



## Committee of the Whole Report For the Meeting of September 9, 2021

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**To:** Committee of the Whole **Date:** July 20, 2021  
**From:** Thomas Soulliere, Director of Parks, Recreation and Facilities  
**Subject:** Natural Areas Restoration Program

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### RECOMMENDATION

That Council receive this report for information on the restoration of natural areas in Beacon Hill Park, Cecelia Ravine Park, Topaz Park and Stadacona Park.

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout 2020 and early 2021, parks were used for temporary shelter by a significantly higher number of people experiencing homelessness than at any point in recent years. This increase was due in large part to the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited indoor shelter options and the capacity of service agencies. Fortunately, the majority of these citizens have now been accommodated indoors, as a result of collaborative efforts involving the City, Province, Island Health, and many other local stakeholders.

The extended duration of outdoor sheltering had major implications for parks, which are not designed for such purposes. Staff identified approximately more than 140 locations across 10 parks with visible impacts in both manicured spaces and natural areas.

In order to restore the most heavily damaged areas, staff have developed a multi-year program. The restoration of manicured spaces is currently underway and will be complete by the end of the year. The focus of the restoration program, proposed to commence in 2022, will be the City's extensive natural areas, including rare and sensitive ecological areas.

The restoration program will repair and enhance these valued natural areas, as well as inform the standard of care and resources required to care for these valuable natural assets over the long-term. In addition, this work provides an opportunity to further the City's commitment to reconciliation, climate action, and community stakeholders through volunteer opportunities.

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide Council an overview of the restoration program including work done to date, and the plan for 2021 to 2024.

## BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a significant increase in the number of people sheltering in parks. Temporary shelters remaining in place 24 hours a day resulted in substantial impacts to parks, including soil compaction and contamination, stress or death of vegetation, invasive species introduction, and degradation of habitat needed to support important insect, bird and animal species. These impacts have occurred in both manicured and natural areas, and to date staff have identified 144 sites with visible impacts across 10 parks.

Park	Level of Impact	Project Focus	Number of sites impacted
Beacon Hill Park	High/ Medium	Natural Areas/ Manicured Area	90
Cecelia Ravine Park	High	Natural Areas	3
Topaz Park	High	Natural Areas	10
Irving Park	Medium	Manicured Area	6
Stadacona Park	Medium	Manicured Area / Natural Areas	16
Vic West Park	Medium	Manicured Area	10
Gonzales Park	Low	Manicured Area	2
Hollywood Park	Low	Manicured Area	2
Oaklands Park	Low	Manicured Area	4
Regatta Point Park	Low	Manicured Area	1

*Figure 1. Parks impacted by sheltering activity*

To repair the damage to these green spaces, a restoration process has been developed that consists of five phases;

- 1) Debris removal and clean-up
- 2) Impact assessment - collection of information and evaluation of data
- 3) Hazard removal - visual inspection and mechanical treatment to remove additional debris
- 4) Restoration – repair impacts including damage to soil, turf, plants and ecosystems
- 5) Monitoring - ensure that the impacted area is established and continues to thrive over time

Restoration treatments vary greatly depending on whether the site is located in a manicured space or natural area. Over the past year, the primary impact in manicured spaces has been to turf, which can be repaired through natural processes, or through soil replacement and seeding or laying of new sod.

The restoration of the City's natural areas, consisting of 225 acres or approximately 40% of the total area within parks, is complex and involves addressing soil compaction, removal of invasive species that have been introduced, and re-establishment of habitat, such as planting native species and replacing other features that attract insects, birds and animals back to the area.

### *Status of Manicured Areas Restoration*

Since May 1, 2021, staff have completed clean-up, assessment and hazard removal of all sites located in manicured spaces of parks most impacted by sheltering. The focus for the remainder of 2021 will be to complete restoration of these spaces using existing resources.

*Status of Natural Areas Restoration*

The City has completed impact assessments of the natural areas in Topaz Park and Cecelia Ravine Park using existing resources. However, additional resources will be required to complete restoration work in these two parks and develop a plan to restore the high number of natural areas impacted in Stadacona Park and Beacon Hill Park, where impact assessments and restoration planning have not yet begun.

Restoration of these sensitive areas will be a multi-year process that will require the development of a Natural Areas Management Plan and include consultation with Indigenous partners and engagement with the wider community. This investment is important to maintain and enhance the value of these park spaces which are critically important local resources that also contribute to the biodiversity of southern Vancouver Island. In fact, many of the areas have regional, provincial and cultural significance and provide habitat for federally listed species at risk.

**ISSUES & ANALYSIS**

*Program Deliverables and Schedule*

The City has developed a program plan outlining the resources required to undertake the planning, engagement and restoration activities to enhance natural areas in parks. The roadmap shown below outlines the proposed project phases. Pending Council approval of funding required for planning and implementation, the project is estimated to take four years to complete (2021-2024).



*Figure 2. Natural Areas Restoration Program Roadmap*

*Natural Areas Management Plans*

A key component of the restoration program will be to develop Natural Areas Management Plans for both Beacon Hill Park and Stadacona Park. These detailed plans will inventory sensitive ecosystems, species at risk, and culturally significant areas, identify environmental or cultural functions, outline guiding principles and management objectives as well as identify restoration, education and future operational actions. For example, the *Cecelia Ravine Park Natural Areas Plan* has a primary objective of increasing biodiversity. This plan identifies six focus areas in the park and outlines the required invasive species removal, planting and maintenance treatments.

More specifically, these plans will provide the City with long-term vision and actions to meet its goal of highlighting and improving its natural areas. This goal was identified by residents as the most important value in the Parks and Open Spaces Master Plan, and the development of a Natural Areas Management Plan was a key recommendation in the Beacon Hill Park Management Plan (2001).

The development of these plans will be completed in parallel to trail and transportation planning work for Beacon Hill Park, proposed to be initiated in 2022 as a separate capital project. These two projects are linked to long-term actions to protect and manage of environmentally and culturally sensitive areas.

Additional staff resources and consultant support will be required to complete restoration work. Furthermore, the City will use this as an opportunity to re-engage with the community, as residents have indicated a high level of interest in participating in the restoration of natural areas.

### *Engagement*

As long-time stewards of the natural landscapes within this region, the Lekwungen have a unique and valuable perspective that the City continues to learn about. Therefore, staff plan to engage with representatives of the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations at the outset of this program to seek input that will inform the scope and schedule of work, including culturally important spaces. In addition, public engagement will proceed with local stakeholders at a consult level on the IAP2 spectrum.

## **OPTIONS & IMPACTS**

Staff will include a proposal in the Draft 2022 Financial Plan for \$535,000 to initiate the natural areas planning and restoration activities in Beacon Hill Park, Cecelia Ravine Park, Topaz Park and Stadacona Park.

Given the scope of work involved, completion of the program deliverables highlighted above is not achievable within existing resources. The proposed budget will cover the costs of commencing the natural areas restoration work including developing management plans to guide investments in 2023 and beyond.

Currently, the City only has three full-time staff dedicated to natural areas work. Two additional temporary staff, one Senior Park Planner and one Natural Areas Field Technician, are included in the project scope to support planning, project management and field work. In addition, consulting services are needed to provide technical support not available internally to develop the Natural Areas Management Plans. The proposed budget for 2022 is outlined below.

<b>Program Component</b>	<b>Budget</b>
Temporary Staff (2)	\$215,000
Consulting Services	\$130,000
Materials and Equipment	\$120,000
Contingency	\$70,000
<b>2022 Program Total</b>	<b>\$535,000</b>

The restoration program will also have operating impacts that are unknown at this time, however these will be accounted for in future financial plans.

### *Accessibility Impact Statement*

Engagement on the development and implementation of Natural Areas Management Plans will consider the Governance and Services focus area of the Accessibility Framework and seek to remove barriers to and increase participation in local government programs, services, information and public decision making.

### *Impacts to Financial Plan*

As noted above, staff are preparing a proposal for an initial investment of \$535,000, which will be presented as part of Draft 2022 Financial Plan.

### *Official Community Plan Consistency Statement*

Restoration of natural areas helps achieve multiple objectives in the Official Community Plan related to enhancing and restoring ecological functions:

- *9.9: Plan and manage natural areas in parks to protect and restore natural ecosystems, including the development of habitat corridors to connect to other remnant ecosystems for the movement of native flora and fauna.*
- *9.11: Work collaboratively with other levels of government, organizations and citizens to protect and restore native ecosystems and species at risk within City parks and open spaces.*
- *10.2: Develop and maintain policies that strategically connect, protect and restore the ecological function of sensitive and remnant ecosystems on public and private lands.*
- *10.4: Work with senior levels of government, community organizations, educational institutions and the broader community to enhance the control of invasive species and management of urban wildlife.*
- *10.19: Promote community stewardship programs that protect, enhance and restore ecological health.*

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The restoration of natural areas impacted during the pandemic presents an opportunity for the City to strengthen practices for environmentally sensitive areas which are of considerable importance to the local community and region. In addition to achieving multiple strategic objectives, the restoration program will address an urgent issue, while also providing clarity about the standards of care and resources required to effectively manage these valuable assets for long-term community benefit.

Respectfully submitted,

Janelle Wyman  
Manager, Park Operations

Thomas Soulliere  
Director

**Report accepted and recommended by the City Manager**