



October 14, 2015

TO: Park Board Chair and Commissioners
FROM: General Manager - Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation
SUBJECT: McBride Park Improvements

RECOMMENDATION

- A. THAT the Vancouver Park Board approve the replacement of the existing playground at McBride Park, as proposed in this report.
- B. THAT the Vancouver Park Board approve a new community garden at McBride Park, as described in this report.
- C. THAT the Vancouver Park Board direct staff to terminate discussions about the possible closure of Waterloo Street between the eastern and western portions of McBride Park due to low public support.

POLICY

The Park Board approves major changes in parks.

BACKGROUND

McBride Park is a 1.7 ha (4.2 acre) neighbourhood Park in Kitsilano. Two sides of this park are separated by Waterloo Street. On the west side is an aged playground, tennis courts, a field house that hosts the artist in residence program, passive lawn areas, and many mature trees. On the east side are softball diamonds and soccer fields. Waterloo Street has healthy mature trees, concrete sidewalks, and paved driving lanes with gravel shoulders. The street is signed 'no parking' and the total street right of way between the two park sections is 30m wide x 70 m long (2100m²/0.52 acres).

In the spring of 2015, staff rolled out a public engagement process for 3 projects in McBride Park: a playground replacement, a new community garden, and the possible closure of Waterloo Street to cars between the two portions of the park. Maps indicating the location of these projects and the proposed playground design are attached as Appendix A-C to this report. The playground and community garden proposals were well received, however there was no clear consensus on the possible road closure to unify the park and so staff are not recommending this action.

Playground Replacement

The Park Board's inventory of approximately 165 playgrounds across the city was assessed recently and more than 20 playgrounds, exceeding 30 years of age, require replacement through the capital program to ensure they meet current Canadian Safety Association (CSA) standards. The McBride Park playground is at least 30 years old and on the priority replacement list.

New Community Garden

A proposal from the Village Vancouver Transition Town Society was received through the Park Board's community garden application process in the spring of 2015. Staff agreed the proposal has merit because the location meets a gap in community garden access, and because the parkland is large enough to accommodate the changed use while still maintaining a large green space. Staff agreed to take the garden proposal to the next step of community engagement.

Waterloo Street Closure

It is atypical for a road to run through a neighbourhood park. The proposal to close this section of Waterloo is historically supported by the Board, including a 2004 Motion to unify McBride Park. The Engineering Department has consulted with residents at least two times over the past decade about a proposed road closure to create a pedestrian and cycling link to Point Grey Road, and indicates interest in pursuing the initiative again if there is enough community support. The Engineering Department temporarily closed the block for six months and collected related traffic data in 2005-6. A 2006 Council Report (RTS No. 4871, CC File No. 12-1000-30) documents the history of the proposed road closure. Road closures require City Council approval.

This is the first time Park Board staff initiated a community conversation around the potential for closure. It was proposed as a worthy pursuit because the new assets in the park would be likely to increase park use and a closure would promote safety and connectivity between the now segregated park areas. However, as no clear consensus was reached through public engagement (see below), road closure is not being recommended at this time.

Public Engagement

An open-house about the 3 initiatives, held on June 20th from 11am to 3pm on Waterloo Street, was well attended by approximately 200 participants.

Display boards, paper surveys, light refreshments, sidewalk chalk for drawing ideas on the street, and field house artist performances were organized for the event. Event promotion was in keeping with current standard practices and included flyers hand-delivered to residences within a two block radius of the park, an ad in the Vancouver Courier, two project signs in the park, and posters in businesses along West 4th Ave.

The online survey was hosted from Jun 20th to Jul 3rd, and the project web page was created containing project information and the open house display boards.

Survey results (close to 300 responses) indicate the following:

- Good support for the new playground (62%), with 15% neutral, 19% opposed, and 4% unsure;
- Moderate support for the community garden (55%), with 18% neutral 20% opposed and 5% unsure); and
- Low support for the road closure (53%), with 44% opposed, 2% neutral and 1% unsure)

Staff believe these results are influenced by people's concerns about the closure of Waterloo Street.

DISCUSSION

Playground

In recent years, operations staff have had to remove play equipment from the McBride Park playground due to age and condition; the existing playground presently provides a limited range of play opportunities. Through public consultation, staff understand that many parents feel the playground is too dark due to heavy shade created by mature surrounding trees, and that there are safety concerns about sight-line issues created by an adjacency to the fieldhouse and washrooms.

Whereas the existing playground is split by a path running through the centre, the proposed design shifts the play area west to alleviate sight-line issues and to create a more cohesive play experience. The new equipment selected emphasizes inclusive play for a range of ages and abilities, including: a multi-purpose climber and slide structure; a spinning net; a disc swing; and natural logs, boulders and plantings for informal seating and play (Appendix C).

Public response was positive overall with respect to the new concept. The informal logs, boulders, and plantings were the most well received elements while the disc swing was the least well received. Specific requests were indicated for traditional swings and a sandbox. Staff are currently working to revise the concept based on these requests while balancing the limitations of a modest budget and available surface area due to tree roots. Staff will also work with Park Board arborists to prune the surrounding trees to address shade issues. With Board approval, the current schedule for this project could see construction commencing early in 2016.

Community Garden

Village Vancouver Transition Town Society developed a proposal for a new urban agriculture project at McBride Park. The garden will incorporate features and gathering spaces to provide social and ecological benefits to the neighbourhood, and is proposed to be 300m² in size. Public support was highest for the native plant and berry patch, individual and communal plots, and community gathering spaces. The greatest concerns regarding the community garden were related to aesthetics and loss of passive green space.

Staff recommend approval of the proposal with the following condition to address community concerns: the garden should not impact the limited passive lawn area, and therefore should be located in location A or B, as indicated in Appendix B.

Currently there is no fence separating the busy traffic along West 4th from users of the park, and anecdotal feedback indicates this prevents use of this part of the park. A linear community garden along this edge of the park with an attractive fence (location A), could serve to buffer traffic for park users and activate this area. Alternatively, the community garden could run along the north edge of the existing tennis courts (location B). A community garden was installed around the tennis courts at Riverfront Park in the summer of 2014, which has very successfully activated and beautified that under-utilized space. The same opportunity exists at McBride Park.

With Park Board approval to move forward with either of these locations, staff would work with Village Vancouver to finalize the location for the garden and to develop clear guidelines for the operating structure and maintenance of the garden space. Construction of the garden space could take place in early spring 2016.

Waterloo Street

The closure of Waterloo Street to motorized vehicular traffic between West 4th and West 5th Avenues would increase the overall park size by approximately 1000m², provide a seamless link between two separate sides of McBride Park, and a pedestrian and cycling linkage. Benefits could also include increased plantings and storm water infiltration.

Regardless of the benefits of the street closure, many residents in this area object to or are uncertain about the concept due to the potential for increased traffic volumes on Blenheim and Collingwood Streets. Cut-through, speeding, and parking issues are ongoing concerns, and residents comment that there is potential for intensified congestion. Safety on West 4th is also of concern. Many people comment that Waterloo Street is the only N-S through street south of West 4th that can accommodate two-way traffic, and that closing this section will compound existing traffic issues. Many residents have not supported this proposal previously and expressed concern that the question of closure was posed again.

There is some support for this closure, including an independent web-based petition of support showing on the website www.change.org. However, overall, the public input received indicates that the closure of Waterloo Street to expand the park needs a clear traffic management plan and additional public consultation to move forward. Considering the overall low support for further exploration of the street closure through the Park Board process, staff do not recommend proceeding with this proposal.

Link to the Strategic Plan

This proposal links to the Park Board Strategic Framework objective for improved inclusivity and accessibility: the more accessible playground and community garden provide diverse and inclusive park services that reflect current and future needs of the neighbourhood. These improvements will also help to encourage active and healthy lifestyles and promote community involvement. The new community garden supports local food security by contributing to the development of neighbourhood food infrastructure programs and assets.

SUMMARY

McBride Park is well used and supports a variety of community recreational needs. Replacement of the existing playground is overdue; the new concept has been well received and once constructed will provide an improved play environment and gathering space for the community. The addition of a thoughtfully located and well managed community garden will provide a complementary amenity for the park, without detracting from existing use. At this time it is recommended to move forward with the playground replacement and community garden development at McBride Park, however, due to low community support, dialogue about the possible closure of Waterloo Street through McBride Park should cease.

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TM/lh/js/clc

Map - McBride Park in Context



Map - Areas Being Considered for Improvements



New Playground Concept

