



Date: May 17, 2005

TO: Board Members - Parks and Recreation

FROM: General Manager - Parks and Recreation

SUBJECT: Stanley Park Ecology Society

RECOMMENDATION

- A. THAT the Board receive the Stanley Park Ecology Society Preliminary Vision for a Nature Interpretation Centre for information.*
- B. THAT the Board fund the completion of this study to develop site specific options and financial models for the project.*

BACKGROUND

The Board's interest in developing a nature interpretation/wildlife program dates from 1992. At this time its volunteer partner was "The Nature House Steering Committee" which would go on to operate the facility on Lost Lagoon. In December 1992, the Board allocated \$60,000 for consultant assistance in creating a nature and heritage interpretation plan and related educational programs in conjunction with the Nature House Steering Committee. The result was the Stanley Park Interpretation and Wildlife Plan developed by Bufo Incorporated in 1993. In 1994 staff proposed to move forward with "a long term environmental education/interpretation and wildlife management plan" at a cost of \$95,000. However, the "big picture" was not pursued. A couple of specific studies were undertaken using largely volunteer resources, while the budget based initiatives waned for lack of ongoing funding. The major significant benefit was the emergence of the Stanley Park Ecology Society as the successor to the Nature House and the Zoological Society.

DISCUSSION

The Ecology Society:

Today the Stanley Park Ecology Society (the Society) defines itself as "a non profit charitable community organization that has established itself in the last ten years as a leader in environmental education for school children in Vancouver and the lower Mainland." (Planet Ecology: August 2004). Beyond children's programs, the Society runs the Nature House at Lost Lagoon, manages the Park Eco Ranger Program, organizes the ivy removal program, runs species monitoring and the CoExisting with Coyotes programs and offers diverse nature tours in Stanley Park.

The Society has become the de facto environmental interpretation and education arm of the Park Board, while the Board funds wildlife management directly. Annually the school program reaches over 11,000 children, as well as over 400 urban campers in Stanley Park. Two hundred volunteers were involved in the sustainable materials demonstration project, the Cob House. Eleven thousand citizens and visitors gained a better appreciation of Stanley Park through the Stanley Park Ecology Society's organized discovery walks last year alone.

The Ecology Society and Park Board staff have been working together over the last five months to develop a vision for a substantially expanded nature interpretation program for Stanley Park and the overall park system. This, in part, grows out of a visioning paper created by the Ecology Society in autumn 2004 entitled "Planet Ecology". The first part of this expanded vision is entitled "Nature Interpretative Centre" and is attached to this report.

The current physical plant available to the Ecology Society is very limited. It consists of the "Nature House" – an 80 square meter conversion of the boat house structure at Lost Lagoon, and a meeting room and offices in the upper floor of the Pavilion restaurant. The attached study to date has focused on the aspirations of the Society were it not bound by its current physical and financial constraints. Phase Two of the study will examine the physical and financial realities of developing this vision in the farmyard/train area of Stanley Park. To reach a completed study will require approximately \$20,000. Funding for this work is available in the Stanley District 2005 operating account.

The train/farmyard site is considered the preferred location of a nature interpretation site in the park because the area is already established as a children's/family area with the train, farmyard, picnic site and major playgrounds. It has a significant parking area and is adjacent to the new public transit terminus. Further, there are adequate related washrooms and food services.

There is also a need for a contained piece of forest to develop the children's Discovery Forest. Rather than fence off and limit access to another piece of the forest, the train area provides an already fenced precinct which would serve this purpose well. Moreover, it would establish a unifying theme for the train, which is now merely an amusement ride.

The Petting Zoo:

The "farmyard" is one of the elements of the central park activity zone. This area, including the Aquarium, is the third most visited portion of Stanley Park, after the seawall walkway and the Totem Pole site. This facility needs to be reviewed in terms of its social appropriateness of contained animals for entertainment. Of equal concern is the decreasing regular attendance and the related questions of financial viability. Lastly, as became apparent at a competing facility in the region last summer, there are liability issues in terms of disease transmission.

The petting zoo farmyard is a remnant of the original Stanley Park Zoo which the public voted to disband in 1993. Improvements were made in the early 1980's – when the farmyard theme was emphasized. It was not closed with the rest of the zoo in the mid 1990's and inherited some of the smaller exotics from the old zoo which remain on display. The pony rides were considered inappropriate in terms of animal welfare and were discontinued in the mid 1990's.

Hence, parallel to the Nature Interpretative Centre, staff are developing a plan for a revised farmyard animal attraction which would eliminate the non-farm creatures from the collection to create some thematic purity to the presentation, as well as introduce an interpretation/learning component to the entertainment that would convey real farm/food source issues. The application of this concept would reduce the physical plant footprint in conjunction with the “exotics” elimination, and would create an interactive environment which reduces the chances of animal and feces borne transmission of disease to the viewing public.

Staff have begun the process to develop a revised farmyard plan internally. If the Board decides to pursue this plan to construction, exhibit designers can be retained at a later phase of the process.

Either of the models that arise from these completed studies could be workable, or a hybrid, based on both study results could be created.

CONCLUSION

Completed studies will provide the required comparison and choices when the Board examines the future of the farmyard/train area and its role in expanding the Board's core mandate for environmental awareness.

Prepared by:

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