



Report Date: March 28, 2024

VanRIMS No.: 08-3000-30

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TO: Park Board Chair and Commissioners
FROM: General Manager, Board of Parks and Recreation
SUBJECT: Joint Operating Agreement - VanDusen & Bloedel

RECOMMENDATION

- A. THAT the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation (“Park Board”) delegate its authority to the Park Board’s General Manager to enter into a renewed Joint Operating Agreement with the Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association, and in line with principles outlined in this report.
- B. THAT no legal rights or obligations will be created by the Board’s approval of Recommendation A above, unless and until such contract is executed by the authorized signatories as set out in this Recommendation.

REPORT SUMMARY

VanDusen Botanical Garden (“VanDusen”) and Bloedel Conservatory (“Bloedel”) (collectively, the “Gardens”) are two of Park Board’s top destination attractions. VanDusen is cherished locally and renowned internationally for its beauty as an urban oasis in the bustling city, inspiring visitors to understand the vital importance of plants to all life through its botanical plant collections, educational programs, and responsible horticultural practices. Bloedel is surrounded by panoramic views of the mountains at the highest point in the city in Queen Elizabeth Park and provides a distinctive Vancouver experience to all visitors with its unique tropical plant displays.

VanDusen and Bloedel are owned by the City of Vancouver and operated by the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation (Park Board) in collaboration with its non-profit partner, the Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association (“VBGA”). The Park Board approved a joint Strategic Plan for VanDusen and Bloedel in 2021 and directed staff to begin discussions to update the existing Joint Operating Agreement (“JOA”).

Park Board and the VBGA have concluded negotiations on a renewed Joint Operating Agreement, a comprehensive document that (i) incorporates the Strategic Plan and vision through clear areas of responsibility, (ii) incorporates a new financial model for VanDusen and Bloedel operations; and (iii) addresses previous challenges identified through the strategic planning process. City of Vancouver and VBGA solicitors continue to finalize the legal language regarding the partners’ privacy, insurance, and indemnity obligations. The agreement will be reviewed and advised on by City of Vancouver lawyers. prior to signature by both parties.

Subject to the Board’s approval of this report and subsequent approval from the VBGA Board, staff from both organizations will begin implementation work through a joint staff working group.

BOARD AUTHORITY / POLICY / PREVIOUS DECISIONS

As per the [Vancouver Charter](#), the Park Board has exclusive jurisdiction and control over parkland use in the City of Vancouver, including any structures, programs and activities, fees, and improvements within parks, and may enter into an agreement to permit any person to occupy any part of a permanent public park on such terms as the Park Board may decide.

A Schedule of Restrictions agreement registered with the BC's Land Title Survey Authority on February 19, 1971, between the City of Vancouver and the Province of British Columbia limits the use of VanDusen Garden land to "a botanical display garden", and notes that any other uses should be accessory to a botanical display garden. City of Vancouver Bylaw ([No. 4532](#)), approved by Council on January 6, 1971, amends the Zoning Bylaw to restrict use of the VanDusen Garden land to a "botanical garden and uses accessory thereto".

VanPlay Goals

The new VanDusen Bloedel Joint Operating Agreement supports implementing goals and initiatives outlined in VanPlay, [Vancouver's Parks and Recreation Services Master Plan \(2019\)](#).

- *Goal 4:* Focus on core responsibilities of the Park Board, and be a supportive ally to partners;
- *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 Joint Operating Agreement represents the next step after completion of the following Playbook initiative:

F.2.6 Establish a vision and mission to guide investment, service delivery and outreach for VanDusen Botanical Garden and Bloedel Conservatory (VanDusen Botanical Garden and Bloedel Conservatory Strategic Plan).

VanDusen Bloedel Strategic Plan

The joint [VanDusen Bloedel Strategic Plan](#) defines the future vision and mandate for VanDusen and Bloedel. The Strategic Plan lays the foundation for aligning operating partner efforts and enables long-term planning and investment.

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

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.

Finally, the Strategic Plan outlines that inform the new JOA and will serve as guideposts throughout its implementation.

BACKGROUND

VanDusen Garden and Bloedel Conservatory are owned by the City of Vancouver and operated by the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation in collaboration with its non-profit partner, the [Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association](#) (VBGA). The stewardship of VanDusen and Bloedel is under the direction of the Garden Director in collaboration with the VBGA Executive Director and Board. The relationship between the Park Board and VBGA is governed by the 1994 Joint Operating Agreement for VanDusen, amended in 2013 to add Bloedel.

Since 2019, a Working Group comprised of Park Board staff and VBGA board members and staff has been collaborating on solution-oriented, long-term focused discussions aimed at achieving consensus on joint operations through reflection and compromise. The Working Group and the project team developed this work thoughtfully with consideration for each other's values. The VanDusen Bloedel Strategic Plan defined the future vision and mission for VanDusen and Bloedel. The work continued to update and modernize the JOA to precisely define roles and responsibilities and improve operations and financial sustainability of the garden and conservatory. The new JOA provides a pathway to operationalizing the strategic vision through clear ownership of areas of responsibility, addressing previous challenges, and a new financial model for VanDusen and Bloedel.

VanDusen Botanical Garden

Opened in 1975, VanDusen is approximately 55 acres, displaying 70 distinct plant collections comprising over 8,000 plant species and varieties from around the world. With its mild temperate climate and ideal location on the South Coast of British Columbia, VanDusen can grow a broad collection of cultivated plants in Canada.

In the current operating model, Park Board manages the site and is responsible for horticultural operations, management of plant collections, building maintenance, special events, general admissions, gift shop, rentals, marketing and overall garden and facility operations. The Park Board generates revenue through admissions, gift shop sales, rentals, bookings and events. The Park Board also manages lease and license agreements for two on-site restaurants.

The VBGA is responsible for the educational program offerings, a horticultural library, membership, fundraising, philanthropy, and volunteer management and have played a pivotal role in advocacy for botanical gardens and tropical conservatory in the community. VBGA generates revenue through educational programs, fundraising and the sale of VBGA memberships; which offer unlimited access to the VanDusen and Bloedel.

Bloedel Conservatory

Opened in 1969, Bloedel is located at the highest point of Vancouver in Queen Elizabeth Park. With exotic birds, vibrant koi fish and over 500 varieties of lush tropical plants, Bloedel is a unique horticultural destination for visitors from around the world. Bloedel was constructed through a generous donation from Prentice Bloedel and is designated as a heritage building.

Bloedel is under the same operating model as VanDusen. Public awareness of this destination has grown through strategic marketing and business initiatives, and various improvements have enhanced the visitor experience over time. Since 2013, Bloedel operates through the existing 1994 JOA with minor site-specific adjustments included in an addendum.

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admissions, gift shop, rentals, marketing and overall garden and facility operations. The Park Board generates revenue through admissions, gift shop sales, rentals, bookings and events.

The VBGA is responsible for the educational program offerings, membership, fundraising, philanthropy, and volunteer management and have played a pivotal role in advocacy for botanical gardens and tropical conservatory in the community. VBGA generates revenue through educational programs, fundraising and the sale of VBGA memberships; which offer unlimited access to the VanDusen and Bloedel.

DISCUSSION

Following direction from the Board in Park Board and VBGA representatives began discussions to update the existing JOA. This report provides an overview of the proposed new VanDusen Bloedel JOA. The new JOA addresses known operational challenges, lays out clear roles and responsibilities for both parties and includes a financial plan that will address the needs of both parties as membership and visitation continue to grow. Park Board and VBGA staff led the project collaboratively, meeting monthly as a Working Group from November 2021 to April 2023. The scope of work included a review of all joint operations and the financial model and was informed by previous work completed through the Strategic Plan.

Need for an Updated JOA

The Strategic Plan identified a shared vision for VanDusen and Bloedel to be leading gardens of transformative experiences and botanical discovery. Both partners contribute unique expertise to achieving this vision but require an updated JOA to guide their joint work. Through the Strategic Plan development process, an external consultant completed a current state review of the operations and finances of both VanDusen and Bloedel. The Working Group aimed to address challenges identified in the current state review and known to staff from both parties. Many of these areas (outlined below) stem from an outdated JOA, which no longer accurately reflects the relationship between the joint operating partners.

- Growth Incentives
- Roles & Responsibilities
- Capital Planning
- Opportunities for Efficiency
- Financial Sustainability
- Facility Space Use

New Joint Operating Agreement

The new JOA builds on the success of the Strategic Plan and the spirit of collaboration and compromise fostered through that process. The new JOA is a 10-year commitment, with the opportunity for 1 renewal term of 5 years.

Current Challenges and Key Changes

The new Joint Operating Agreement acknowledges the current state challenges previously noted and includes the following key changes:

CURRENT CHALLENGE	KEY CHANGE IN NEW JOA
Growth Incentives	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The two key gardens and conservatory access products; membership (sold by and revenues retained by VBGA) and general admissions (sold by and revenues retained by the Park Board) are in competition, disincentivizing collaboration between the two parties to grow overall admissions and membership concurrently. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishes a new joint Garden Membership product (with associated revenue share structure which is discussed later) to replace the sole VBGA membership. A Garden Membership will include unlimited access to the Gardens and will include a VBGA membership. This will incentivize Park Board and VBGA to grow memberships. Each partner will own decision making around incentives that can be offered via the Garden Membership based on responsibility for costs (For example, VBGA owns the decision on incentive discounts members for educational programming while PB would own decisions over discounts on special events)
Customer Experience	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The VanDusen Visitor Centre includes two desks; one staffed by VBGA and one by Park Board Separate management of both desks creates disparate customer experiences Due to lack of space at Bloedel, no memberships are sold by VBGA on-site at this location 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Park Board to sell memberships & admissions from both desks at the VanDusen Visitor Centre, allowing for optimal customer service during busy periods VBGA to provide member services from the Discovery Room at VanDusen Customers will be able to purchase Garden Memberships at Bloedel
Roles and Responsibilities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of clarity around the accountabilities and responsibilities of both parties – which has caused friction in the relationship between the partners, as well as lower value use of staff time to navigate these differences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clarifies responsibilities, for example, the Park Board is responsible for horticultural and curatorial decisions, operational decisions such as hours of operation Focusses each partners' staff time and attention on areas in which they have subject matter expertise Outlines decision making processes for VanDusen, Bloedel, and facility planning and development.

Capital Planning	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No clear pathway for VBGA input into Capital Planning Not leveraging philanthropic capacity Both of the above have resulted in slow progress being made on capital improvements to the gardens. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies process for VBGA input into City of Vancouver Capital Planning process Re-establishes VBGA as the exclusive philanthropic partner, to lead fundraising for agreed-upon capital projects
Opportunities for Efficiency	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Certain areas of responsibility are resourced by both partners, resulting in duplication of efforts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifies areas to increase efficiency through assigning responsibility <i>Volunteers</i> – VBGA to lead volunteer recruitment and management for all Park Board special events and programming (except large-scale events like the Festival of Lights). <i>Front of House</i> – Park Board to lead front of house, selling admissions and memberships, while VBGA to lead member services. <i>Marketing & Communications</i> – parties to draft joint marketing and communications protocol based on Park Board policies
Financial Sustainability	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VBGA retains 100% of membership sales revenue, while the costs associated with operating and maintaining the Gardens and facilities and providing public access are with the Park Board. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develops a Garden Membership revenue-share that will meet each partner’s needs as membership to VanDusen and Bloedel grows. Proposes shared Dedicated Fund to fund jointly agreed-upon Garden improvement projects
Facility Space Use	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growing demand for facility spaces and lack of clarity around use prioritization results in competition between partners for space 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritizes use of space for various programs as follows: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Garden Access (2) Educational Programming (3) Rentals & Events Establishes a process for revisiting space use annually.

Park Board staff consulted with relevant subject matter experts on the impacts of the above key changes on HR, unionized staff, IT systems, privacy, risk management, and security. Advice was considered and reflected in the new JOA.

New Financial Model & Implications

As noted earlier, the Working Group discussed a new financial model which will supersede all previous revenue-sharing. The model agreed to by the Working Group allows VBGA to stay whole and meeting each partner's needs as membership to VanDusen and Bloedel grows. Components of the new financial model include:

1. **New Joint Garden Membership product** – Garden Memberships will offer unlimited access to VanDusen and Bloedel and revenues will be shared according to a new revenue-split.
2. **Horticulture Funding** – VBGA will provide new funding for Park Board horticultural staff on an annual basis to support the horticultural and botanical strategic goals of both VanDusen and Bloedel.
3. **Dedicated Fund** – A portion of Park Board and VBGA Garden Membership revenues will go into a shared reserve fund. These funds will be used for jointly agreed-upon visitor enhancement projects.

The new financial model will positively impact VanDusen and Bloedel as the new joint Garden Membership revenue stream will allow the Park Board to respond to increases in visitation, and additional resource funding will allow for improved horticultural maintenance of the Gardens and meeting shared botanical goals. The Dedicated Fund ensures dedicated resources to support reinvestment needed for this destination attraction to stay competitive and attractive to visitors.

The Park Board will likely incur additional costs associated with the implementation of the JOA; however, Staff expect that these costs will be offset by the new Garden Membership revenue stream.

NEXT STEPS

Following the approval of this report, approval by the VBGA Board, and subsequent signing of the new Joint Operating Agreement, staff will focus on supporting implementation and change management. A small working group representing the Park Board and VBGA will undertake this work. The effective date of the agreement, including the new financial model will be January 1st, 2025. Changes to on-site operations will require a phased transition. Staff from both parties will work collaboratively to minimize any negative impacts to visitors and current members.

CONCLUSION

VanDusen Garden and Bloedel Conservatory are both legacies to be proud of that have an important future. The new Joint Operating Agreement is the next step in achieving the vision for both gardens. With a shared commitment, the guidance of the Strategic Plan and a modernized JOA, the two organizations will work together to offer transformative experiences and botanical discovery.

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