



# Watershed Policy & Planning Committee

## River Park/ Sandy Beach/ Britannia Slopes

### Public Consultation – Online Survey – March 2011

#### **Water Use**

In general, recreational use of the Lower Elbow River is good for the city and for Calgarians, but within limits. People benefit from access to Calgary's rivers in many ways and have for decades. Unfortunately, there are occasions when public access exceeds a critical threshold and becomes problematic for the health and integrity of a water course; River Park presents a clear demonstration of this conflict. At Sandy Beach for example, sunny summer days often draw crowds of picnickers, walkers with and without dogs, cyclists, swimmers, waders and rafters, to the point of serious conflict with each other and adjacent communities. In addition, there are concerns for the safety of inviting large numbers of people to an area where the water quality is not always acceptable. So there is a dangerous situation where park users and residents may be faced with health hazards.

The cumulative ecological impacts of all of these human activities, as well as stormwater and sanitary effluent, must be evaluated and understood in order to set appropriate limits or restrictions on human access. Enforcement, user fees, and restricting people (and dogs) to strictly designated areas are potential options to consider.

#### **Environmental and Park Sustainability**

Currently the park is large and conditions vary widely, and the major points of concern are fairly well documented – particular concerns, however, include riverbank erosion, riparian degradation, loss of biodiversity, habitat disturbances, littering and other pollution, and bacterial contamination of the water and landscape. Large regional parks in an urban setting are critical for many reasons. They provide significant habitat patches for local and migratory wildlife, they help purify our water and air, and they offer opportunities for citizens to enjoy multiple benefits from a "natural environment" close to home.

The sources of all pollution should be investigated and confirmed, whether from point sources (e.g., outfalls) or non-point sources (overland flow). If bacterial contamination is the result of animal feces entering the river, it would suggest a certain remedial approach. If sanitary sewer lines are cross-contaminating storm sewers, a different approach would be required. Currently there is an opportunity to develop a constructed wetland feature at the north end of the park into a valuable amenity for multiple environmental and social benefits.

#### **Pathways and Trails**

All pathways and trails in the park should be sensitively designed (or redesigned) to avoid unnecessary disturbances of natural habitat areas, escarpments, riverbanks, wetlands, ravines and stream corridors. Any pathways in the flood plain should be constructed with permeable materials. Wherever possible, user conflicts should be minimized as well, by providing dedicated paths for incompatible uses and user groups. Finding an acceptable balance between natural conservation and human access will require patience and compromise among many interests.

#### **Parking, Traffic and Safety**

All parking lots, roads and pathways in the park should be constructed with permeable materials. To a large extent, the size and design of parking facilities will determine the duration (e.g., 2 hours vs. all-day)

and intensity of human activities. The existing level and patterns of park use are causing severe damage to the park's valued functions and features; parking capacity should not be further expanded. Linear features like roads and pathways also disturb natural processes and their impacts should be minimized wherever possible. Parking lots should not be designed to encourage use by commuters or other non-park users.

## **People and Dogs**

In cases like this, fundamental questions arise regarding appropriate urban activities. Are dogs inherently incompatible with rivers? Is there a place beside any river where unrestricted dog access would be acceptable? When Calgary's population was only 100,000, activities were common that now, with a population over 1 million, cannot be permitted. The problem here is one of scale: where a few dogs chasing sticks in the river may be considered safe harmless fun, hundreds of dogs and more on a single afternoon generate a cumulative impact that is impossible to ignore.

Areas within River Park are renowned for their biodiversity and natural functionality. Numerous observations in the area have confirmed that the presence of dogs significantly interferes with avian and aquatic species, and studies conducted elsewhere corroborate this finding. The presence of even a few dogs during critical wildlife stages or seasons can effectively sterilize the habitat for years.

Riverbanks should not be "hardened" for dedicated dog access, especially where the purpose is to encourage activities that are known to be deleterious to aquatic and riparian health. It appears that direct dog-access into the river is inappropriate and ecologically unsustainable in the city's off-leash areas, despite other "pilot" demonstration projects (e.g., Bowmont Park, Southland Park). A pilot project here could involve 1) on-leash only in valley areas, 2) no dogs allowed on escarpments, 3) seasonal restrictions in sensitive habitat areas, and 4) off-leash on upland areas only (i.e., Britannia and River Park).

River Park is located over a gravel alluvial aquifer. Continued off-leash dog use will likely cause contamination of the groundwater and river due to the many dog owners who frequent the park but do not "pick up" after their pets. Studies have shown a direct relationship between dog parks and reduced water quality in adjacent water bodies, including conditions that may be unsafe for human recreation.

## **Your Vision for the Park**

The first principle for park management and design should focus on the park's ecological capacity to maintain its own health and integrity over the long term. The final plan should therefore be based on a shared commitment to supporting the natural functions of the park's ecosystem. This is more important than any singular or collective human activity. The reason for this park's existence came from a vision of the public interest and has always been intended as a natural respite in a growing city.

The over-arching vision for this plan should reflect the principles of the Urban Park Management Plan. A place as diverse as River Park requires a variety of management techniques and open-space typologies (e.g. natural environment areas, multi-use areas, off-leash areas, etc). That said, it must remain a place where human use and management respect the integrity and functionality of the local ecology, including habitat for fish, migratory birds and ground-nesting wildlife.