

STRATHCONA PARK PUBLIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE

(October 12, 2022 – Virtual Meeting)

SPPAC MEMBERS present: Hardolph Wasteneys (Chair), Catrin Brown, Ryan Wanner, Jennifer Pass, Bill Phipps, Jessie Moore

REGRETS: Philip Stone, Darren Saare, Ryan Stuart

Recorder: Aaron Miller

Guests

Aaron Miller (BC Parks)

Nicole Pesonen (Myra Falls Mine)

Tony Robson (Myra Falls Mine)

Thibault Doix (Sartori Consultants)

MEETING SUMMARY

Introductions

Strathcona Area Update

Jessie reviewed the update she had provided previously via email to the Committee and discussed key initiatives that had had been completed or were to be completed this year. Discussed opportunity for additional capacity of having a Full Time Senior Park Ranger and extended Ranger term would bring to the Area this winter and going forward. Delay in snow melt and number of trees that were down this year created challenges to get Strathcona open both in the frontcountry and the backcountry.

Discussion regarding key issues in the Park,

- 1) Need for Z-best toilet installs in backcountry – King’s Peak and Marble Meadows in particular. Jessie noted the damaged toilet at Marble Meadows was replaced this year. Suggestion that improved signage would be useful at Marble Meadows to advise users of the presence of the toilet – beyond sign on Wheaton hut. Suggestion of a sign at the tarns/meadows camping area of the toilet at the hut, committee was unsure if this would be beneficial due to distance from camping area to the hut. BC Parks (BCP) will consider additional signage in future – potential need for an additional toilet.
- 2) Discussion of use in the Park and how it has increased since COVID. Up to 70 cars noted at Bedwell parking lot this year, parked up and down the access road. Visitor management and overall use numbers create a challenge overall.

Crest Crags Update

Bill advised that one trail day happened this year. Volunteers were engaged from the climbing community. 8 volunteers were present, along with 2 BCP Rangers. Areas of the main access trail from the parking lot were upgraded/replaced, as well as the key area/platforms where new climbers learn to climb. Some old routes were scrubbed, and the Skid Row zone was cleaned up. It was a good day, good interaction with Rangers, support with chainsaw work and materials purchase was appreciated by the volunteers. Volunteers sign up was with Multiple sign-up form. Process was easy, no red tape. Discussion about the Rec Sites and Trails (RST) campsite just outside the park – it was being used quite a bit this summer. Toilet is still in good shape, but access point is hard to find. Would be good to have a sign on the side of the highway where you turn off to the site. RST is now part of Division with BCP, so the two groups can discuss potential signage options.

Myra Falls Update

Information was provided by Nicole, Thibault and Tony. Nicole discussed the background of the project and location of the proposed line, including the decision to go subsurface along a 700m portion of the Jim Mitchell Road to avoid impacts associated with install and maintenance of a powerline so close to the Thelwood River. Project is intended to replace hydro line that goes through Price 13 Portal and would allow for closure of that portal. This portal is completed and the responsible thing to do is to backfill and close, so need to take cables out; portals are not safe to humans or animals. Surface line would be more reliable to repair and would reduce the amount of diesel that Myra Falls uses and would be the main source of power for the closure plan facilities that will need to be in place. Proposed overland line would begin at Price 13 connecting to the existing powerlines along the road, underground for 700m at the terminus of the Jim Mitchell and highway, would connect overland to the existing above ground lines at Upper Myra Falls day use area. Thibault outlined the key environmental risks/considerations including 4 species at risk that had high potential presence along the proposed route – marbled murrelet, band tailed pigeons, red legged frogs and western toad. The line is also proximal to several proposed marbled murrelet critical habitat polygons. The goal would be to have the line in by May 2023. Ideally the project would avoid the bird breeding window. Project would need to field test the exact location of the poles as they were installed. Principle controlling decisions on the building of the Thelwood Creek Distribution line is: “put poles as far as possible from environmental features, so will be underground where closest to creek edge to avoid any impact to creek. Where there are 4 metres on each side of the road with debris, okay to put poles above ground.” Tree cutting will be minimal, they will avoid watercourses; there will be some pruning; they will need right of way for repairs; of particular concern, there will be amphibians along the roadside where there are water

features. Reflectors will be to avoid bird strikes given concerns over negative impacts. PRESENTATIONS WILL BE MADE AVAILABLE.

Discussion: Concerns were raised about the proximity of the line to water course. Response - most of what appeared to be water bodies in mapping were slides tracks, or seasonal streams – not expected to be fish bearing. Line would be buried in the road where it is close to Thelwood Creek, reducing impacts. An erosion and sediment control plan will be in place and the underground installation would be done in small pieces so they can backfill quickly and reduce potential for impacts from accumulated rainfall in the trench. Concerns about timing and impact of Parks users in the summer season (e.g. Bedwell access). Goal would be to have the line along Jim Mitchell complete by May long weekend. However, as the proposal hasn't been approved, cable hasn't been ordered, so timing of approval and ability to secure line given supply chain issues may create a challenge to meet this date. If approved, there would be traffic control on Jim Mitchell road as well as on the mine site where park visitors would pass through to get to trailheads beyond the mine site.

The installation approach that would be used is to plant the poles first, string the lines and then assess what limbing or tree removal needs to be done to reduce impacts to park, but ensure lines are safe. Tony went through the various options considered and explained why Myra Falls is proposing above ground powerline primarily, with some below ground. There was discussion about an option of running new conduit through the existing Price 13 portal, but this would leave this area unable to be closed and also would have challenges with number of pull boxes that would need to be maintained.

A question was asked about if this would change the need to plough the Jim Mitchell Road in winter to monitor the powerline. No significant change anticipated as ploughing would be similar to what happens now as the Mine currently needs to access the Thelwood Hydro site in winter.

Discussion of plans to increase the level of the Thelwood dam to increase water retention. Myra Falls continues to plan to install the structure to increase the height of the dam and increase the water retention in Thelwood Lake. The proposal was approved several years ago by BC Parks; however, Mine shut down and other issues prevented this project from going ahead. Plans are to build the structure as it would provide enough water/hydro power that the Mine could stay on Hydro the entire dry season (currently when water levels get to low, they run on diesel for power). Thelwood is the main source of Hydro to run the mine site. Other upgrades to the system at Thelwood would occur to improve generation. The smaller Tennant Lake hydro system continues to run well.

Myra Falls presentation was completed. Copies of the presentations and a map of the proposed route will be provided in future.

The Myra Falls Mine portion of the agenda was concluded.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

There was a discussion of the recreational values on Thelwood Lake, including whether or not there was a trail in the Thelwood area that linked to features beyond it. There is no formal recognized BC Parks trail. In the past guidebooks had mentioned that there was a route in the area, but it was mostly bushwacking, not well defined. It was noted that there is the canoe/boat launch access at the end of Jim Mitchell road for Park visitors to paddle the lake and access the other side.

There was a discussion of the need for government to secure recreational access (e.g., via an easement or another legal instrument) through the Clayoquot Wilderness Resort area – lands outside the park. The concern that if there is nothing legally registered, current access to the Bedwell area of the park could be lost. CWR may be interested in supporting a formalized tenure. BCP will follow up with the planning section in Headquarters to see what could be done as they hold the expertise in these matters.

There was a discussion of winter access with the popularity of the winter activities at Mount Washington, but also of backcountry touring. Concern was that access parking lots were being ploughed so were inaccessible for users. There was a general discussion about the lack of capacity in the wintertime with BC Parks and the hope that with 3 new permanent Sr Park Rangers now being based out of Miracle Beach there would now be capacity to become more engaged in what is happening in the Park as BCP staff has had limited presence for a significant amount of time, while use has increased. BC Parks staff have received necessary training and purchased equipment to be able to have a presence in the Park and the goal is to develop a winter program. Reference was made to talking to other regions of BC Parks to gather how they run winter programs (e.g., Sea to Sky area). BC Parks would like to collaborate with SPPAC on identifying issues/interests that could be addressed in a winter program.

There was a discussion about wildfires and how BC Parks manages them, particularly since there is the fire at Wolf River, in the Donner/Kunlin Lake area and just outside the Park. Jessie advised that she had flown the 2 fires in the Park the day before the SPPAC meeting. Quite thick smoke, difficult to get a good look at the fire. BCP explained that they work closely with the Wildfire branch to plan how and when to attack fires vs. monitor although often, any action is dependent on Wildfire priorities. BC Parks has a general approach that in areas where there are no significant facilities fire is viewed as a natural process and in that situation, there is a let it burn approach. Where there are facilities and more risk to public safety, or property (either inside or adjacent to the Park) the approach is to attack these. There was a discussion regarding a project BC Parks and the Wildfire branch had done several years ago to identify and map key trails/facilities to better inform

Wildfire about values in the Park and there was the intent to develop a similar process for ecological values, but BCP staff were aware of the status of this project.

The question was asked if BC Parks has a matrix that determines the response – BCP doesn't have a matrix, they look at the facilities/human risk and consult with the Wildfire branch. The knowledge and expertise for wildfire is housed in the Wildfire branch and BCP works with them to determine courses of action. The question was asked regarding why BC Parks doesn't consider protecting old growth trees as a high value. BCP doesn't specifically consider old growth as a high value to protect from a fire perspective. There was a lengthy discussion about the importance and past history of fire in the area (e.g. Miracle Beach fire) and that there is a history of fires on the Island. No conclusion was made on how or if BCP would consider old growth forests in their ranking of risks, while acknowledging that other jurisdictions do this (e.g. California and redwood forests).

There was also a discussion that hikers who had recently tried to ascend the Golden Hinde had to turn back due to burning trees on the route to the summit from the Wolf Rive fire. Follow up will happen to get more details from these individuals to better understand where they observed this fire behaviour. If necessary, a notice will be put on the BC Parks website advising the public of this issue.

There was also a discussion of the desire of the committee to meet more frequently and in person and to get a better understanding of how BCP is managing, or intends to manage, the Park in the future. Options for in person meetings of Miracle Beach or Strathcona Park Lodge were discussed (recognizing that any existing COVID health protocols would need to be met. This will be discussed at a future meeting. There was also a discussion about how best to engage the public in the work that SPPAC is doing as there is a concern that SPPAC may be becoming less relevant to Park users. This has been an issue that has been challenging for SPPAC in recent years. At a minimum, there is a desire to have some public at the in person meetings as has happened in the past. There was also discussion about inviting some of the key partners that are present in the Park be invited to a meeting to solicit their input into issues that SPPAC may want to consider. BCP will clarify with Robert van der Zalm about any barriers to at least providing the option to SPPAC members to meet in person at the Miracle Beach office.

MEETING ADJOURNED 9:50