



Committee of the Whole Report

For the Meeting of June 3, 2021

To: Committee of the Whole **Date:** March 30, 2021
From: Thomas Soulliere, Director of Parks, Recreation and Facilities
Subject: 2020 Annual Progress Report: Parks and Open Spaces Master Plan and Urban Forest Master Plan

RECOMMENDATION

That Council receive this report for information.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Victoria's parks inventory includes dynamic, inclusive, and diverse public spaces, which support health and wellness, protect natural areas, and allow residents and visitors to connect with the unique ecosystems and character of the City.

The Parks and Open Spaces Master Plan and Urban Forest Master Plan provide direction for the purposes of planning and managing the City's parks and urban forest. The short-term and long-term actions are rooted in public engagement, ensuring that activities and investments align with community values and priorities.

The global pandemic significantly impacted City operations in 2020, including the Parks division, where resources were directed towards supporting the City's emergency response and public safety priorities. In particular, the homelessness crises, which expanded during the pandemic, required significant attention to mitigate impacts related to the high number of individuals sheltering in parks.

The 2020 report (Attachment A) provides a comprehensive accounting of the progress made over the past year towards the strategic goals as well as key actions in managing Victoria's urban forest.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the actions initiated and completed in 2020 associated with the Parks and Open Spaces Master Plan and Urban Forest Master Plan.

BACKGROUND

Council approved the Parks and Open Spaces Master Plan (POSMP) in 2017 as a strategic roadmap to guide the planning, management, and investment for the City's parks inventory over the next 25 years.

The Urban Forest Master Plan was approved by Council in 2013, following extensive consultation with community members, staff and industry experts. The plan provides guidance on the long-term management and enhancement of the urban forest, with 26 recommendations relating to trees on public and private lands to be completed over the next 40 years.

Council has directed staff to report on the progress of implementation of priority actions identified in the Parks and Open Spaces Master Plan and the Urban Forest Master Plan on an annual basis.

ISSUES & ANALYSIS

Parks and Open Spaces Master Plan

The POSMP guides the work of the Parks division and informs the consultation for projects led by other City departments, such as neighbourhood planning, transportation planning, and the review of private development proposals that impact trees and landscape.

In 2020, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the City's focus on the emergency response, staff were able to advance work towards the goals outlined in the POSMP. The noteworthy actions from the past year include:

- Further investment in relationship-building with Indigenous people and coordination on park development projects and programs
- Acquisition of park land in the South Jubilee neighborhood to create Agamemnon and Eleni Kasapi Park
- Re-purposing Royal Athletic Park as the City's Recreation Hub
- Development of a new food security program that distributed 81,500 vegetable seedlings to citizens, including those most affected by the pandemic
- Expansion of grant programs resulting in a total of \$170,000 in funding available to support urban agriculture programs
- Renewal of seven sport courts
- Collaboration with community service providers and other stakeholders to provide support and infrastructure for individuals sheltering in parks due to the pandemic

The global pandemic in 2020 highlighted the importance of parks and open spaces in our city. Open spaces are significant contributors to the physical and mental health of citizens, providing opportunities to connect with nature and recreate. Following a brief closure in the spring, all outdoor recreation facilities, including playgrounds, spray parks, sport courts, and skate and bike parks were re-opened as part of the City's Parks and Recreation COVID-19 Recovery Plan.

The City's primary recreation facility, the Crystal Pool and Fitness Centre, closed in March as part of pandemic healthy and safety measures. The City used the downtime to complete a number of major maintenance projects for the aging facility, which were completed in December. To meet community needs and align with public health protocols, the Royal Athletic Park outdoor stadium was re-purposed into a new *Recreation Hub*. Through creative planning, many of the typical spring and summer recreation programs and services were delivered to residents of all ages.

The past year has been especially challenging for vulnerable citizens who are experiencing homelessness and used parks for temporary shelter, after indoor shelter options were either closed or significantly reduced in capacity. City staff worked tirelessly to maintain parks and committed extensive additional resources to support the basic needs of individuals sheltering in parks. This work resulted in new temporary infrastructure such as toilets, handwashing stations, and water

fountains to meet the increasing demands. Meanwhile, the City collaborated with stakeholders to update bylaws and explore alternative solutions to address safety concerns and preserve space in parks for residents remain active. The physical impacts of full-time sheltering also had major implications for certain parks, some of which required temporary closure and large-scale remediation.

In addition to the measures in response to the pandemic, staff from multiple departments delivered initiatives in parks that supported local businesses, community building, and food security, as illustrated by the *Build Back Victoria* program and *Get Growing, Victoria*.

Urban Forest Master Plan

The Urban Forest Master Plan (UFMP) outlines recommendations to help achieve the vision for the City's urban forest. The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the progress of several actions; however, staff advanced the following key actions:

- Increased tree planting on City land by 40%
- Measured tree canopy cover across the city
- Updated the *Tree Preservation Bylaw*
- Participated in the United Nations *Trees in Cities Challenge*
- Received distinction for leading urban forest management practices, under the *Tree City of the World* program
- Published tree care, planting and selection guides
- Established the new Manager of Urban Forest Services position

Trees are an important community asset providing environmental benefits such as regulating temperature, mitigating stormwater runoff, and providing wildlife habitat. The value of the urban forest is critical as the city adapts to climate change.

Tree Canopy Cover Analysis

Obtaining accurate tree canopy cover and impermeable surface estimates and updating them over time is critical to inform the management and enhancement of the urban forest. In 2019, staff conducted an assessment of the tree canopy coverage using LiDAR (satellite imagery) modelling data, which was followed in 2020 by further analysis. The purpose of this study was to establish an accurate baseline across the city using a method that can be repeated with reliable results.

The key finding of this assessment showed that the city's tree canopy coverage increased between 2013 and 2019. The increase of 46 hectares is roughly equivalent to an area covering 60 soccer fields. The study identified that the growth of the existing canopy has offset the loss of tree canopy due to urban development or die off. New and replacement plantings on public and private lands during this time period did not represent a significant contribution to canopy gains, however, as these trees grow and reach maturity their contribution will be more evident.

Strengthening Tree Protection

In 2019, Council approved a Strategic Plan action to undertake a comprehensive review and update the *Tree Preservation Bylaw*, one of the three City bylaws that influence or regulate tree retention and removal in Victoria. This work was pursued in a phased approach.

At the conclusion of the first phase, completed in May 2020, Council took a significant step toward strengthening tree protection by reducing the Bylaw protected tree size from 80 cm to 30 cm diameter-at-breast-height (DBH). This change placed 50% more trees and 84% more tree canopy under protection, than the previous bylaw. Staff are now reviewing 40% more tree permit applications compared to 2019, and 18% more development-related applications requiring review due to tree impacts.

Over the course of the year, staff also completed the second phase of work for the new *Tree Protection Bylaw*, which Council approved in March 2021. The new bylaw offers improved processes, tree canopy outcomes, increased flexibility for applicants, and improved accountability

Health Impacts of Trees

In October 2020, Council directed staff to respond to an Accessibility Working Group motion, which suggested amending the Urban Forest Master Plan to “include consideration of human health”.

The UFMP Goal #4 does reference this topic:

Maximize community benefits from the urban forest in all neighbourhoods by incorporating health objectives into the planning and design of new treed environments in the public realm.

The UFMP considers the functions and benefits of the urban forest, including the well-established environmental benefits provided by trees, as well as the values relating to supporting mental and physical health of individuals. For example, the ability of trees to reduce noise and air pollution helps to mitigate the demands placed on the environment by urbanization. As Victoria continues to densify, trees are a natural tool to counteract the climate emergency.

The UFMP also references the innate ability of trees to remove pollutants from the air, which reduces asthma rates and improves livability for all citizens (page 13).

The allergenic potency of trees is taken into consideration by the City, to the degree possible, when selecting trees to be planted. Finding a balance that meets individual needs and aligns with City policy commitments, such as the repopulation of local native flora, can be challenging, at times.

While there is considerable scientific research and published papers on the benefits of trees, including human health benefits, there is relatively limited scientific research on the potential negative impacts of trees on human health, such as pollen allergies. As further evidence-based information or standards become available, staff will factor this into future planning for the public realm.

Accessibility Impact Statement

A guiding principle of the Parks and Open Spaces Master Plan is increasing the accessibility of the parks system. In recent years, this has been applied through maintenance work as well as the

development of park projects, based on input from individuals with lived experience, and technical expertise.

The City has also taken action to balance accessibility considerations with the management of the City's natural habitats, as illustrated in the examples below:

- Planting lower allergen plants in proximity to high pedestrian traffic or gathering areas
- Connecting with residents in advance of selecting boulevard trees about potential health concerns, such as serious pollen allergies
- Publishing resources for the public and staff, such as (i) *Lower Allergen Landscape Planting Resource List*, (ii) *Pollinator and Allergy-Friendly Gardening the City of Victoria Guide*, and (iii) *Tree Species Selection Guide*

Impacts to Financial Plan

There are no impacts to the 2021 Financial Plan relating to this progress report.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2020 report provides a summary of the actions taken towards advancing City's strategic goals and objectives for parks and the urban forest. Staff also continue to provide information on the implementation of related actions through the City's Triannual Reports.

Respectfully submitted,

Nav Sidhu
Assistant Director

Thomas Soulliere
Director

Report accepted and recommended by the City Manager.

List of Attachments

Attachment A: 2020 Annual Report - Parks and Open Spaces Master Plan and Urban Forest Master Plan