future.

Reconciliation: We recognize and celebrate the original stewards of these unceded lands of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. We are committed to carrying out the important work of reconciliation.

Respite: We value being a place that allows for peace, restoration and grounding oneself in nature.

Stewardship: We honour the garden and conservatory's founders including W.J. VanDusen and Prentice Bloedel and all other donors, contributors and legacy by promoting environmental stewardship, and ensuring the financial resources to maintain and grow the gardens.





Vision is an inspirational statement that simply states the aspirational future for VanDusen Garden and Bloedel Conservatory. The vision articulates hopes and dreams, inspires and unites.

Mission is a simple statement that communicates the why and how we do something.

Values represent the core of who we are, what we stand for and what we believe in.

Transformative Goals align with the values, help realize the vision, and advance the mission.

- Achieving these goals will require a number of specific actions. These actions will impact the work of staff in each organization, and it is important to develop these actions with staff capacity, time, and financial resources.





VanDusen & Bloedel

Engagement Findings Report

Spring 2020

Table of Contents

Executive Summary1

Context + Project Background1

 Engagement and Communications Objectives 2

 Analysis Methodology 3

 Engagement by the Numbers 3

Executive Summary of Engagement Findings 4

Detailed Engagement Findings by Theme 6

 A garden for all 6

 Connecting people, plants and community 8

 Responsible stewardship13

 The garden is our teacher16

 Rooted for future longevity17

 Bloedel-Specific Findings18

 Accessibility19

 Bloedel as a Winter Oasis19

 Education at Bloedel19

 Conservation / Preservation20

 Infrastructure at Bloedel20

 Marketing and Promotion21

 Special Events at Bloedel21

Conclusion + Next Steps21

Executive Summary

Between October 2019 and February 2020, more than 6,000 people were engaged in the process of developing a strategic plan for the VanDusen Botanical Gardens (henceforth VanDusen) and the Bloedel Conservatory (henceforth Bloedel and collectively “the gardens”). The input collected through the engagement process was thoughtful, diverse and demonstrated that above all else, Vancouver loves the gardens. There was commitment, passion and a community legacy evident in every engagement.

The analysis of the input has identified five overarching themes. These include:

1. **A garden for all:** VanDusen and Bloedel are Vancouver’s gardens and participants feel they should be welcoming to all. The accessibility highlights included making the gardens physically accessible, limiting barriers to entry and working to be inclusive of everyone.
2. **Connecting people, plants and community:** The gardens are recognized as a place of connection between people, community, plants and nature. Though different things brought participants together, there was a collective value around how the gardens are a place where memories are made.
3. **Responsible stewardship:** Protecting and advocating for the gardens and the biodiversity they support is critical for today and the long-term. By acting locally and thinking globally about climate change, we will ensure the gardens play an important role in leading the charge in tackling the current climate crisis.
4. **The garden is our teacher:** The gardens are our classroom, a place of learning and excitement. Today and tomorrow’s generation of gardeners can come and learn about and care deeply for the gardens, ecology and biodiversity so that they will act as custodians for generations to come.
5. **Rooted for future longevity:** The gardens are well positioned for the future with an appropriate governance model that ensures our long-term financial viability. The gardens aren’t just “getting by” but are North America’s premier botanical garden. Excellence is our culture.

These are the key themes we heard through the engagement process. Where Delaney has a hypothesis, we have noted it as such. Otherwise, these findings directly reflect what was heard by the more than 6,000 people who contributed.

Context + Project Background

VanDusen and Bloedel has never had a strategic plan and its joint operating agreement dates from 1994. The impact of having a dated strategic plan is a Joint Operating Agreement (JOA) that has rolled over and has not provided adequate governance direction, nor articulated a shared vision for the gardens. Moreover, in 2009, Bloedel was amalgamated with VanDusen, but there has not been an intentional focus on how to integrate Bloedel into the broader offering of the VanDusen Botanical Gardens.

Having jointly recognized the need for a new strategic plan, both the Vancouver Park Board and the Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association (VBGA) have committed to developing a new strategic plan which will then inform a new JOA that governs the working relationship and responsibilities between both organizations.

Both organizations are committed to listening and learning from the community and stakeholders and will use this engagement findings report as an important piece of information as they develop the strategic plan. Additional sources of information that the steering committee¹ will consult through the process include a Current State report encompassing

- Benchmarking similar botanical gardens
- A review of past and present practices in the gardens
- Comprehensive financial analysis
- Marketing study: a review of industry standards and the Vancouver market
- Park Board and City-wide policy

The project team began engaging the community and stakeholders to better understand their interests, values and key insights for the VanDusen and Bloedel Strategic Plan in Fall 2019. The purpose of this report is to provide an account of what was heard through the engagement process. It is important to note that as third-party, neutral engagement professionals, our responsibility is to report on what was heard, not to pass any judgement on whether what was heard is “correct” or fact-based. The findings of this report are what we learned through the process and they reflect the insights of the community and some stakeholders which will help to support the steering committee as they develop the strategic plan.

In late January 2020, the project team provided an interim update to the steering committee on emerging themes from the engagement. This report provides a comprehensive update on that report and should be viewed as superseding that report.

Engagement and Communications Objectives

The engagement goal for the public process was to meaningfully engage the public and stakeholders in articulating key elements of the new strategic plan, so that it captures their imagination, long-term support and aligns with their values and the role they believe botanical gardens should play in Vancouver.

The specific communications and engagement objectives to support this goal included:

1. To share information about the project and how the public and stakeholders can participate in the process in a meaningful way so they are aware and are motivated to participate.
2. To provide information about how the strategic plan will be developed, its associated timelines and how public and stakeholder input will be used to develop the strategic plan.
3. To share information about what a strategic plan is, its various components, and highlight the specific areas where public and stakeholder input is being sought.
4. To report back to the public and stakeholders on what was heard in the engagement process so that they are aware and understand how the feedback will be used in the strategic plan (following the internal report back).
5. To involve the community and key stakeholders in documenting their ideas for the vision, mission, values and principles, as well as concerns and aspirations around the medium and long-term future for VanDusen and Bloedel, so these can be understood and documented in support of the project.

¹ The steering committee is the decision-making body for the strategic plan and is comprised of four VBGA representations and four Vancouver Park Board representatives.

- 6. To involve donors to VanDusen and Bloedel to better understand and explore their motivation for donating, their vision for the facility(ies) and what would motivate them to continue and/or increase donations in the future.

This internal report will provide a detailed report back on what was learned as relates to these objectives.

Analysis Methodology

The input collected was qualitative in nature as it was early days in the project and there was no draft plan on which to consult. Rather, the project team sought to listen and learn from participants and then take those findings and build a draft based on what was learned. The analysis methodology was to determine broad themes and to then identify areas of convergence and divergence. The findings of this engagement are not representative of the broader population and should be considered as insights gained by those who self-selected their participation in the process.

Engagement by the Numbers

The following list of engagement events outlines how input was solicited. Please note that internal engagement has also taken place but is not included in this report. Also note that the consultant team (EMD) did conduct other expert interviews which will be considered in the development of the strategic plan.

Event	Description	# of participants
Pre-engagement interviews	A number of individuals were identified and invited to be interviewed. Interviewees were asked a set of pre-developed questions focused on their connection to the gardens and their vision of the future.	48
Festival of Lights intercept surveys	Delaney and Park Board staff attended two nights at Festival of Lights at VanDusen and conducted brief intercept surveys with event visitors. Participants were asked a set of pre-developed questions regarding why they visit the garden and priorities for the future.	189
Festivale Tropicale intercept surveys	Delaney and Park Board staff attended two nights at Festivale Tropicale and conducted brief intercept surveys with event visitors. Participants were asked a set of pre-developed questions regarding why they visit the conservatory and priorities for the future.	126
Members open house	Members were invited to attend an open house at VanDusen where they were asked to provide feedback on a number of topics including vision, values, and priorities.	155
Online public survey	An open link to a TalkVancouver survey posted on the Park Board website and participants were asked questions regarding their attendance at the gardens, values, priorities, and vision of the future.	2,264

Public open house	The public was invited to attend an open house at VanDusen where they were asked to provide feedback on a number of topics including vision, values, and priorities.	86
Stakeholder focus group	Stakeholders of VanDusen and Bloedel were invited to take part in an in-person focus group. Participants were asked a set of pre-developed questions focused on vision, mission, values, and priorities. Participants included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alliance for Arts and Culture • Umbrella Events • Luxury Alliance Group Ltd • Master Gardeners Association of BC • Dickinson Art • UBC Botanical Garden • Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival • Earth and Company • Access and Inclusion for Vancouver Park Board • Vancouver Coastal Health • Temrick Family 	11
Visitor online survey	People who purchased tickets to attend Festival of Lights online were sent an email linking to a short survey.	3,282
Volunteer workshops	Volunteers were brought together in person for two workshops to discuss values, ideal future, and communications and engagement preferences.	27

Executive Summary of Engagement Findings

The themes identified through the external engagement process with the community and stakeholders should be viewed as overlapping and interdependent. **From a** neutral engagement perspective, these themes appear to be logical groupings; however, there is much overlap and certainly arguments could be made about alternative groupings. What is important is that the content of each theme reflects what we heard through the engagement process.

What’s more, there are few incongruencies in what we heard, at least on the surface. Ultimately, the divergences **that** emerge are below the surface, in the details and **in** the interpretation. While individuals and groups mostly share a high-level consensus on preferences, priorities, and their interpretations of key ideas and terms, some debate does exist regarding how these aspects are balanced and enacted to achieve an ideal future.

For example, it would be simplistic to say that there are those who love large scale public events and those who despise them. There is in fact, a lot of shared understanding that events play an important role in generating revenue and building community for both VanDusen and Bloedel. The divergence, however, comes in when the details are explored. For example, the car show is seen by some as being at odds with a place they feel should be a champion for climate action. Others are highly supportive of events that draw in first-time visitors as this provides a pathway to broader interest and engagement with the gardens. It is because of this important nuance that Delaney has sought to avoid definitive and/or polarizing language. There is much common ground overall, but divergences are present in the more intricate details.

It is also important to note that this is a summary of engagement findings, not “the facts”. The findings in this report show what people and groups have experienced, which is their reality, but the findings may not necessarily represent “the facts”. This is a window of insight into what individuals and groups believe should inform the strategic plan.

The key themes and sub-themes that emerged through the engagement are:

- 1. A garden for all:** This theme includes the following sub-themes:
 - a. Affordability
 - b. Amenities that facilitate inclusion and access
 - c. Physical accessibility
 - d. Location and connectivity
 - e. Wayfinding / non-educational signage
 - f. Diverse patronage

- 2. Connecting people, plants and community** (connection): This theme includes the following sub-themes:
 - a. Connections between / amongst people and groups
 - b. Connecting people to plants and nature
 - c. Events
 - d. Family memory-making
 - e. Marketing and promotion
 - f. Volunteerism
 - g. Zen and oasis elements of the gardens

- 3. Responsible stewardship** (conservation, sustainability and the climate crisis): This theme includes the following sub-themes:
 - a. Advocacy related to climate change / climate crisis
 - b. Animal welfare
 - c. Building and protecting plant collections
 - d. Reconciliation
 - e. Promoting ecology and the interconnectedness of all things and beings
 - f. Supporting native and / or Indigenous plants
 - g. Sustainability and events
 - h. Sustainability practices at the gardens

4. **The garden is our teacher** (education): This theme includes the following sub-themes:
 - a. Education and programming
 - b. Educational signage and materials
 - c. Research
 - d. Youth and family engagement

5. **Rooted for future longevity** (infrastructure): This theme includes the following sub-themes:
 - a. Current and long-term infrastructure needs
 - b. Financial viability / sustainability
 - c. Governance and management
 - d. History, legacy and tradition associated with place

Detailed Engagement Findings by Theme

A garden for all

Within this theme, the following sub-themes emerged:

- Affordability
- Amenities that facilitate inclusion and access
- Physical accessibility
- Location and connectivity
- Wayfinding / non-educational signage
- Diverse patronage

Amongst those who engaged in this process, there was consistent reference to accessibility, inclusion and supporting those who may experience barriers to visiting the gardens. There was broad consensus that everyone should feel welcome: that this is a special, urban space for all. There was broad recognition that it is also a space for residents and non-residents alike; however, a minority view was that it is a “tourist destination forgotten by the community.”

From an **affordability** perspective, participants in the process provided a number of tactical ideas regarding improvement that could be made. They included:

- Decreasing admission fees at VanDusen (Bloedel was seen as being relatively affordable, and a number of people we spoke to had visited for free after having received tickets through their visit to VanDusen for Festival of Lights)
- Free access for youth and seniors
- Free day(s)
- Free birthday access
- Introducing family passes
- Introducing multi-passes
- Maintaining free parking
- Managing program costs
- Providing discounts for Vancouver residents and/or BC residents
- Provide a one-year, free passport to primary students in a particular grade (similar to the [Ski Canada program](#))

- Subsidies for low-income families (some participants referenced making qualified recipients of existing recreation vouchers more aware of their applicability at VanDusen)

In the online survey, of the 112 respondents who responded that they had never attended VanDusen, 43% identified that cost was a key barrier.

On the question of affordability, one donor and a number of members at the open house referenced the increasing cost of living in Vancouver and that financial resources should not be a barrier to accessing and enjoying the gardens. One stakeholder suggested that responsibly partnering with corporate sponsors may be one way to provide free days and limited-time access at no cost to patrons.

In terms of **amenities that facilitate inclusion and access as well as physical accessibility**, the primary focus of comments here was on supporting a comfortable and safe experience for families with young children, seniors and those who experience challenges with mobility. Examples of ways to do this included:

- Having a proper washroom in the garden (not a port-a-potty)
- Having baby change table stations
- Paving (or leveling) pathways that can be used by those with a walker or wheelchair or stroller
- Increasing the number of accessible parking spots
- Increasing the number of benches and other seating
- Installing automatically opening doors
- Improving the speaker system (currently difficult to hear)
- Participants remarked that they enjoy being able to enjoy green space without dogs

One participant at the member open house suggested that in order to truly understand accessibility, VanDusen needs to fully understand who its guests are and work to create an integrated user experience.

In terms of feedback related to **location and connectivity**, participants in the process were generally positive about the location of the gardens, commenting on their central position and ease of access within the city. This was seen as a positive attribute in that it helps to facilitate access to green space within the urban context, noting that with increasing density, people become “starved for green”. One challenge, in particular for access to Bloedel, was Little Mountain (the elevation from Cambie Street to Bloedel) and the lack of public transit. Moreover, participants commented about the need to facilitate better public transit connections between the Canada Line and both sites, as well as other public transit options. While there were several comments related to educational/informative signage, there were also comments about the general need for enhanced wayfinding and labelling.

Numerous participants in the process commented on how to continue to increase **diverse patronage** to VanDusen and Bloedel. One donor stated, “it seemed [in the past] like a private, west-side Caucasian club, but now it seems to more reflect the community.” Engagement participants commented on the diversity of Vancouver residents and questioned whether the City’s diversity was reflected in those who visit VanDusen or Bloedel. As will be further explored in both the themes of [“Connecting people, plants and community”](#) and [“Responsible stewardship”](#), there is a sense that not only is appealing to diverse ethno-cultural communities the right thing to do, it is also imperative to ensuring there is a strong community of supporters, advocates and champions in the years ahead. A few participants commented that VanDusen is leading the way for engaging diverse communities and others suggested that much more could be done to engage with “botany guests” from different cultural and community backgrounds.

There were a few comments made by only a limited number of participants that related to:

- Perceived low quality, high cost, and poor service of the on-site food services
- How volunteers enable accessibility (and how without them things would cost more)

As will be further explored in the next theme, there were numerous comments about garden access during events. There is significant frustration, particularly amongst members, that events that limit access to the gardens should be avoided and that if there are limitations on access these should be reflected in discounted ticket prices (for non-members), and that these access restrictions need to be better communicated.

At a very high level, the key take-aways are that these are Vancouver's gardens. They are places that should be open, accessible and comfortable to all. Examples of how accessibility can be enhanced, from participant perspectives included:

- making it easy for parents with strollers to get around
- having accessible bathrooms (not a port-a-potty) for toddlers who need a bathroom break
- increasing non-English signage and other sources of information, and
- planning for visitors with mobility challenges (level pathways for example) and for those who are less steady on their feet.

The experience of being in the gardens should not be an exclusive privilege for the few, but a common experience for the many.

Connecting people, plants and community

This is the single largest theme and includes the following sub-themes:

- Connecting people to plants and nature
- Connections between / amongst people and groups
- Events
- Family memory making
- Marketing and promotion
- Community involvement
- Volunteers
- Zen and oasis elements of the gardens

It should be noted that the feedback under this theme is quite different based on whether it came from a member of the public or event participant, or if it came from a VBGA member, donor or stakeholder. The comments reflect peoples' history with, and experience and knowledge of the gardens. One groups' input should not be viewed as more valid than another, but rather as a reflection of one of the multitude of different types of relationships people have with the gardens.

Foundationally, there is strong support for the notion that the gardens should facilitate **connecting people to plants and nature**. One stakeholder stated, "(the gardens) help get ourselves back into a relationship with our environment." While there is broad support for this high-level theme, there are a number of complex and overlapping nuances around the exact nature of this connection.

For many, predominantly members, donors and some stakeholders, there is a clear call to strengthen the botanical nature of the gardens. The actual definition of botanical is a varied and moving target but some input around the meaning of "botanical" included:

- A living library

- Science- and research-based
- Not a show garden
- Not just pretty or green

In the following theme, there are more insights related to the meaning and implications of “botanical”; however, for this theme, these nuances really relate to the depth and educational underpinnings of the connection between people, plants and nature. For many members of the public and event participants, it was about nature at a high level; whereas, for members, donors and some stakeholders, it was a more specific interpretation of nature, i.e. botanical diversity and ecological knowledge. Connecting people, plants and nature was often related to educational programming which is covered in the more depth in the theme [“The garden is our teacher”](#). This connection, however, was not limited to programming and included simply visiting, being in the garden, walking with children and grandchildren, being able to understand how bugs, plants, and worms connect to the garden and how we, in turn, connect to the garden.

For many, there was a sadness around the fact that density, growth and change in the City are leading to fewer green spaces to connect with nature. This translated to a passionate, sometimes fierce, desire to protect the gardens from development, even around its borders. The notion of preservation was not just for presentation sake, but that as a community we need these gardens for ourselves and our families. One open house attendee stated that there should be “wisdom and foresight to protect and maintain this place.”

Overall, there is a strong sense amongst those who participated in the process that the gardens support mental, physical and spiritual connection to green spaces.

At a high level, there is broad support for the notion that the gardens should facilitate **connections between / amongst people and groups**. This passion for connection was articulated quite strongly when engaging stakeholders, donors and volunteers. All shared their appreciation that people can connect to each other through the gardens. From a stakeholder perspective, this included educational and wellness programs, as well as events.

Donors and volunteers valued giving back to a place that held special connection to them, and further allowed them to connect others to the garden. The common thread that was shared with some frequency is the notion of friendship, connection and giving back to the city and community. There was also reference to the role that the gardens can play in strengthening general health and wellbeing, in part, by supporting community connection. A participant stated that the gardens create “connection where there can be a lack of connection.”

Part of the connection included recognizing that many groups contribute to VanDusen and Bloedel. From volunteers to donors, there is a sense that more could be done to demonstrate recognition of those who give of their time and resources.

Not surprisingly, a significant amount of input was received on **events** as intercept surveys were done at both the Festival of Lights and Festivale Tropicale. Overwhelming, event participants appreciate both events and feel they are very well done. While there is some commentary related to the price of entry for the Festival of Lights, visitors very much enjoy and appreciate the holiday events.

It is also worth noting that in a follow-up online survey for ticket holders who attended Festival of Lights, participants were asked to finish the sentence “when I think about a long-term vision for VanDusen, I believe the priority needs to be on...”. Forty-eight percent (48%) of respondents said **respite and beauty**, followed by **restoration, conservation and environmental education** with 39%. Fourth, after **special plant collections and horticulture**, was **major public events with widespread**

appeal. So, while there is appreciation and enjoyment for special events, event participants prioritized respite and beauty. This may mean there is, in fact, more common ground than some believe.

For most members, stakeholders and donors, there is support for events that are connected to the botanical mandate of the gardens. There is significant support for events such as Pollinator Days, plant sales, or special events that celebrate rare and unique collections, such as the corpse flower. There is, however, a high level of frustration with events that:

- Limit access to the gardens
- Are viewed as being incompatible with a botanical garden
- Detract from garden maintenance

Members in particular shared that “VanDusen is not a backdrop.” There were a number of comments that spoke to peoples’ frustration with the car show. This was seen as a pro-carbon emissions event that is not in line with the botanical mandate of the gardens and does not align with many peoples’ thinking about climate change.

While the Festival of Lights was viewed by some members and volunteers as less than ideal (in terms of directing staff efforts towards installing lights and away from maintenance), there was also a recognition that the Festival is an important introduction to the gardens for many new visitors. There was support for events that introduce new visitors to the garden, but for some the issue with the Festival of Lights is that it is not about the garden or plants, but lights and so they question the degree to which the event supports long-term visitation.

Some of the events and ideas to encourage visitorship (new and pre-existing) that draw support from engagement participants included:

- Star gazing
- Family picnic days
- Plant sale
- Pollinator Days (more like this)
- Open late on summer evenings
- Smaller scale music events in the summer
- Art events - both visual and performing
- Kids events to engage them with the garden (there was also a desire to engage teenagers, but no specific event suggestions)

Generally, amongst members, there is a strong desire for botanically focussed and aligned events and for events to be in a contain space so that parts of the garden can still be enjoyed even if there is an event taking place.

One of the largest frustrations that currently exists around events is a belief amongst many volunteers, stakeholders and donors that revenues from large events, like Festival of Lights, don’t get re-invested back in the garden. There is broadly a lack of shared understanding around the financial model for the gardens (specifically regarding who pays for what), but there is also a sense that large events tend to “exploit” the gardens for revenue that does not benefit the gardens. There were a few comments such as: “spare us from Disneyland”; the gardens are “not a fun park”; focus on “protection not exploitation” all highlight this frustration.

While there is a lot of commentary on events, there are a few key take-aways:

- It is not as simple as people love or hate events; it's about the kind of event and how it relates to the botanical mandate.
- There is a strong desire amongst the public and event participants to maintain seasonal events, and some would like to see them increased.
- Amongst members, there is a strong desire to ensure that events align and support a botanical mandate.
- Primarily with members, but in alignment with the first theme regarding access, there is a desire to ensure that events do not completely limit or impede one's ability to enjoy the gardens even when there is an event in progress.

Events are an important avenue for **family memory-making**, but they are not the only ones. Many event participants spoke of how they only come at Christmas time and have done so for years. Others remember being brought to the garden by their parents, and are now donors who contribute, in part, because the gardens hold special memories for them. For many the gardens facilitate family memory-making. Whether people go with the very young, or the elderly, there is a sense that the gardens support and foster building family memories that last a lifetime. During one intercept survey at VanDusen, a family with a sick child was taking a break from the hospital and went to check out the lights. Others' comments bolster the fact that families who are receiving care come to the gardens for some respite. Another stakeholder shared that their father had chosen a care home because of its close proximity to the gardens. There is an element of tradition and happiness that the gardens bring that is broadly appreciated, whether it is at the annual Festival of Lights, or on a more regular basis visiting the gardens with family.

A number of event participants, open house attendees, donors and stakeholders, identified that the **marketing and promotion** of the gardens is lacking. They noted that the garden needed to tell their story in a way that connects the gardens to the community. There was a strong desire to better communicate and engage with youth in order to "cultivate the next generation of garden lovers." The marketing for VanDusen was seen as better than Bloedel, but overall there was a sense from participants that a cohesive marketing and promotions strategy is lacking. One stakeholder commented that this lack of strategy would make it more difficult for sponsors to engage with the gardens.

Other marketing and promotion content related to:

- Bringing the beauty of the gardens to Instagram (it is recognized that this currently exists, however, is shared here to highlight that it was unknown to a number of participants in the process)
- Increasing onsite flyers and programming materials
- Marketing the health and wellness benefits of Bloedel
- Promoting self-guided tours

Many participants in the engagement process said that they believe it is critically important for marketing to appeal to families, youth and diverse ethno-cultural communities. Several called the gardens the "best kept secret", a "hidden jewel", and an "urban jewel". There were several comments that the gardens need a higher profile in the City and that there needs to be a concerted effort to build the image of the gardens as being open, inclusive and engaging. One participant stated that most visitors, when asked about visiting the gardens, say yes: "we are going to see Butchart in Victoria" suggesting that people associate "the gardens" with Butchart, not VanDusen.

In addition to enhanced and coordinated marketing and promotion, there is also a sense that the gardens need to be more actively involved in the community. **Community involvement** was seen as an important way of building engagement within the community, and participants felt this could

be done by integrating into the surrounding communities. Specific ideas regarding community involvement included:

- Having mini botanical-inspired gardens throughout the city and working with neighbours to build and maintain them. The idea was not about having show/display gardens but increasing the number of gardens in the city with native plant species.
- Supporting cross-collaboration with organizations such as Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia
- Developing and supporting micro satellite gardens
- Outreach activities that support sustainable gardening practices

As an example, one volunteer/donor spoke of how they started by volunteering at VanDusen and then decided to work in a garden with Canuck Place at BC Children's Hospital. There is support and excitement around the role the gardens can play outside the walls of the gardens themselves.

When thinking about connecting people to plants and nature, a key “connector” are **volunteers** and the critically important role they play in the gardens. The engagement process included two engagement sessions with volunteers in which in-depth input was shared. It is important to note, however, that the role of volunteers was recognized across all the engagement activities. Volunteers are motivated by the place itself, but also a deep sense of connection to each other, the City and to supporting the City's efforts to be a green city. While there is a lot that is going well, there are some particular elements where volunteers and non-volunteers alike feel improvements could be made. These include:

- There is a desire for volunteers to do actual gardening and be “hands-on” and there were past issues raised around how this would work in an environment with unionized staff.
- There is a strong desire amongst those highly engaged stakeholders to have a “stable” home for the seed collectors.
- Volunteers are keen to engage outside the walls of the gardens and feel that more could be done to engage families.
- Generally, though not exclusively, volunteers feel strongly that the garden needs to be a botanical garden, not a show garden. There is a sense that some plantings in the past have been beautiful but have not aligned with what a true botanical garden should be planting.
- Some volunteers, at times, have felt that there has been a lack of recognition (in particular by the Park Board) in valuing their contributions and in listening to ideas and suggestions. The remedy, in part, is a desire for strong, more open communications.

Lastly, the number of comments related to **Zen and oasis elements of the gardens** was, to the facilitator, surprising. Whether participants in the process were long-time members, event participants (even during busy events), stakeholders or donors, there was significant input that reflected people's appreciation and support for ongoing calm and respite in the garden. The gardens were referred to as:

- An oasis in the city
- A place of remembrance that is not a cemetery
- A tranquil place
- A welcoming refuge from city life, offering people, diversity and education for all
- A place for condo-dweller respite
- Relief from the urban jungle
- An oasis amidst the noise and change of our city
- A place for quiet and reverence

There is general consensus that the gardens should be an oasis and facilitate a place of renewal. It should be noted, however, that while there is general consensus, there are different levels of fervour and opinion of how to protect the zen and calm.

Within this theme, there are diverse sub-themes and ideas. What is consistent across all of them, is that the gardens do (and should continue to) play an important role in building people's connections to plants, nature and others. There is a great hopefulness that most people communicate when speaking about the gardens and much of that relates to the gardens' ability to support community connections and to re-ground ourselves in nature.

Responsible stewardship

This theme includes the following sub-themes:

- Advocacy and education related to climate change/the climate crisis
- Animal welfare
- Building and protecting collections of plants
- Reconciliation
- Promoting a vibrant and healthy ecology
- Supporting native and/or Indigenous plants
- Sustainable events and operations

Across most of the engagement activities, we heard about a sense of stewardship amongst many who participated in the process. This theme is broad and includes many different ideas, but there is a high degree of consensus amongst the ideas.

A key theme throughout the engagement was the idea that the gardens should play an **advocacy and education role related to climate change/the climate crisis**. In the sub-theme of climate change, there are a number of key ideas.

1. We need to do all we can to protect and enhance the resilience of the garden in the face of climate change. For example, planting trees and species that are drought-resistant and add an abundance of oxygen and/or contribute to tackling the climate crisis.
2. We need to communicate, educate and do all we can to help make the connection between people, community, ecology, climate change and the garden so that people are motivated to take action to support efforts to combat climate change.
3. The gardens need to do all they can to achieve carbon neutrality and water self-sufficiency so they do not add to the climate crisis.
4. We need to protect species that are at risk due to climate change.
5. We must promote and adhere to sustainable gardening practices.
6. We must respect and understand the complexities of our natural world and champion what can be done to address climate change.

There was no one in the engagement process who disputed or challenged the idea of the gardens playing a role in advocating and educating the community on how to address climate change. The balance comes in understanding where to prioritize one's activities and where the largest gains can be achieved. One participant noted: "climate change requires action and the garden provides opportunity for education."

Specific to Bloedel, there was reference to **animal welfare** and ensuring the birds were well cared for. While a small minority of participants suggested additional animals such as monkeys and sloths, a slightly larger number suggested adding butterflies to Bloedel. Other participants contributed to a broader understanding of ecology and noted that we should be protecting “critters in the leaf pile.” Overall, there is broad support for increasing the presence of bees and pollinators.

For most participants (member, non-member visitors, stakeholders, donors), there was a strong emphasis on the need for VanDusen to be **building and protecting collections of plants**. In the online, post-event survey, **restoration, conservation and environmental education** came in as the second priority, after **respite and beauty**. For most, the following attributes relate to plant collections:

- There should be a large number and great diversity of plants.
- There needs to be a formal evaluation of the garden to understand gaps and needs.
- The collection should be informed by research and best practice and led by leadership with a strong horticulture background.
- The opportunities for partnership should be leveraged to build the collection.
- A focus on native species is appropriate.
- Rare and endangered species should be prioritized both for acquisition and conservation.

At the open house sessions in January 2020, the public and members were asked to vote for what they believed should be the top priority for the gardens.

For members, the priorities, in order of “votes” were:

- Respite and beauty (39)
- **Special plant collection and horticulture (37.5)**
- Restoration, conservation and environmental education (32.5)
- Classes and activities about plants and horticulture (7)
- Major public events with widespread appeal (1)

For the public (with fewer participants overall), priorities in order of the number of “votes” were:

- Restoration, conservation and environmental education (21)
- Classes and activities about plants and horticulture (12)
- Respite and beauty (9)
- Major public events with widespread appeal (8)
- **Special plant collection and horticulture (4)**

It is important not to interpret that **special plant collection and horticulture** is not important to the public, but rather that **restoration, conservation and environmental education** is the top priority which aligns with supporting plant collections.

While discussion of **reconciliation** with Indigenous Peoples was not overwhelming, it was mentioned in most engagement activities. Specific commentary related to reconciliation included:

- Work to recognize the traditional territory on which the garden is located.
- Engage with Indigenous knowledge holders to educate and engage visitors in the gardens.
- Establish a medicine garden.
- Plan to engage with Indigenous Peoples, and
- Plant native species in the garden.

While this was not a major theme, it should be noted that in the first theme "[A garden for all](#)," respondents indicated it is important that all people feel welcome in the garden, including Indigenous people. Moreover, those who shared this input were very passionate about reconciliation and what the garden might do to take actions in the spirit of reconciliation. Lastly, it should be noted that no one provided input that it should be a classic garden. There was some informal commentary that this was the perception of the gardens, but not what people necessarily wanted it to be.

There was a significant amount of input around **promoting a vibrant and healthy ecology**. For many, the commentary was that the gardens are a "green haven", whereas for others, it was not so much about "green", but about the diversity and complexity of the ecological system that comprises the garden. An important distinction for people is that the garden is not (and should not become) "just another park". In a park there is not typically plant labelling or an intentional educational element; however, as the next theme will highlight, there is strong support for an educational mandate within the gardens.

Much like the commentary above, participants in this process very much wanted to protect, educate and engage with visitors in the dirt, with bugs and worms. There was a deep sense of wanting to support a vibrant ecological system and to help people get back to nature and recognize their part in a broader system. For some, the health of the garden was linked to the health of the community. Through observation of the facilitator, it is our hypothesis that this strong desire to promote ecology and systems thinking relates, in part, to concerns about being anything less than a true botanical garden. For example, a display garden's purpose is beauty and enjoyment, but may not be maintained through sustainable gardening practices and indeed may introduce environmental degradation. By comparison, a botanical garden would elevate and support vibrant ecological systems. One participant shared that "without the environment we have nothing."

As identified in the theme of reconciliation, **supporting native and/or Indigenous plants** was identified, sometimes in combination with reconciliation, but often on its own. Participants in the process believe the gardens have a role in supporting and protecting native and/or Indigenous plants and in educating people about invasive species. This includes supporting the seed collectors with a permanent home and ensuring that the garden is focussed on a botanical mandate, as opposed to a display and show garden.

Participants in the process referenced **sustainable events and operations** as an important priority for the garden. At a strategic level, there is a sense amongst some that events should align with the botanical mandate of the gardens. For many there is also support to work to "green" events and operations. Specific ideas include:

- Providing free or discounted hot chocolate when you bring your own mug
- Minimizing waste generated at events by having proper sorting stations
- Installing solar panels, better managing the soil and display materials
- Systems to collect grey water
- Begin a reservoir/well renewal project
- Dredge / manage the lake to improve water quality for species

One participant stated that "the gardens need more sustainable solutions in their processes and need to better model best practices related to sustainability." A few members at the member open house commented that the Festival of Lights set-up/tear-down distracts staff efforts from the garden, which is a negative impact associated with large scale events. The key take-away here is that several participants believe that the gardens need to walk the talk on sustainability and be a leader in how they operate day-to-day and during events in order to model sustainability.

Additional comments related to this theme include:

- The need to have a self maintaining collection
- To sell seeds so that others can plant native species
- To build bird houses and bird feeders
- To fully support a robust seed bank

There are a number of key take-aways from this theme, but first among them is the notion that the gardens will work to support, protect, advocate and defend biodiversity and champion actions that target the climate crisis. While there is great appreciation, and even love, for the gardens, there appears to also be fear and unrest about their resilience and the degree to which they will be preserved and protected for the next generation. As the facilitator, our hypothesis is that the fear of some participants regarding the lack of commitment to long-term conservation and preservation creates an increasing sense of polarization in other areas, such as events.

The garden is our teacher

This theme includes the following sub-themes:

- Education and programming
- Educational signage and materials
- Research

A participant summed up this theme when they stated “we need to cultivate the next generation of garden lovers.” Amongst many participants there was a sense that if people don’t know about the gardens, they can’t love and protect them. “If kids don’t want to garden, VanDusen will become condos within 15 years.” The key takeaway from this theme is that education and outreach is a foundational way that we support our next generation of gardeners and caretakers.

Specific input around **education and programming** related to both its priority for the gardens, as well as specific ideas around what that education and programming might include. Namely:

- Education on what are native plants vs. invasive species
- Workshops on how to save seeds
- Increasing intergenerational tours/visits
- Courses on increasing plant knowledge, how to garden and the importance of pollinators
- Increasing the vegetable garden demonstration area
- Supporting tours and lectures for high school students (like the Art Gallery)
- Providing a mix of one-time classes and ongoing series
- Facilitating knowledge exchange and translation with Indigenous elders
- Updating the self-guided tours
- Speaker series
- Health and wellness programming (yoga/meditation)
- Photography course

Participants suggested that education and programming should appeal to all ages and aim to increase environmental awareness. A stakeholder commented that they “get by” with what they have, but a goal would be to excel and to have excellent programs. Other suggested that offering more of what was already available would be an improvement.

A key part of supporting education is improving **educational signage and materials**. One event participant stated that the event was lovely, but they didn’t learn anything. There were numerous

comments made by participants in the process that the gardens – both VanDusen and Bloedel – lacked appropriate labelling and interpretive displays/signages. There is broad support for enhancing display materials and keeping them relevant and up to date.

The theme of **research** was not shared by all in the process, but those who support a botanical mandate generally feel strongly that a “real” botanical garden must include a research component. There was not a lot of depth to comments relating to research though some commented on knowledge translation, linking to education institutions and the important role the library plays at the gardens.

Other comments within this theme included:

- Developing an app to support plant identification
- Increasing the digital learning experience
- Having an appropriate education centre (this is further explored in the theme below)
- Continuing to work closely with schools
- Attending schools and giving gardening workshops

There is broad support for the gardens playing a leading role in providing educational opportunities that support a botanical mandate, community and individual wellness and biodiversity.

Rooted for future longevity

This theme includes the following sub-themes:

- Current and long-term infrastructure needs
- Financial sustainability
- Governance and management
- History, legacy and tradition associated with place

Within this theme, most of the input was from those who have a long-term connection to the gardens and/or have more insights than the general public.

In alignment with the theme of “[Responsible stewardship](#),” there is a sense that **current and long-term infrastructure needs** need to be well maintained, repaired and planned for. This means infrastructure from benches and plaques, to the glass conservatory and education centre need to be well maintained, repaired in a timely way and planned for renewal. There is a strong desire to have an adequate education centre at VanDusen, to improve/expand the entrance at Bloedel, finalize the gazebo project, build a covered stage, and to fix the Korean Pavilion.

The level of capital asset management and investment influenced, for some, perceptions of the amount of priority and attention the gardens receive from the Park Board. Some, primarily members, suggested that more financial and other resources should be committed by the City (which by extension refers also to the Park Board).

Amongst donors, volunteers and one stakeholder there was a sense that successful capital campaigns could be launched if the VBGA was more able to get City approval for funding major projects. There is also a preference amongst donors to donate to specific projects, with finite timelines, that speak to their passions or key interests.

In terms of **financial sustainability**, participants in the process spoke to it being the goal and that profitability is not a necessity. This would mean there are enough financial resources to go beyond survival, but not so much that profitability is the key decision-making criteria. It was suggested that

within the Joint Operating Agreement (JOA), a common set of values be established to guide any changes and/or improvements requiring capital funding.

Within this theme there were also a few comments around transparency and accountability. Amongst highly-engaged participants in the process, the financial relationship between VBGA and the Park Board is seen as unclear and in need of an overhaul.

While finances are part of what is being clarified as part of this project, there are a number of **governance and management** issues that were identified through the engagement. With the public, there were few specific comments on this theme; however, there were comments such as: “Oh, I didn’t know the Park Board was involved,” or questions about who pays “the staff”? For members, donors and stakeholders who are more familiar with the current structure, there were a number of pointed comments. These included:

- Many members, some donors and a few stakeholders called for “One VanDusen” and of those, some advocated for the Park Board to turn full management of the gardens over to VBGA.
- Others were not as prescriptive and simply stated that the JOA must clarify roles and responsibilities between the two organizations.
- Others still hoped that this process would ultimately lead to a win/win for both organizations.

A few, who were more aware of the JOA and the current framework, commented on the need for both organizations to be in “marriage counselling” and to recall what brought them together in the first place. Within the stakeholder workshop there was a discussion about needing a solid governance model in order to recruit the right (by which they meant horticultural) leadership to run the gardens “unshackled” by senior leaders from either organization.

Primarily amongst those with a long history of visiting or contributing to the gardens, there were a number of comments related to **history, legacy and tradition associated with place**. Related to the second theme of “[Connection](#),” this sub-theme is really about celebrating and respecting the legacy and tradition of the gardens. There is a fondness and nostalgia when people recall how the gardens came to be and the history of the last 50-60 years. There is pride for the forward-looking group of people who came together to establish the gardens and what they collectively contributed. With this fondness, there is also a need to recognize that collaboration is part of the gardens’ legacy. One participant in the process stated: “it may be a Park Board facility, but it’s been built by many people.” It is the facilitator’s own assessment of the sentiment behind this and other similar comments, that there is a sense of pride in the past and a lack of confidence that such collaboration or leadership may be demonstrated in the future. One participant stated: “this is an occasion to be bold.”

It was clear through this engagement process that the gardens are a special place for many. For some, it is their place of solace, respite and calm. For others it is their place of connection and community. And for others still it is a place where family memories are made. Regardless of the motivation for being in or part of the gardens, there is a common thread throughout and that is the belief that excellence is possible in this place.

Bloedel-Specific Findings

Most of the engagement sessions sought feedback on both VanDusen and Bloedel at the same time and many of the resulting themes apply to both VanDusen and Bloedel. During *Festivale Tropicale* at the Bloedel, intercept surveys were conducted onsite, and as such, we were able to solicit feedback specific to Bloedel. Moreover, we heard Bloedel-specific feedback at the volunteer engagement sessions, at the open houses and in interviews with donors.

Much of what we heard overlaps with VanDusen; however, there are a number of sub-themes unique to Bloedel.

Some of the most common words related to Bloedel are listed below. They include:

- Bird(s)
- Warm
- Plants
- Tropical
- Accessible
- Colourful
- First-time
- Relaxation

Visitors appreciate the birds, the variety of plants, the tropical environment and its element of escape. In Vancouver's climate, people enjoy experiencing the heat and humidity of a faraway place. Many remarked that it is great for kids, has educational significance and provides good value for an affordable price. Many also really appreciate the architectural aspect of the building and some who visited when they were children expressed nostalgia and appreciation that it is still running. For more detailed findings on these themes, please see below.

Accessibility

Specific references to Bloedel focussed on the socio-economic accessibility or affordability of Bloedel. Additional insights related to accessibility at Bloedel include:

- Improving interpretative and wayfinding signage
- Improving lighting and pathway access from the Canada Line
- Providing free parking at Bloedel
- There were positive references to overall accessibility from within the City, i.e. it's "easier to get to than Stanley Park"

As highlighted in the sub-theme below, interviewees appeared quite taken with the winter/seasonal appeal of Bloedel and the experience it provided to Festivale Tropicale visitors.

Bloedel as a Winter Oasis

At the intercepts and in the online surveys in particular, numerous comments were made about the appreciation, and sometimes surprise, that there could be a tropical escape right in Vancouver. Some referred to it as a Hawaiian escape, while others who were visiting or had immigrated from tropical countries (for example, one participant was from Indonesia), said it reminded them of their home. There was a consistent theme around the unique, tropical nature of Bloedel and how it provides an escape in winter and a feeling of being transported to a special tropical place.

While there were many who spoke of the oasis of Bloedel from a temperature and environmental perspective, a few also spoke to the Zen-like quality of Bloedel and that it had a "good and special vibe."

Education at Bloedel

There was a strong interest in increasing the number of educational events at Bloedel, as well as ongoing improvements to the interactive nature of the visitor experience. Interviewees identified the need for generally "more of everything" education-related. They referenced enjoying games like find the flamingo and the bird scavenger hunt, and suggested having more interactive educational

opportunities. Moreover, information and learning about birds (where they are from, what they eat, their origin) and plants was consistently noted as being an area of interest by interviewees. One interviewee said “you don’t learn anything”, though they enjoyed the Festivale Tropicale event, which suggest there is an appetite for more education and learning, not simply a non-interactive experience.

Other areas of interest as related to education at Bloedel included:

- Clearer signage and information on everything that already exists
- Interest in astronomy/telescope
- Much more information on birds
- Plant labelling/information
- Self-guided tour information
- Water / water conservation information and practices
- More information about Indigenous plants and potentially providing an avenue to advance Indigenous reconciliation

Conservation / Preservation

During intercept surveys, the open houses and in donor interviews, people highlighted that they believe Bloedel should play a role in increasing environmental awareness, particularly about species preservation and water conservation. Participants referenced the importance of having a collection that is well-curated and biodiverse, as well as creating a safe space for the bird inhabitants.

A volunteer commented on the brothers who built Bloedel and how that connection to history needs to be made clearer, and that there’s a public interest in the history of the place. The volunteer noted: “what captures people’s eye – the photo of the brothers who set up Bloedel.”

A donor identified that Bloedel still has a water reservoir and that the connection between its history and how it stands today needs to be made clearer. Additionally, at the member open house the idea of a special tender plants collection was suggested to be a good addition to Bloedel.

While the connection to place was highlighted, so to was the need to broaden conservation efforts to take on a more global interconnectivity, particularly around diverse species of plants, water, water conservation and ecology.

Infrastructure at Bloedel

One area where there was some clear divergence was regarding expanding or maintaining Bloedel. Some interviewees spoke of needing a robust building maintenance plan and preserving what we currently have, whereas, others spoke of “mak[ing] it bigger”, saying, “more the merrier”. Some more subtle ideas around infrastructure included having picnic tables available, a proper gift shop (with quality, made-in-Canada offerings), an onsite post box (to mail postcards), a café, and making improvements “in a responsible way” and over time.

It should be noted that VBGA is seen as having saved Bloedel and that for a few participants they perceive that the “City” sees it as too expensive to repair / maintain. From some highly engaged stakeholders, it was noted that in 2009, Bloedel lacked a proponent organization. One donor stated that much could be done to achieve the original vision which was that the “QE Park/VanDusen Plan intended that these two facilities be connected by a tree-lined greenway running along 33rd Avenue.” Again, amongst a small, but highly engaged stakeholder group, there is a strong sense that renewal for Bloedel is required as part of a broader master plan for Queen Elizabeth Park. “It’s a jewel in the crown, along with Stanley Park, QE Park, VanDusen. [!] would like to see that original plan linking Queen Elizabeth Park and VanDusen.”

At a number of engagement sessions, comments were made relatively frequently related to infrastructure being needed for a new education/visitor centre at Bloedel. There was a consistent theme amongst participants that Bloedel has so much to offer but has limited physical locations to engage school children and others who want to engage at a deeper level.

Much of the input on infrastructure at Bloedel tended towards expansion and growth whereas, VanDusen input tended more to renewal and a well funded maintenance plan.

Marketing and Promotion

A number of interviewees, volunteers, and members of the public identified the lack of coordinated and effective marketing for Bloedel. Some interviewees specifically identified that VanDusen “has better ads”. In the Talk Vancouver survey, for example: of those who said they had never been to Bloedel (~10% of respondents), 42% of those said they were unaware of what is offered at Bloedel, and this was the single largest reason for not attending Bloedel.

Special Events at Bloedel

Many of those interviewed at Festivale Tropicale had never been to the event and many had never been to Bloedel. Those participating in the event expressed great enjoyment, specifically mentioning its affordability and their desire to have more events geared toward kids.

Where there was some divergence was around services and amenities at events. Some suggested that having food and drink services would be a welcome addition, including offering alcoholic drinks, whereas a minority view of interviewees suggested that it needed to be family focussed and not have any alcohol and remain as it is.

It should be noted that while many enjoyed the events, there was a minority of interviewees (as well as a few in the survey and open house) who raised questions/concerns about the impact of lights, music, and other event activation impacts on the birds and their well-being. These participants also raised questions about the appropriateness of having birds in captivity, their welfare and overall health.

Conclusion + Next Steps

Throughout this engagement process, more than 6,000 people engaged and provided input into what they believe should be the priorities, values, mission and vision for the gardens. For the steering committee, this is an importance piece of the puzzle, but it is not the only one. There are a number of other sources such as the current state report, examples of best practices for similar botanical gardens, and the subject matter experts who are available to the group.

The next steps will be to consider all these data sources and to work incrementally to develop a consensus-based strategic plan. The process by which the plan is developed will establish the foundation for developing a Joint Operating Agreement (JOA).