

Notice of Motion: Nanaimo River Park System Plan Development

Submitted: January 21st, 2021

Co-sponsored: Director Ben Geselbracht and Director Erin Hemmens

Motion:

"That a plan be created for the development of a Nanaimo River Park System, in collaboration with stakeholders and governments, to protect and enhance the ecological integrity and public access to recreation along the length of the watercourse from the Nanaimo Lakes to the Nanaimo Estuary."

Background:

The Nanaimo River watershed is 750 square kilometers and is the main source for the City of Nanaimo's drinking water. Nonetheless, within the entire watershed, there are less than 2 square kilometers of park and less than 11 square kilometers of conservation areas. That's 0.3% and 1.5% respectively of the Nanaimo River watershed. Most of the land is privately owned because it was part of the 1874 E&N land grant. Much of this land is currently managed for forestry by Mosaic Forest Management.

The Nanaimo River has high ecological value. The system supports two provincial fish species at risk, Dolly Varden and Coastal Cutthroat Trout, and all five species of Pacific Salmon, including the Nanaimo River spring run Chinook Salmon population, which was recently designated as Endangered by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada. The Nanaimo River's Chinook Salmon stocks are essential to the diet of the endangered southern resident killer whale. The Nanaimo River also has high socioeconomic value. It supplies the City's drinking water, the water for one of the region's largest employers (Harmac Pacific), supports the culture and subsistence of the Snuneymuxw First Nation, and draws thousands of locals and tourists to important recreational sites along its length. Despite how critical it is to protect the river's ecological and socioeconomic values, there is a severe under-representation of park land for recreation and conservation along the river. The lack of park and protected area is especially striking when compared to other river systems on Vancouver Island with similar public usage and proximity to an urban center.

Description:

The intent of the proposed motion is to achieve two key priorities:

- 1) Protect and enhance the Nanaimo River System ecological and hydrological integrity.
- 2) Protect and enhance the recreational public access to the Nanaimo River.

A project to conduct a land analysis study along the Nanaimo River is in the 2022 preliminary regional parks workplan. This study will collect and analyze valuable information on any land parcels of 5 acre or more bordering the Nanaimo Rivers, from the Nanaimo Estuary to the Nanaimo Lakes.

The proposed motion to create a Nanaimo River Park System is aimed at providing clear directives on the criteria that will guide the land analysis study planned for 2022.

Deliverables from the land analysis study would include lists and maps of:

- All 5 acre or more land parcels bordering the Nanaimo River that are under imminent or impending ecological threat. The lands under threat would be categorized by the type of threat facing them with a forecasted timeline and possible options to ensure their long-term protection.

- Land parcels with high potential for regional park purposes and their prioritization within the list. This would include the estimated cost to the RDN to purchase and manage the lands as regional parks with estimated cost of proposed development and enhancement such as restoration, water access, park infrastructure, etc.
- Lands that could be acquired in partnerships with other organizations and governments for conservation purposes e.g. BC Parks, land conservation trusts, etc.

Once completed, the study would be presented to the Regional Parks and Trails Select Committee for their consideration and will be used to inform the next steps in the creation of a Nanaimo River Park System.

Next steps may include strategic land acquisitions, partnerships with other levels of government, collaboration with third party organizations towards the creation of a Nanaimo River Park System with the goal to protect this important natural asset and increase and guarantee access to residents and visitors of our region for many years to come.

Rather than waiting for urgent public appeals to intervene reactively when important recreational and ecological sites become inaccessible and degraded respectively; we must be pro-active and develop a Nanaimo River Park System plan to protect regional district land of high recreational and ecological value. Such an approach will permit the RDN the timeline needed to be strategic in prioritizing efforts. It will also improve our ability to leverage more significant levels of external funding supports and partnerships. Finally, this approach may also serve as a potential template by which to proceed with increasing the protection of other significant watercourses within regional district.