
TO: Regional Parks and Trails Select Committee **MEETING:** November 5, 2019

FROM: Yann Gagnon
Manager of Parks Services

SUBJECT: Mount Benson Parking Lot Update Fall 2019

RECOMMENDATION

That the existing roadside parking lot on Benson View Road and the floating boardwalk at Witchcraft Lake be permanently decommissioned.

SUMMARY

The new parking lot of Mount Benson Regional Park opened on June 19th, 2019 and offers 87 paved parking stalls, a drop off zone for buses, a new trailhead and other improved facilities including a kiosk with maps, bear proof garbage cans and an accessible vault toilet. The new parking lot also includes an overflow gravel parking lot that can accommodate an additional 30-35 vehicles, bringing the total capacity of the parking lot to 120 vehicles.

The parking lot is gated and closed from 11pm to 5 am in summer and from 8 pm to 5 am during the fall and winter months.

Some local residents have requested that the old parking lot at Witchcraft Lake be fully decommissioned by removing the parking lot and floating boardwalk. This parking lot is situated on MoTI lands and the access trail along with boardwalk are located on City of Nanaimo parklands. In recent months, several reports of various misuses were received from local residents reporting overnight parking, alcohol use, excessive noise and camping at this location.

A review on the use of the existing parking lot has been completed and it has been determined the original parking area at Witchcraft Lake is no longer required and users of Mount Benson Regional Park and the City of Nanaimo Witchcraft Lake Park can be accommodated at the new parking lot.

The anticipated cost to fully decommission the Witchcraft Lake parking lot and floating boardwalk is estimated at \$60,000.

BACKGROUND

Current Situation: Two Parking Lots

The parking lot at Witchcraft Lake holds 24 cars and is managed by the RDN under permit with the MoTI since 2010. The RDN also manages the trailhead and floating boardwalk as regional trail under License of Use agreement with the City of Nanaimo who is the landowner at this site.

In 2015 and 2016, neighbours began contacting the RDN with complaints about the parking, trailhead, the floating boardwalk, including road congestion, noise and litter.

The RDN Board approved the purchase of a property at 2761 Benson View Road, at a cost of \$580,000. A new parking lot and trailhead for Mount Benson Regional Park was constructed in summer 2019 at a cost of \$612,000, for a total capital investment of \$1.1 million dollars.

Evening Reports at Witchcraft Lake

In recent months, several reports of various misuses were received in regards to the Witchcraft Lake parking lot. Nearby residents reported overnight parking, alcohol use, prostitution activity, unauthorized camping, littering, loitering, dumping and excessive noise. Residents also reported that they had contacted the RCMP on several occasions to report the illicit activities listed above.

Daytime Reports at Witchcraft Lake

It was reported by residents and confirmed by a security company hired by RDN Parks Services (Footprint Security) that the old parking lot at Witchcraft Lake is still being used during the daytime by cars, buses as well as being used as a drop off point for user groups.

Below is a table summarizing the daytime use at the Mount Benson Regional Park parking lots.

Date	Witchcraft Lake vehicle count	New Mount Benson parking lot vehicle count
Aug 3 2019	10	28
Aug 4 2019	7	26
Aug 5 2019	6	22
Aug 10 2019	17	17
Aug 11 2019	5	10
Aug 12 2019	17	17
Aug 17 2019	4	20
Aug 18 2019	9	21
Aug 24 2019	12	20
Aug 25 2019	10	20
Aug 31 2019	4	14

Source: Footprints Security- Sept 3rd 2019 vehicle count report

Given that the new parking lot is located on the way to the Witchcraft Lake Parking lot and ample signage has been put in place to advertise the new parking lot to park users, it can be assumed that park users are choosing to park their vehicle at the Witchcraft Lake parking lot rather than at the new Mount Benson parking lot.

Determining the Future of the Existing Witchcraft Lake Parking Lot

There are very few practical reasons to retain the old parking lot at Witchcraft Lake now that the new parking lot is built and operational. The new parking lot was developed with the intent of becoming the permanent new main entrance of Mount Benson Regional Park and as such, all the necessary infrastructure and amenities were built on this new site. The new parking lot was also designed to satisfy the capacity needs of today as well as future anticipated visitation growth.

A survey conducted by Footprint security in August 2019 indicates an average occupancy of 20 vehicles per day at the new parking lot, which represents 16% of its total capacity. In regards to the Witchcraft Lake parking lot, the daytime usage averages 10 vehicle per day, which is 41% of the total capacity of the lot.

Proposal

The recent acquisition and development of the new parking lot and trailhead of the Mount Benson Regional Park showcases a professional, safe and inclusive main entry to this popular and well-regarded regional park. The vehicle capacity of the new parking lot is sufficient to address both the current and the future anticipated parking needs of the area. The infrastructures and amenities installed at the new parking lot offer improved site conditions and an overall safer environment for park users.

Therefore, in order to reduce the reported misuse at the Witchcraft Lake Parking lot and direct park users to the new main entrance of Mount Benson Regional Park, it is recommended that the Witchcraft Lake Parking lot and floating boardwalk be decommissioned and removed. Permanently removing the existing parking area, boardwalk and other trailhead features involves removing the culvert and re-instating the roadside ditch, as well as restoring vegetation on site.

In order to avoid any future negative impacts on the site resulting from this change, the RDN will work collaboratively with the City of Nanaimo on a transition plan prior to removing the existing parking area, boardwalk and other trailhead features.

Witchcraft Lake Access

Witchcraft Lake has historically been a popular site for ice skating in the winter and is a popular site for passive recreational use and wildlife viewing throughout the seasons. At any time, Witchcraft Lake and the Witchcraft Lake Regional trail can be easily accessed through the new Mount Benson parking lot, a 650m meter trail walk on easy terrain. Park users will be encouraged to use the new parking lot for this purpose.

As Benson View Road is a public road, MoTI has expressed that they would not support installing no-parking signs where the road configuration allows. With this, there still may be times that the public may choose to park along the road side to access area homes or Witchcraft Lake. With the removal of the boardwalk, it is anticipated the users of Mount Benson Regional Park would see limited benefit of parking their vehicles along the roadside.

ALTERNATIVES

1. That the existing roadside parking lot on Benson View Road and the boardwalk at Witchcraft Lake be permanently decommissioned.
2. That the existing roadside parking lot on Benson View Road and floating boardwalk at Witchcraft Lake remain open and the RDN manage both recreational access points.
3. That alternative direction be provided regarding the future of the existing roadside parking lot at Benson View Road and floating boardwalk at Witchcraft Lake.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Decommissioning the Witchcraft Lake parking lot and boardwalk would be an expected one-time cost of approximately \$60,000. Operational maintenance costs of the site, which have been approximately \$1,000 annually, would no longer be incurred at this site.

STRATEGIC PLAN IMPLICATIONS

Social Wellbeing - Make the Region a safe and vibrant place for all, with a focus on children and families in programs and planning.



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October 18, 2019

Reviewed by:

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- P. Carlyle, Chief Administrative Officer