



CORPORATE REPORT

To: Electoral Area Services Committee
From: Gord Gadsden, Park Technician II

Date: 2020-05-12
File No: 6120-01-General

Subject: COVID-19 Impacts on Regional and Community Parks and Trails

INTENT

This report is intended to advise the Regional and Corporate Services Committee of information pertaining to the impact COVID-19 has had on the FVRD parks system. Staff is not looking for a recommendation and has forwarded this information should members want more clarification or to discuss the item further.

STRATEGIC AREA(S) OF FOCUS

Support Healthy & Sustainable Community
Provide Responsive & Effective Public Services
Support Environmental Stewardship

PRIORITIES

Priority #5 Outdoor Recreation
Priority #4 Tourism

BACKGROUND

Over the past two months the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the lives of all residents within the regional district. Related to outdoor recreation, the Province has recommended that people avoid travelling outside of their communities for recreation purposes, and implemented social distancing and group size limitations. To reduce the spread of the virus and ensure compliance with the Provincial Health Officer's Orders some of the Fraser Valley Regional District's (FVRD) parks and amenities have been closed.

To understand FVRD park usages, the Parks Department has a network of counters in our regional and community parks and trails. Traffic counters detect a passing vehicle, and trail counters detect body heat as a user passes by on the trail. These counters provide a detailed picture of park visitation trends, which assist parks planning for future needs and demands. For the purposes of analyzing the data to calculate the number of persons entering the park, traffic counts are multiplied by three which is considered to be the average number of vehicle occupants. Trail counter data accounts for individual persons as they walk by on a trail.

DISCUSSION

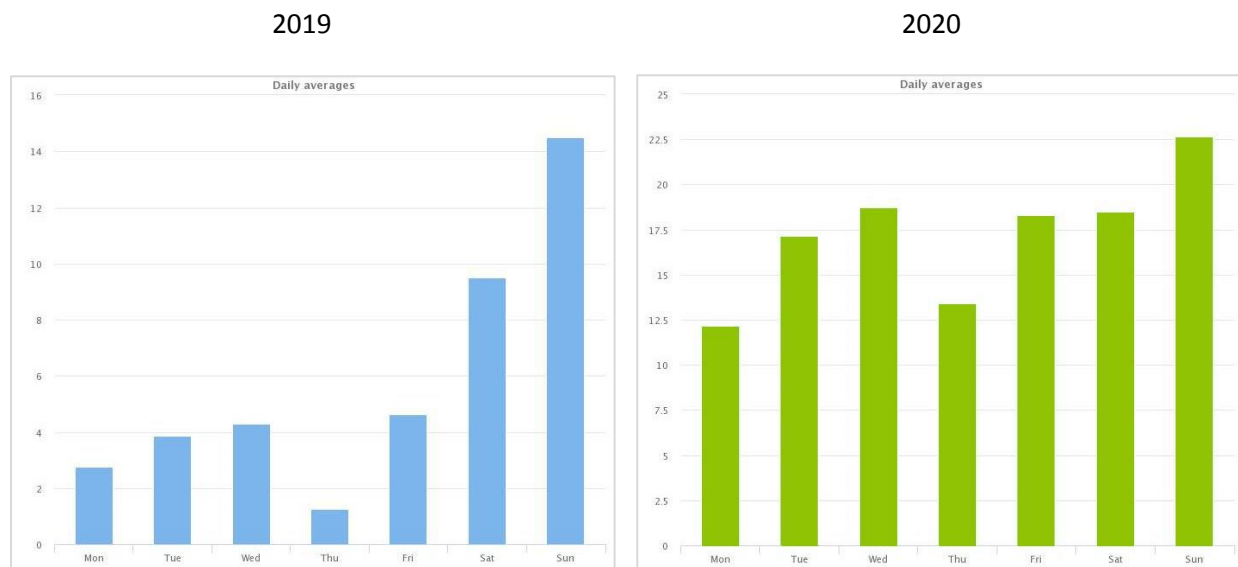
With the recent onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Parks Department service model had to change. Parks staff implemented a multitude of measures to reduce the risk of exposure to this virus for both the park user and staff. This meant the closure of all playgrounds and washroom facilities. The dog off-leash park and bike park were also closed at Island 22 Regional Park. As well, Cascade Falls Regional Park, Thompson Regional Park, Elk Mountain Regional Trail, and East Sector Lands were all closed. These closures still require frequent inspections by the Parks Department to ensure compliance.

In addition to these closures, parks were signed with guidelines and reinforced through social media around:

- Maintaining physical distancing by keeping at least 2 metres between yourself and others
- Restricting groups to only those who live in your household
- Wash hands frequently during the day and upon returning home
- Avoid gathering in groups at trailheads, viewpoints, or other places along the trail
- If you feel unwell, please protect others by staying home
- Do not use parks and trails outside of your community
- Play it safe. Now is not the time to push your limits and burden hospitals or Search & Rescue
- Respect and expect closures

Due to the virus's impacts to people's day-to-day lives and activities, it was expected that our park system would see an increase in use and a change in daily usage patterns. Typical park use sees the weekends receiving a higher percent of visitors over the weekdays. British Columbia began to respond to the outbreak in March, and shortly after, park staff began to observe a shift in park use. This observation has been confirmed by the data collected. When comparing March and April 2020 data to the same months last year, it shows that usage has significantly increased and that higher visitation rates are seen during the week days than previously. Chart 1 shows the trends of one of our trails comparing 2019 to 2020. This is representative of most FVRD parks.

Chart 1 – Popkum Community Trail



March and April of this year recorded 356,509 FVRD park users. **This represents an increase of just under 50% (+117,738 users)** over the same months last year. What makes this even more significant is that last year all our amenities and parks were open. Some community trail usage even quadrupled in comparison to last year. Charts 2 and 3 illustrates parks and trails that show this trend. This increase indicates that residents are taking full advantage of local outdoor opportunities and following the direction of the Provincial Health Officer to recreate locally.

Chart 2 – Electoral Area C

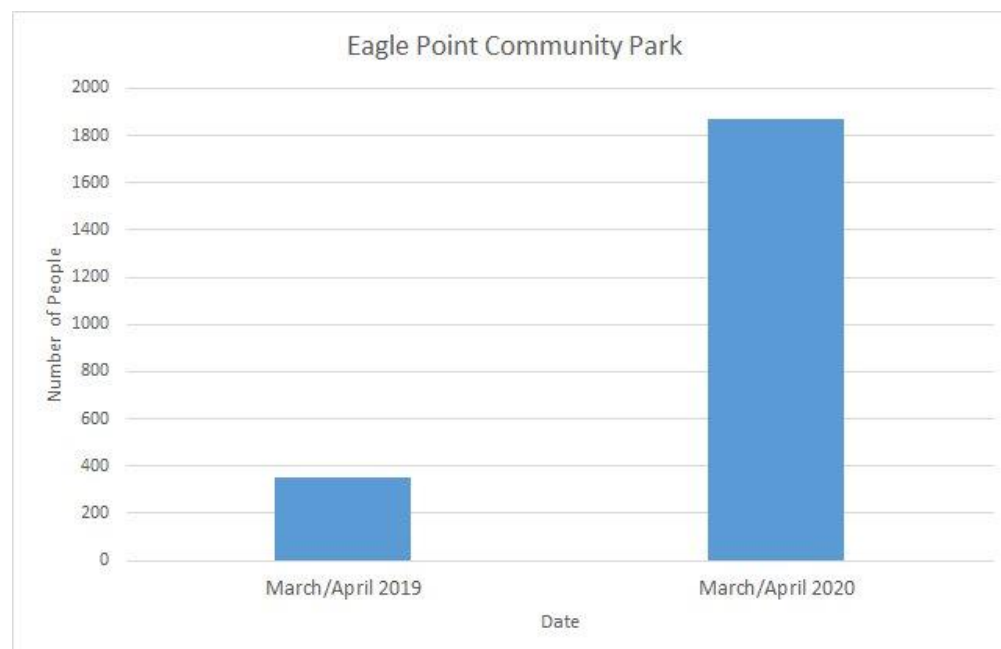
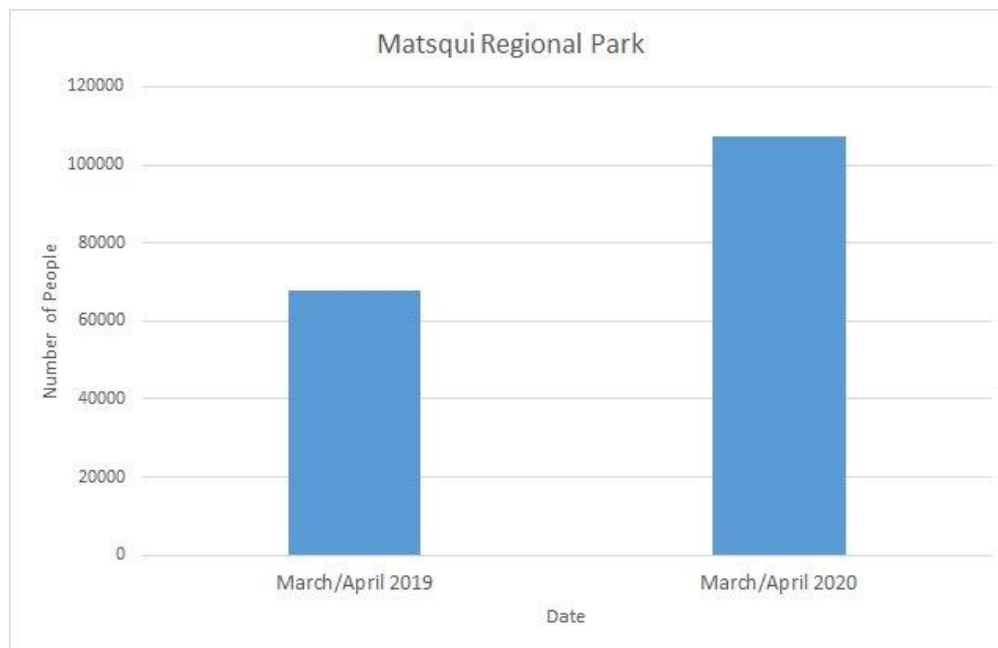


Chart 3 – City of Abbotsford



It is worth noting that weather patterns play a significant role in park use. There was a similar amount of rain for the two periods being compared. This strongly suggests that the weather is not a variable that might have influenced the park use figures.

Such a rapid increase in park use has added a significant demand on existing park staff from both a maintenance and public engagement perspective. Additional staff to deal with increased park needs and to act as park ambassadors to engage users about COVID-19 guidelines would be highly beneficial. The FVRD Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) is currently active for the COVID-19 pandemic. The EOC can apply to the Provincial Regional Emergency Operations Centre (PREOC) by way of an expenditure authorization form for funding to assist with this pandemic. This funding could bolster park staff levels during the peak summer months to better implement preventative measures to reduce the risk of exposure to this virus for both park users and field staff.

The FVRD will be requesting funding for two additional Park Assistants until the end September. These temporary positions would be subject to a successful application for provincial funding. The positions would not be pursued otherwise as they are not within the existing 2020 budget.

COST

The approved 2020 budget has established current staffing levels for this year. The request to PREOC to cover the costs of two temporary Park Assistants until the end of September would be approximately \$35,000. This amount of money would cover staff wages, personal protective equipment, and if needed two short term truck rentals.

CONCLUSION

The service model for FVRD regional parks and trails changed significantly in March to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and it is expected to remain the same for the foreseeable future. Despite park closures, park usage is up nearly 50% for the months of March and April compared to last year and people are using the parks more during weekdays. A funding request will be made to the Provincial Regional EOC to help offset the increasing demands COVID-19 has created on the FVRD parks system.

COMMENTS BY:

Stacey Barker, Director of Regional Services: Reviewed and supported.

Kristy Hodson, Acting Director of Financial Services: Reviewed and supported.

Jennifer Kinneman, Chief Administrative Officer: Reviewed and supported.