



CORPORATE REPORT

To: Regional and Corporate Services Committee

Date: 2020-10-15

From: Meghan Jackson, Park Technician II

File No: 4300-40-Thompson RP

Subject: Outdoor Learning Program in Thompson Regional Park

INTENT

This report is intended to advise the Regional and Corporate Services Committee of information pertaining to a planned outdoor learning program at Thompson Regional Park. 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 Environmental Stewardship
Foster a Strong & Diverse Economy
Support Healthy & Sustainable Community

PRIORITIES

Priority #5 Outdoor Recreation

BACKGROUND

Fraser Valley Regional District (FVRD) regional parks have a history of hosting short-term outdoor learning programs put on by external organizations. In the past, programs have been held at Thompson, Thacker, and Cheam Lake Wetlands Regional Park on a one-time or seasonal basis. In September of this year, two local certified teachers approached the Parks Department to discuss the feasibility of using Thompson Regional Park as part of an outdoor learning program for the 2020-2021 school year. Thompson Regional Park is well suited to facilitate outdoor learning, with features that include a covered picnic shelter, washroom facility, grass field, loop trail, and salmon enhancement channel.

DISCUSSION

The planned Chilliwack River Valley Outdoor Learning Program will be based out of the Chilliwack Fish and Game Protective Association, using the adjacent Thompson Regional Park as an outdoor classroom. The program will be for children aged kindergarten to grade five, who are currently enrolled in home school, distance learning, or learn-from-home instruction. Students would be divided into two separate cohorts of kindergarten to grade two, and grades three to five. Classes would take place from October 13, 2020, to June 30, 2021, on Tuesdays and Thursdays only from 9:30 am to 2:30 pm.

The Chilliwack River Valley Outdoor Learning Program would offer students a nature-based education with a focus on ecosystem preservation and conservation based on the BC Curriculum. The program is not associated with the FVRD nor is it associated with a specific school or district, although facilitators will be working closely with other nature-based schools, such as Leap for Joy, Roots to Grow, Wild and Immersive, and Fresh Air Learning. Instruction will be funded by the families of the children attending; however, organizers are applying for grants and additional funding opportunities to help support the program.

Organizers of the Chilliwack River Valley Outdoor Learning Program are finalizing the FVRD's Park Permit process, which requires applicants to have adequate insurance coverage and an approved COVID-19 safety plan. Regarding COVID-19 mitigation, several measures will be taken including minimizing time spent indoors, and mask-wearing by staff when physical distancing is not possible and/or when indoors. This plan aligns with the requirements of the FVRD's COVID-19 Parks Safety Plan.

From a park usage perspective, there is much lower use during the weekdays of the school year. This program is not expected to have an impact on other user groups of the park and would be a good use of the space.

COST

There is no charge for use of the park as permit fees are not to be charged for education activities as per the FVRD Parks bylaw. There will be no additional costs to the FVRD if this program proceeds.

CONCLUSION

Outdoor learning aligns well with the values and goals of our regional parks system, providing children opportunities to experience and explore nature. Thompson Regional Park is typically not very busy on weekdays during this time, so this program is not expected to impact regular park use.

COMMENTS BY:

Christina Vugteveen, Manager of Parks and Recreation: Reviewed and supported.

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

Kelly Lownsborough, Chief Financial Officer/ Director of Financial Services:

Reviewed and supported.

Jennifer Kinneman, Chief Administrative Officer: Reviewed and supported.