



VANCOUVER  
BOARD OF  
PARKS AND  
RECREATION

April 22, 2021

MEMO TO : Park Board Commissioners and VBGA Board Governors

FROM : Donnie Rosa - General Manager, Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation  
Stephen Shapiro - Executive Director, Vancouver Botanical Garden Association

SUBJECT : **VanDusen & Bloedel Strategic Plan - Project Update & Engagement Summary**

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Dear Commissioners & VBGA Board Governors,

The purpose of this memo is to update you on the VanDusen & Bloedel Strategic Plan project, as well as provide a copy of the 2020 Engagement Summary referenced in the [General Manager's Report](#) presented on January 18, 2021.

Starting in summer 2019, the Strategic Plan Steering Committee and project team have worked to understand and document the current state of the VanDusen Botanical Garden and Bloedel Conservatory, and have reviewed international best practices with comparable gardens to inform the development of a new strategic plan.

A key element in developing the strategic plan has been the in-depth community engagement conducted by the project team from October 2019 to February 2020. There were well over 6,000 different participants in these engagement sessions, including the public, visitors, members, volunteers, staff, donors, educators, some event organizers, master gardeners, and others. Attached is a summary of the engagement activities and the feedback received.

Another project update will be provided prior to bringing the proposed strategic plan forward for decision, which is currently targeted for the end of 2021. Following approval of the strategic plan, the project team will turn their focus to supporting the negotiation and ratification of a new joint operating agreement to govern the relationship between the Board of Parks and Recreation and the Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association.

Regards,

Donnie Rosa  
General Manager  
Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation

Stephen Shapiro  
Executive Director  
Vancouver Botanical Garden Association

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Copy to: PB Senior Leadership Team  
PB Project Lead  
PB Communications



# Engagement Summary: April 2021

## VanDusen Botanical Garden & Bloedel Conservatory Strategic Plan

# ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

## Project Background

VanDusen Botanical Garden and Bloedel Conservatory are jointly operated by the Vancouver Park Board (Park Board) and the Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association (VBGA, formerly VanDusen Botanical Gardens Association), which have largely discrete functions. The VBGA was formed in 1969 to provide various volunteer services such as educational opportunities and to enhance the visitor experience and value of VanDusen Botanical Garden. In 2013, the VBGA extended its relationship with the Park Board by becoming a joint operating partner of Bloedel Conservatory.

To date, no joint strategic plans have been developed between the Park Board and VBGA. The Joint Operating Agreement (JOA) which governs the relationship between the two parties dates back to 1994, with an addendum in 2011. The impact of having a dated JOA is that there has never been a shared vision between both parties for either individual garden, or for both gardens together.

Having jointly recognized this need for strategic planning, the Vancouver Park Board and Vancouver Botanical Gardens Association have launched a process to develop a new strategic plan. The strategic plan would play a key role in developing a new Joint Operating Agreement (JOA), which would then update and clearly outline the relationship and roles/responsibilities between both organizations.

Both organizations are committed to listening and learning from the community and stakeholders and will use what they heard from the public, members and stakeholders as they develop the strategic plan.

Delaney + Associates, a neutral, third party stakeholder engagement firm, 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. This report summarizes what was heard.

## Engagement Highlights

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 Garden and the Bloedel Conservatory (“the gardens”). Participants engaged in a variety of ways, including:

- interviews
- online surveys
- event intercept surveys
- open houses
- focus groups, and
- workshops.

Across these engagement sessions, different stakeholders participated, including: the public, visitors, members, volunteers, staff, donors, educators, some event organizers, master gardeners, and others.

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 session.

## Emerging Themes

Across all the input received, the following are five big themes that emerged:

- 1. A garden for all**
- 2. Connecting people, plants and community**
- 3. Responsible stewardship**
- 4. The garden is our teacher**
- 5. Rooted for future longevity**

# Thematic Highlights

## 1. A Garden For All

Participants shared they believe the gardens really are Vancouver's gardens and should welcome all. They want the gardens to be as accessible as possible, with few barriers to entry and they want them to be welcoming to everyone. There was broad consensus that everyone should feel welcome: this is a special space for all.

Within this theme, several sub-themes emerged. Participants suggested tactical ideas to increase **affordability** of the gardens. **Amenities that facilitate inclusion and access** (including physical accessibility) were suggested, with the primary focus of comments supporting a comfortable and safe experience for families with young children, seniors, and those who experience challenges with mobility.

Feedback regarding **location and connectivity** was received, with participants being generally positive about the location of the gardens, as they help to facilitate access to green space within the urban context. However, a few challenges that were noted included Little Mountain (the elevation from Cambie Street to Bloedel) and the lack of public transit connections near both sites. Additionally, **wayfinding and non-educational signage** were also identified as needing to be enhanced for the gardens.

Lastly, numerous participants in the process supported the continued increase of **diverse patronage** to VanDusen and Bloedel. 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. There was a sense from participants that not only is appealing to diverse ethno-cultural communities the right thing to do, but it is also imperative to ensuring there is a strong community of supporters, advocates and champions in the years ahead.

## 2. Connecting People, Plants and Community

Participants broadly agreed that the gardens are a place of connection between people, community, plants and nature. Though different things bring us together, there was a collective value participants put on the gardens and the memories individuals and families make in them.

Feedback under this theme varied depending on from whom it came. The comments reflect peoples' history with, and experience and knowledge of, the gardens. Foundationally, there is strong support for the notion that the gardens should facilitate **connecting people to plants and nature**. One stakeholder stated that the gardens "help get ourselves back into a relationship with our environment". For many members of the public and event participants, connection was at a high-level and broadly referenced connecting with people and nature; whereas, for members, donors and

some stakeholders, it was about a more specific interpretation of nature, i.e., botanical diversity and ecological knowledge. 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.

There is broad support for the gardens facilitating **connections between / amongst people and groups**. This was articulated quite strongly by stakeholders, donors, and volunteers. All shared their appreciation that people can connect to each other through the gardens.

A significant amount of input was received regarding **events**, as intercept surveys were done at both the Festival of Lights and Festivale Tropicale. Overwhelmingly, event participants appreciate both events, feel they are very well done, and think that seasonal events should be maintained. For most members, stakeholders and donors, there is support for events that are connected to the botanical mandate of the gardens. There is, however, frustration amongst some stakeholders with events that: limit access to the gardens; generate income that is not reinvested back into the gardens; are viewed as being incompatible with a botanical garden; and/or detract from garden maintenance.

Events are an important avenue for **family memory-making**, but the gardens as a whole also add to these experiences. Whether people go with the very young or the young at heart, 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 had come to check out the lights. Other comments bolster the fact that families who are receiving care come to the gardens for some respite. 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 participants identified that the **marketing and promotion** of the gardens is lacking in coordination and implementation. They noted that the gardens need 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”. 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.

Linked to this, **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. A couple of suggestions for how to do this were: developing and supporting micro, satellite gardens throughout the community; outreach activities that support sustainable gardening practices; and supporting cross-collaboration with educational organizations.

It was clear that **volunteers** play a critically important role in connecting people to plants and nature. While two workshops were held with volunteers, the role of volunteers was also recognized and appreciated across all engagement activities.

Lastly, whether participants were long-time members, event participants, stakeholders, or donors, there was significant input that reflected people’s appreciation and support for the **Zen and oasis elements of the gardens**.

### 3. Responsible Stewardship

Participants in the process believe that protecting and advocating for the gardens and the biodiversity they support is critical for today and for the long-term. By thinking globally and acting locally about climate change, those engaged believe that we can ensure the gardens play an important role in leading the charge in tackling the current climate crisis.

Under the sub-theme of **advocacy and education role related to climate change/the climate crisis**, a number of key ideas came through. Participants articulated that the gardens could lead this work by:

- Protecting and enhancing the resilience of the garden in the face of climate change;
- Communicating, educating, and doing all we can to help make the connection between people, community, ecology, climate change, and the gardens so that people are motivated to take action to support efforts combating climate change;
- Working to achieve carbon neutrality and water self-sufficiency;
- Protecting species that are at risk due to climate change;
- Promoting and adhering to sustainable gardening practices; and
- Respecting and understanding the complexities of our natural world and championing addressing climate change.

Specific to Bloedel, there was reference to **animal welfare** and ensuring the birds are well cared for. For most participants (members, non-member visitors, stakeholders, donors), there was a strong emphasis on the need for the gardens to be **building and protecting plant collections**.

Throughout the engagement there was some interest in understanding how **reconciliation** with Indigenous peoples could be advanced. Specific ideas which were shared included: recognizing the traditional territory on which the gardens are located; engaging with Indigenous knowledge holders to educate and engage visitors in the gardens; establishing a medicine garden; engaging with Indigenous peoples; and planting native species in the gardens. 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.

There was a significant amount of input around **promoting vibrant and healthy ecology**. Participants emphasized that the garden is not (and should not become) “just another park”. Participants in the process referenced **sustainable events and operations** as an important priority for the gardens.

### 4. The Garden Is Our Teacher

For a number of participants, the notion that the gardens are our classroom, our place of learning and excitement was prevalent. 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.

The key takeaway from this theme is that education and outreach is a foundational way we can support our next generation of gardeners and caretakers. Specific input highlighted the priority that **education and programming** play in the gardens, and that they 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. Others suggested that offering more of what already is available would be an improvement. A key part of supporting education is improving **educational signage and materials**. There were numerous comments made by participants in the process that the gardens lack appropriate labelling and interpretive displays/signage. There is broad support for the gardens playing a leading role in providing educational opportunities that support a botanical mandate, biodiversity, and community and individual wellness.

The sub-theme of **research** was not widely raised in the process, but those who support a botanical mandate generally feel strongly that a “real” botanical garden must include a research component.

## 5. Rooted For Future Longevity

Most of the input in this theme was from stakeholders, members and donors as they may have a more in-depth relationship with the gardens and be more intimately aware of some of the current challenges. There is a strong desire to ensure the gardens are well positioned for the future with the appropriate business and governance models that ensure long-term financial viability. There is a feeling of not wanting the gardens to be just “getting by”, but for them to be a premier North American botanical garden where excellence is our culture.

There was a sense that **current and long-term infrastructure needs** must be well maintained, repaired, and planned for. There was a desire to see strong and dedicated maintenance at VanDusen, whereas some participants in the process spoke more about expansion at Bloedel.

It should be noted that the engagement did not seek to engage participants on financial planning or trade-offs. Those who provided such input were well informed and highly engaged participants who had a degree of familiarity with the current business model. In terms of **financial sustainability**, participants spoke of it being a goal, but that profitability is not the primary goal. This would mean that there are enough financial resources to go beyond survival, but not so much that financial performance 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 comments about transparency and accountability.

While finances are part of what needs to be made clear, it was also clear that some participants have a lack of understanding of **governance and management**, and a few participants who were more aware of the current framework commented on the need for the VBGA and Park Board to



have clear roles and responsibilities so they can both achieve what they are best positioned to achieve.

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**. 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."

## 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. 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.

In terms of next steps, the steering committee will consider all these data sources and will work incrementally to develop a consensus-based strategic plan. The process by which the plan is developed will establish the foundation for developing a new Joint Operating Agreement (JOA). It was originally expected that a draft strategic plan would be developed in mid-2020; however, given the current COVID-19 pandemic, closures and a focus on maintaining operations during changing public health orders, the timeline has been revised to be completed by late 2021.