

Accessibility Working Group Consultation Report regarding

COTW May 14, 2020 decision re. road closures to allow physical distancing in Beacon Hill Park

Date: August 31 2020

On May 14, 2020, a COTW motion was approved (key phrase in asterisks):

2. Direct staff to pedestrianize Beacon Hill Park while opening parking lots at Heywood Rd, Circle Drive, and Nursery Rd. and the roads that serve as their closest access points *for the duration of summer*. Further that Council ****direct staff to seek input from** accessibility organizations including the AWG if that body is available, and *report back with that advice*, and *all other input received* ****** so council can consider whether to further extend the pedestrianized approach to the park.

The minutes also reflected discussion on:

- *Ensuring that an equity lens is used when implementing.*

Parks staff attended the AWG meeting of July 28, 2020 for discussion of the Park road closures. No motion with advice to Council was made, and therefore, this report was written after the fact and has received the assent of a majority of AWG members.

The July 28 AWG draft minutes read:

b) Beacon Hill Park road closures

- Staff to reach out to disability groups including VDRC [Victoria Disability Resource Centre] and Action Committee for people with Disabilities. Engineering have shared a contact list with Nav [Sidhu] for disability and seniors' groups. Feedback can be submitted through AWG who will forward it on to Parks. Robin is concerned that some input, submitted immediately upon hearing the topic was to be discussed at Council, and prior to Council giving staff direction to proceed, may be missed.
- Chris M stated that as a power wheelchair user, he is appreciative of the traffic limitations as sharing the road with cars and pedestrians is problematic for him.
- Nav reported there are six additional accessible parking spaces: 3 off Douglas (near the petting zoo) and 3 on Nursery Road (near the Cook St. playground) bringing the total to 11 accessible parking spaces within the park.
- There needs to be a way of making the lookout accessible to those who are not able to walk or roll up the 300 m 1-10 incline. Further discussion is warranted.
- AWG has been made aware that there is a need for designated parking for those who are not disabled but are unable to walk distances as they have small children and may be carrying picnic baskets for instance.
- Jeremy [Loveday, AWG Council Liaison] indicated that COVID measures that prove to be beneficial to accessibility will be reviewed and considered for permanent change after COVID.
- The Temporary Signage on Douglas for accessible parking is confusing and inconsistent.

Action: Staff will address this. They have appropriate signage which should have been used.

These minutes reflect these points of AWG advice:

1. Consult with seniors groups re. impact of the road closures as well as specific accessibility organizations suggested
2. Include feedback received before the COTW decision in May
3. Some people with disabilities (including power chair users) appreciate the extra space
4. Need designated parking for people who may not have disabled parking permits but cannot walk far
5. Make the lookout at Beacon Hill accessible for those who are not able to walk or roll up
6. Address deficiencies in Accessible Parking signage

But there were some oversights at the meeting which must be noted.

Accessible Parking

The AWG was told where the 6 new “accessible parking spots were”, and know of two others by the petting zoo, but were not able to find out where the other 3 are and if they are in areas of the park that continue to be reachable via roads that remain open. Information on the location of the new accessible parking stalls does not appear to have been publicized, and certainly not targeted to those who need to know.

Subsequent to the meeting, the signage was replaced, but it still does not meet acceptable standards. It is only about 30 inches off the ground, stapled onto wooden stakes, and thus removable by vandals or someone wanting the wood, and not highly visible. Further, it has the name and phone number of a towing company that cannot act without a Bylaw enforcement or police ticket.

The 6 new Accessible Parking stalls are merely regular stalls with Accessible parking signage added. They are not accessible in dimension and therefore do not meet the needs of people who must open the doors fully to transload or use a ramp. Lines would need to be repainted to create stalls of larger dimensions to be truly accessible.

One criterion for obtaining an accessible parking permit is that a person is not capable of walking over 100 metres. Therefore, it is essential that accessible parking be located near where people want to go. The 6 new stalls on the perimeter are thus, not ideal.

Therefore:

The AWG recommends to Council to direct staff to ensure that all 11 accessible parking stalls:

- **Are reachable on roads that remain open;**
- **Meet an accepted standard of signage and dimension;**
- **Are optimally located taking into account the mobility limitations of users; and**
- **Are considered for permanent changes even if the road closures are not to remain in place.**

Beacon Hill Loop

The majority of roads in Beacon Hill Park are flat and accessible. Beacon Hill Loop is the exception. Its grade and poor surface condition makes it likely that people with mobility impairments cannot walk or

roll up to enjoy the view. The viewpoint is a highlight of the Park, and one that Council has heard is frequented and enjoyed by people with mobility impairments. It must be understood that people with disabilities may use public facilities differently than others, and that passive recreation, such as driving to enjoy the scenery, is a legitimate use of the Park.

Traditionally, turnover in the lot at the end of Beacon Hill Loop is good. People with disabilities and seniors have traditionally gone up for the view, possibly with a meal they eat in their cars, and then return. These users do not have a negative impact on the sensitive ecosystem.

Beacon Hill has never been a crowded area of the Park. It has continued to be easy to practice physical distancing at the top during the pandemic. Further, there are many alternative walking routes to the top, as the following satellite image indicates.

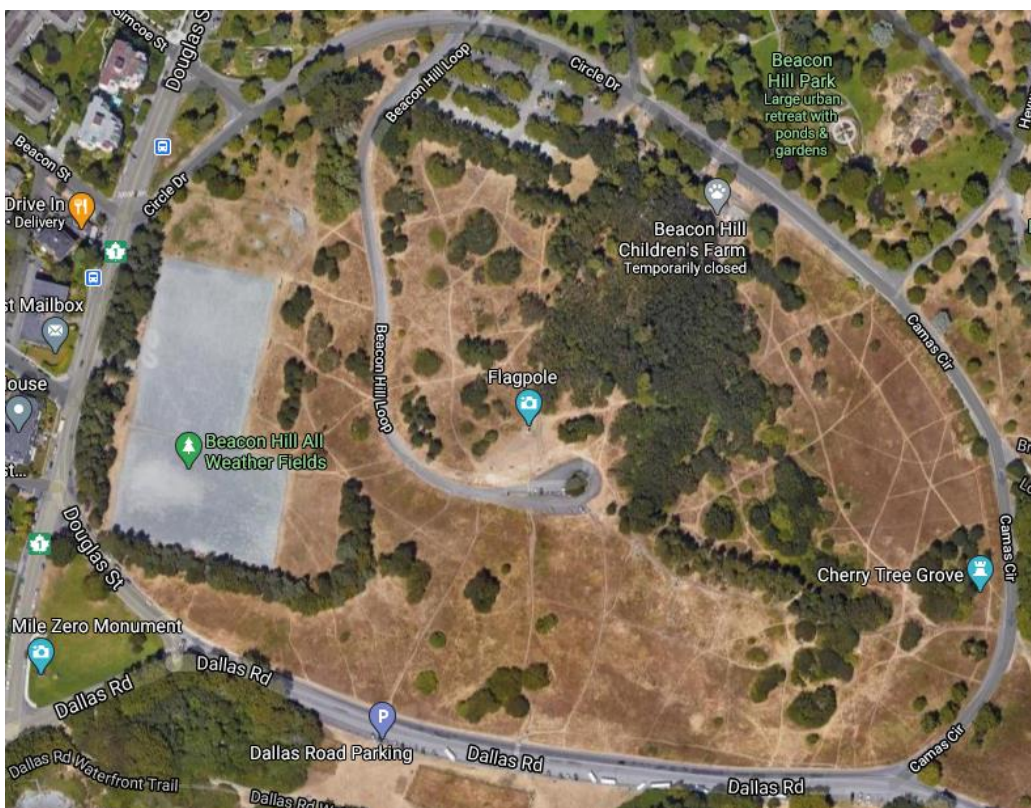


Image caption: This satellite image of Beacon Hill shows a curving road and parking lot at the top, and a criss-crossing system of trails from all directions to the top of Beacon Hill, providing about 10 different walking routes in addition to the road.

Unstructured but frequent observations by an AWG member indicate that the trails are much more popular than the road with walkers, who can access the viewpoint from all directions using trails. The vast majority of people who arrive on foot do so using paths or mostly using paths and only using the top part of the road if they come from the West. The picnic tables installed after the closures are very seldom used (observed in use only once). Visitors informally interviewed expressed their appreciation for the view and sadness that not everyone can appreciate it now. "It's a shame" was frequently expressed. The negative impact is not only felt by people who can no longer enjoy the view, but also by others who instinctively feel the unfairness.

One can therefore conclude that the problems that led to Council direction for closure of many interior roads did not exist for Beacon Hill Loop in particular, and therefore does not warrant restrictions on enjoyment of this amenity for people with disabilities, especially on a permanent basis.

No evidence has been provided that staff attempted to mitigate the negative impact on accessibility by considering alternatives to a full closure, such as time of day, day of week, or restricting access only to holders of accessible parking permits. This failure is inconsistent with the commitments of the Accessibility Framework and Council Accessibility Policy.

Therefore:

The AWG recommends to Council that Beacon Hill Loop be re-opened or partly re-opened to provide access to people with disabilities, and that this road closure not be made permanent.

Internal Road Closures

The AWG recognizes that the road closures are appreciated by some people with disabilities and hopes that wider consultation will provide more representative input that will guide Council's decision on whether to make them permanent.

Consultation and reporting on feedback

Many people who wrote to the City and Council members before the May 14 decision will believe that their feedback will be considered in the pending decision after the summer. Yet the AWG recalls staff reporting that they will only be reporting on public opinion and results of consultation for the period following the May 14 decision. These individuals may not know that they need to make their case again. This may result in under-reporting on negative impacts on people with disabilities.

The COTW motion indicated uncertainty about whether the AWG would be available. The AWG has clearly indicated a willingness to consult on issues where it has a chance of having influence, and has often done so on tight timeframes. It is willing to serve until one month after final approval by Council of the Accessibility Framework and ancillary documents, as for its interim mandate.

Council authorized the road closures for the Summer, commonly understood to end on September 22. Staff plan to report "in October". It is unclear what will happen to the road closures after the summer if a decision has not been made.

COTW wanted an Equity Lens brought to the decision. One of the first steps in such an exercise is to understand who gains and who loses from a change, or an extant situation. Parks, Engineering and the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion unit could work together to apply some Equity principles and processes in their advice to Council for the decision whether to extend the internal road closures.

Therefore:

The AWG recommends to Council to direct staff to conduct some form of expedited consultation with people with disabilities before implementing changes related to COVID-19, taking advantage of lived experience, with an aim to understanding how people with disabilities use City facilities and what barriers might be created by proposed changes.

The AWG recommends to Council that it consider the input or feedback received during the period between when the Council Member motion was posted and a COTW decision was made, in making its decision after the summer.