

A photograph of a family of four walking through a dense forest. A woman in a purple sweater and dark pants walks with a young girl in a pink hoodie. A man in a dark jacket and blue jeans walks with a young boy in a red hoodie. The forest is filled with tall, thin trees, and sunlight filters through the canopy. In the foreground, a pond reflects the surrounding trees and the family. The reflection is slightly blurred, creating a sense of depth.

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VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Vision

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VISION FOR THE FUTURE

VISION

The Vision for RDN parks and trails provides an overarching guide for all park projects and parkland acquisitions over the next 20 years. The Vision emerged through a review of past vision statements for regional and community parks in combination with new input from stakeholders and the public during the Parks and Trails Strategic Plan consultation process. This single vision is intended to encompass both regional and community parks and provide a unified approach to the overall parks system.

Regional and Community Parks and Trails in the RDN provide welcoming and diverse opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to connect with nature and each other. Important natural areas are preserved, enhanced, and maintained through strong local partnerships and volunteer initiatives. Regional and Community Parks and Trails in the RDN support the health and wellbeing of all residents in the region.





GOALS

To set the course for arriving at the desired vision, seven goals are listed below. Each goal is supported by specific actions that will allow the RDN to reach the goals and fulfil the Vision for Regional and Community Parks and Trails over the next 10 years.

The seven goals that will support the RDN in achieving its vision are:



GOAL 1:

IDENTIFY & PRESERVE IMPORTANT NATURAL AREAS AND REPRESENTATIVE LANDSCAPES THROUGH PARKLAND ACQUISITION



GOAL 2:

PROTECT & ENHANCE IMPORTANT NATURAL PARKLAND AREAS THROUGH MANAGEMENT & RESTORATION



GOAL 3:

ENHANCE & DEVELOP TRAIL CONNECTIONS



GOAL 4:

PROVIDE PARKS & TRAILS WITH WELL-MAINTAINED & DIVERSE AMENITIES



GOAL 5:

INCORPORATE FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVES INTO PARKS PLANNING AND DESIGN



GOAL 6:

STRENGTHEN LAND USE PARTNERSHIPS WITH LOCAL & PROVINCIAL ORGANIZATIONS



GOAL 7:

INCREASE VOLUNTEERING AND LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE PARKS AND TRAILS SYSTEM



GOAL 1: **Identify & Preserve Important Natural Areas and Representative Landscapes through Parkland Acquisition**

Preserving important natural areas is critical to human and environmental well-being. Our local natural areas perform important ecological functions which support and preserve biodiversity within the RDN. With rapid development in our region, RDN parks and trails play a crucial role in offsetting the loss and degradation of natural ecosystems by preserving representative landscapes such as forests, rivers, wetlands, shorelines, and alpine areas. These important natural areas provide vital habitats for wildlife, hold and filter freshwater, purify the air, and offer numerous other environmental benefits to our region.

The RDN has an important role to play in securing and acquiring important natural areas as parkland. The region's long-term sustainability is enhanced when its natural areas are preserved- this has a direct positive impact on the quality of life for all residents in the region.

The following 4 Actions support Goal 1:

→ ACTIONS

1.1 Inventory and map important natural areas within the Regional District and assess how existing parks contribute to natural areas preservation.

Using the Provincial Sensitive Ecosystem Inventory (2004) and/or the Provincial Habitat Atlas as a baseline for categorizing sensitive and important ecosystems, create a map that displays the existing base of important natural areas within the RDN. Overlay the current RDN, Municipal and Provincial parks systems and conservation areas to assess how existing parks currently contribute to protecting various important ecosystems.

The map will be a valuable baseline for various governments and organizations in the region. The production of this map will likely involve input from several other groups with the common interest in protecting land for biodiversity.



1.2 Identify and assess lands for parkland acquisition that contribute to enhanced biodiversity in the region.

Building on the map created in Action 1.1, the next step is to assess and identify those important natural areas that ought to be prioritized for parkland acquisition. A new layer will emerge on the map that highlights the lands with greater potential to contribute to enhanced biodiversity in the region. The lands that will emerge onto this layer will come from a review and update of the community input received during 2005-2015 Regional Parks and Trails Plan, the Community Parks and Trails Strategy 2014, and the current Parks & Trails Strategy. In addition, new lands that may not have been identified during those processes will be added by considering the following questions:

- 1) Is this natural landscape currently under-represented within the region's park portfolio?
- 2) Does this potential acquisition link other important natural areas that are already protected? This is important to create a level of integrity in the 'green fabric' given the level of development around.
- 3) Does this potential acquisition preserve a large contiguous landscape that has value for watershed conservation (e.g. groundwater recharge, flood control, storm water management, drinking watershed protection) and/or wildlife habitat?
- 4) Is this landscape currently at greater risk due to the impacts of climate change? (e.g. alpine areas, old growth forests, estuaries, floodplains, wetlands, rivers, lakes, and ocean fronts).

These questions (and presumably additional questions as led by a qualified professional) will guide the review and assessment and will serve as a sieve to help bring those lands which most contribute to enhanced biodiversity in the region to the forefront on the map.



The identified lands can then be ranked into (e.g. high/medium/low conservation value) to aid in decision making and prioritization of future parkland acquisitions and help reach the RDN's environmental protection goal to increase the amount of protected land.

This map-based inventory will graphically present the conservation aspect when considering parkland acquisition. It will be used as an internal planning document in conjunction with the Regional Park Acquisition Criteria and Rating Framework (see Action 1.3), which also considers recreational and cultural aspects in decision-making when opportunities for acquisitions arise (such as through the sale of the property or through land use agreements with property owners and/or partner organizations).

The map will also support long-term planning such as Official Community Plan updates, the creation of parks and trails masterplans for each electoral area, parkland dedication opportunities through subdivision, and information sharing with other organizations that are also pursuing the protection of natural areas.

1.3 Revise the Regional Park Acquisition Criteria and Rating Framework to better guide strategic regional parkland acquisition.

An existing acquisition evaluation checklist is used by staff to analyze the merits of properties with acquisition potential. This tool is used on a case-by-case basis and gives a numeric rating to a property under evaluation. The properties are then prioritized based on numerical score and cost. The Regional Board reviews the priority list prior to final approval.

The existing framework, while comprehensive, presents a stringent process that is difficult to replicate since it relies on the subjective interpretation of the analyzer. A revised version of the Evaluation Criteria and Rating Framework is needed to simplify the analysis and serve primarily as a guide to appropriate parkland acquisition. A framework based on acquisition guidelines would allow for more fluid decision-making in relation to setting acquisition priorities.

Supporting data from the important natural areas map (see 1.2), other RDN initiatives and information from other conservation organizations, local governments and First Nations could be factored into an updated framework. RDN-specific initiatives include the Drinking Water and Watershed Protection (DWWP) program (as a source of water resources mapping & information related to sea level rise, floodplain, and aquifer protection) and RDN strategies on climate resilience, adaptation, mitigation, and natural asset management.

1.4 Add a Regional Park Reserve category to the regional park classification system.

Acquiring land is a priority for the RDN, however, the cost of land continues to rise. Securing land at a lower price now allows for the continual growth of parkland. However, in many cases, the land acquired has minimal amenities for public use and capital funding is needed to develop infrastructure within the newly acquired parkland. The intent of the Reserve classification is to allow for the purchase of land even if funds are not readily available to develop the park.

The 'Regional Park Reserve' category will allow land to be acquired with the clear expectation for the public that the land could be further developed at a later date. Ongoing funding will be required to manage risks on the land.

Once land has been ranked through the updated Regional Park Acquisition Criteria and Rating Framework (see Action 1.3), it could be placed into the Reserve category. Through a Management Plan process for the property, the land would be reclassified into one of the RDN's existing Regional Park Classifications (1. Conservation Area, 2. Natural Area, 3. Recreation Area (e.g. Campground), 4. Trail).



GOAL 2:

Protect & Enhance Important Natural Parkland Areas through Management & Restoration

There is an ongoing need to steward and manage the land to ensure that natural habitats, landscapes, and cultural features are not at risk of degradation. In a park setting, there are some common factors that negatively impact an ecosystem. These include disturbances to native vegetation and wildlife due to soil erosion from heavy trail use in steep areas or from park visitors moving off-trail or establishing new unauthorized trails. The loss of biodiversity and genetic diversity due to the introduction and establishment of invasive species and the disruption and loss of wildlife corridors also has a negative impact on ecosystems.

The RDN can support the ongoing protection and enhancement of natural parkland areas in RDN parks by continuing with initiatives that strive to balance the provision of recreation with the preservation of natural habitats.

The following 3 Actions support Goal 2:

→ ACTIONS

2.1 Update regional park management plans & prioritize key action items related to sensitive ecosystem preservation.

Existing regional parks protect a wide range of habitats and landscapes. Many of the action items within the existing park management plans focus on preserving and enhancing the natural ecosystems within RDN parks. Complete a status update of the action items and prioritize those actions that ought to be carried out in each park to support preservation of the natural habitat.

2.2 Develop and implement an invasive species management strategy to rehabilitate and enhance natural ecosystems and biodiversity in parks.

Invasive species are non-native plants and animals that have a negative impact on the natural biodiversity of an area. If parks are to serve as a refuge for our natural ecosystems, then action must be taken to mitigate the impacts of invasive species.

A management strategy will offer a step-by-step process to begin to tackle invasive species within both regional and community parks. There are opportunities for collaboration with other organizations and volunteers who aim to protect natural ecosystems.

2.3 Develop a wildfire and risk assessment strategy to mitigate fire risk in regional and community parks.

With more people getting out to explore parks it will become increasingly important to have hazard risk assessments and mitigation plans to prepare for unexpected emergencies.

The risk of wildfires is predicted to increase as climate change affects rainfall patterns and forest health. A wildfire and risk assessment strategy is particularly important for areas at the interface of forests and urban areas. New parks that serve as fire breaks may be identified during the process, and could also provide opportunities for unique parks, greenways, and linear corridors.





GOAL 3: Enhance & Develop Trail Connections

Trail connections to nature and local community destinations contribute to the livability of a region and the wellbeing of its residents.

Access to nature helps reduce stress and anxiety, encourages social interactions, and provides a low cost, low barrier opportunity for fitness activities.

Establishing safe on- and off-street trail connections to local community destinations, such as schools and shops, can promote alternative modes of transportation by reducing vehicle dependence, which in turn result in a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and increased physical activity. Enhancing regional trail connections can also contribute to the economy by providing tourism opportunities for visitors to the area. Through the public engagement process it was clear that trails are an important asset to the community.

The following 3 Actions support Goal 3:

→ ACTIONS

3.1 Evaluate and update the proposed Regional Trail Network to reaffirm regional trail priorities.

Part of the vision from the 2005-2015 Regional Parks and Trails Plan is the concept of creating a regional trail from park to park. Great swaths of potential trail corridor were marked over a conceptual map. Since 2005, some pieces of this vision have come to fruition and others are still far off in the future.

A review of the Regional Trails Network is needed to provide a status update and clarify priorities and targets moving forward. As with Goal 1 (Identify and Preserve Important Natural Areas), this review will be an opportunity for the RDN to take stock and align regional trail goals with other jurisdictions and partner agencies or landowners. Consider the following in the review process:

- Connection of the Lighthouse Country Regional Trail (North and South Loops)

- Completion of the Morden Colliery Regional Trail
- Completion the Trans Canada Trail

3.2 Complete a parks and trails master plan for each electoral area.

Expanding on the work that was carried out in the Community Parks and Trails Strategy for Electoral Areas E through H (2014), a master plan for each electoral area will generate a visual map that easily demonstrates parkland inequity and high priority trail connections to community destinations. Gaps in the parks and trails system will become evident during the process and can be flagged as priority projects to consider in future planning. Factors to consider in the masterplan for each electoral area include:

- Safe connections to schools, recreation centres, and commercial areas;
- Connections to water access points, viewpoints and the regional trails system;
- The creation of local loops to encourage regular use of trails for health and fitness;
- Accessible trails wherever feasible;
- Potential park programming opportunities;
- Potential park improvement projects to support recreation.

3.3 Participate in regional active transportation planning initiatives to convey the local and regional trails interests.

Although an active transportation plan is outside of the Parks Services mandate, trails are an integral component of the district-wide active transportation network. When practical, aligning regional or community trails with active transportation objectives may result in funding opportunities and the ability to achieve shared goals across jurisdictions. There has been a trend in government investment in active transportation infrastructure to support a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. Parks Services should be at the table within the RDN and with other local jurisdictions when active transportation planning is underway.





GOAL 4: Provide Parks & Trails with Well-Maintained & Diverse Amenities

As the parks and trails system has grown rapidly, so has the inventory of amenities and physical assets. The Parks Division requires increased resources to manage the park system so that it can continue to be well-maintained, safe, and meet public expectations.

On top of the baseline maintenance and upgrades, climate change will put increasing pressure on all aspects of maintenance and operations. Natural areas will be at increased risk due to drought, fire, flood, pests, and disease.

The quantity, quality, and distribution of amenities varies widely across the RDN's Electoral Areas. While part of this is due to development patterns and the differences in community interests and needs, more effort is needed to ensure that all residents have access to welcoming, well-maintained parks that offer a diverse range of amenities to meet the needs of the community. Access to greenspace is a major contributor to health and wellbeing.

The following 3 Actions support Goal 4:

→ ACTIONS

4.1 Identify, develop, and promote specific areas in the parks system where access for all ages and abilities is available.

While providing universal accessibility to all areas of the parks system is not feasible due to rugged terrain and sensitive ecosystems, there are opportunities for improved accessibility.

Conduct an accessibility audit of existing regional and community parks (first focusing on high use parks) to identify trails and amenities that are already

accessible. In addition, trails and amenities that have the potential to be upgraded to meet this need should be identified for consideration in short and long range financial planning. All park elements that are suitable for all ages and abilities should be clearly marked on maps and signage within the park.

4.2 Assess current service levels to ensure operating funds are sufficient to meet public expectations.

Both community and regional parks are feeling the effects of increased park use and current service levels need to be assessed and adjusted to meet the increased demands. Establishing a consistent level of service by park type can help inform financial planning decisions and ensure that operating budgets reflect the levels of service required.

4.3 Support the RDN's development of an asset management system to inform short and long-term budget planning for park asset maintenance and renewal.

Asset management plans are essential for planning the short- and long-term replacement of existing park infrastructure.

Whenever a new park, trail or amenity is added to the inventory, the operations and maintenance costs of the system increase. If operational and life-cycle replacement costs are not considered, the system will get further and further behind, quality of the parks will decline, and there may be increased liability due to deferred maintenance. Current budgets can be used to determine appropriate baselines and metrics.



GOAL 5:

Incorporate First Nations Perspectives into Parks Planning and Design

The RDN is situated within the traditional territories of the Coast Salish Peoples including the Snuneymuxw First Nation, Snaw-naw-as First Nation, Qualicum First Nation, and K'omoks First Nation. Both community and regional parks are often located on land that is rich in archeological, cultural, and ecological significance. Building on collaborative relationships with area First Nations, incorporating Indigenous cultural and historical perspectives, and preserving and protecting culturally significant areas should be a priority for the RDN as part of its ongoing commitment to reconciliation.

The following 2 Actions support Goal 5:

→ ACTIONS

5.1 In collaboration with First Nations, explore opportunities to incorporate the cultural significance of sites into park naming, design, and development.

Through collaboration with First Nations, opportunities to incorporate the history and values of the land into park design and development can be identified. Examples include undertaking a review of the RDN's Parks Naming Policy to include consideration of Indigenous cultural and historical interests, featuring cultural education through appropriate signage, promoting ecological stewardship within parks, and enhancing the visibility of the local First Nations via key built features and signage.

5.2 In collaboration with First Nations, explore opportunities to protect important cultural areas.

Through collaboration with First Nations, explore initiatives such as improving the protection of cultural areas and sensitive archeological sites, supporting traditional uses, enhancing visibility of Indigenous languages, art, and culture in the parks and trails, and incorporating traditional knowledge in management of regional parks.



GOAL 6: Strengthen Land Use Partnerships with Local & Provincial Organizations

Many of the RDN's existing regional parks and trails exist due to partnerships or land use agreements with other agencies or individuals.

Recreational access is a major attraction for our region. The delivery of a public parks and trails system on Vancouver Island is dependent on a complex web of agreements and partnerships.

The continued success of parkland acquisition and management in the region depends on strong partnerships with both private and public entities on an individual and organizational basis.

The following 2 Actions support Goal 6:

→ ACTIONS

6.1 Increase Parks Division capacity to manage land use agreements with private and public agencies for recreational and conservation purposes.

The RDN holds agreements with several agencies for park and trail access, including the Trans Canada Trail, the Arrowsmith CPR Trail, the Coombs to Parksville Rail Trail, the Lighthouse Country Regional Trail, as well as for many other regional and community parks and trails on private and public lands.

On Vancouver Island, most forested lands are privately held and managed for forestry purposes. Fortunately, successful agreements have been put in place to allow public recreational access over some of these private lands. With increasing concern over fire risk associated with public access, these land use agreements face additional restrictions. The RDN has an important role to play in communicating responsible recreational use of these lands to foster strong relationships with the landowners and ensure ongoing agreements into the future.

Furthermore, within the RDN, roads are managed by the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MoTI). This network of developed and

undeveloped roads offers many trail and beach access opportunities. Working collaboratively with MoTI and establishing land use agreements within key road corridors can help improve the overall trail network in the RDN, facilitate active transportation initiatives, and provide access to inaccessible recreational areas and beaches.

In addition, several agreements with individual or private strata landowners exist to enable public recreational access over private lands. These park and trail acquisitions are not possible without the legal documents and negotiations that bring them to life. For the Parks Division to meet the actions related to parkland and trail network acquisitions outlined in this Strategy, additional staffing is needed.

6.2 Increase Parks Division capacity to identify and foster partnerships with not-for-profit organizations for acquisition, management, and maintenance of parks and trails.

Not-for-profit organizations have been valuable partners in previous regional park acquisitions and continue to provide value through ongoing ecological monitoring and park and trail maintenance.

There are also well-established local clubs and volunteer groups that bring value to the region through trail system development and management. Mutually beneficial agreements can be put in place to ensure that ongoing access to important recreational assets on privately held forest land can continue.

Fostering these partnerships will support park and trail acquisition and will allow the RDN to lean on the expertise of specialized groups for best practices and a collaborative approach to ongoing park and trail development and management.







GOAL 7:

Increase Volunteering and Learning Opportunities within the Parks and Trails System

As with strong partnerships with organizations, strong relationships with active members of the community can have a large and lasting impact on the quality of parks in our region. Volunteers are critical to the ongoing stewardship and enhancement of parks and trails. Individuals devote countless hours to serve on advisory committees, fundraise for new park amenities, and get their hands dirty with activities in the parks and trails.

Past attempts to implement an effective volunteer program in RDN parks have failed due to a lack of resources dedicated to the cause. The RDN has an opportunity to tap into an abundance of support from an enthusiastic community who want to make a difference and give back to their local parks and trails.

Our parks also have great potential to serve as outdoor classrooms and learning environments. RDN Recreation Services provides outdoor programs in the park system and several schools, post-secondary education institutions, and community groups use RDN parks for educational purposes, administered through Park Use Permits.

To increase volunteer and learning opportunities in RDN Parks, additional resources, infrastructure, and coordination are required. The benefits are yielded in more residents participating and using parks and trails and increasing awareness and connection to the region's diverse landscapes and ecosystems.

The following 2 Actions support Goal 7:

→ ACTIONS

7.1 Develop and implement a park and trail volunteer program to strengthen the Parks Division's capacity for coordinating and supporting volunteer-led stewardship projects.

There is significant potential to increase stewardship opportunities in our parks and trails and provide more opportunities for people to get out, be active, and learn in our parks. The need for an improved volunteer program

that provides support to individual volunteers, organized community groups and not-for-profit organizations was clearly identified by the feedback gathered through community consultation.

The current staff liaison between the Parks and Recreation Services has started to tap into this potential, but a greater investment of staff time and resources is needed to expand program offerings to include activities such as volunteer work parties and citizen science initiatives. Outcomes of a volunteer program could include:

- a stewardship newsletter
- an adopt-a-park program
- consistent, reliable, and validating interactions with dedicated volunteers
- partnerships with RDN Drinking Water and Watershed Protection on education, research, invasive species management, and citizen science projects.

7.2 Enhance the ability to offer programming and educational opportunities by identifying and developing additional infrastructure at key parks.

To enhance the RDN's ability to offer programming and educational opportunities in our parks, improved infrastructure such as washrooms, drinking water, parking and school bus access is often required. A review of the barriers to programming (at a park-specific level) is an important first step towards improving the RDN's ability to facilitate programs in our parks. Following the review, actions to address the barriers can be prioritized and included within the financial plan.

The specific parks in each Electoral Area that are more suited to host recreation and education programs would be identified through the Parks and Trails Master Planning for each Electoral Area, as described in Action 3.2. Once the key park projects are implemented to enable improved park programming, RDN Recreation and Parks can continue to work collaboratively together to expand programs and camps in RDN parks.