Metro Vancouver may freeze new park purchases

By Jeff Nagel - Surrey North Delta Leader
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Concept plan map for the Experience The Fraser trail network, which would include 160 kilometres of trails on both sides of the Fraser River and has $2.5 million in initial seed money from the provincial government.

File

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The planned Experience The Fraser trail network and other pledged upgrades to regional parks may be in jeopardy because Metro Vancouver is too cash-strapped to pursue them all.

The regional district board has been advised by staff to declare an 18-month moratorium on the acquisition of new parkland while they reconsider how to finance the regional parks

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system and keep up with the demands of a growing population.

Surrey Coun. Barbara Steele said there's tremendous pressure to develop the Experience The Fraser trails along the length of the Fraser River in the Lower Mainland.

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"There are huge expectations from Hope to Squamish and beyond and now there's no money to do it," she said after Metro's environment and parks committee was briefed on how park demands have outstripped funding.

"We can't do the Experience The Fraser with Metro Vancouver leading the way if Metro Vancouver doesn't have any money."

Heritage buildings are also at risk, Steele said, noting Metro was supposed to work with the City of Surrey on a plan to refurbish the historic Gerow barn in Tynehead Regional Park.

"It's not going to happen at all because there's no money," Steele predicted. "If you put this stuff on hold, it's going to disintegrate before our very eyes."

The challenge is Metro allocates just $3.7 million a year to buy new parkland, an amount that has remained almost unchanged for 20 years while the price of real estate has soared dramatically.

Metro officials have a list of 210 target properties worth an estimated $600 million they'd like to buy that would add 3,000 hectares of new parks or major expansions to existing parks.

They have a second list of 341 other parcels considered key missing pieces to existing parks that span 2,500 hectares and are worth an estimated $500 million.

Spread out over 30 years, that $1.1 billion in proposed acquisitions would require an annual acquisition fund of $37 million a year – 10 times the current amount.

But officials fear a jump in interest rates coupled with older owners opting to sell may soon result in a surge of target properties going on the market, increasing the temptation to buy parkland lest it be snapped up for development.

Gaetan Royer, Metro's manager in charge of planning, environment and parks, said parks acquisition is severely underfunded, forcing the region to either downsize its plan or find more money.

"At this rate of spending it's going to take 300 years to get to where the plan says we're going to be in 30 years," he said.

Royer recommended staff continue work to buy some missing pieces for existing parks from the second list, but shelve all other acquisitions until a major review is finished that priorizes target properties.

Metro's environment and parks committee hasn't yet approved the proposed moratorium – directors said they need more time to consider the implications.

Several said they see no way property taxes could be raised to funnel more cash to park acquisition, given the current pressure on taxpayers.

But Metro may look at selling less essential pieces of existing parkland in order to pay for the acquisition of pieces considered more environmentally sensitive or critical for recreation.

It's also been suggested that Metro doesn't need to own every park it operates if it can work with cities or other partners.

Ushering more business ventures onto regional parks is considered another option, although that strategy has so far failed to generate much new income.

Metro is also under pressure to develop park trails and infrastructure at sites where land is in place – such as Surrey Bend, Colony Farm and Sumas Mountain – but there may be pressure to postpone much of that work as well.

"We build expectations faster than we build trails and facilities," Royer said.

He noted there are large areas of land Metro owns that aren't publicly accessible because there's insufficient capital funding for to carry out the development plan.

Existing park infrastructure is also aging and in need of repairs, while aging rental houses on some of Metro park properties are increasingly being torn down.

To maintain Metro's existing parks and upgrade them according to current development plans would cost $9 million a year for 30 years, while the region currently spend $6.3 million.

Metro runs 22 regional parks, four regional greenways and four park reserves.

The Pacific Parklands Foundation, a charity that contributes to Metro parks, is thought capable of adding at most $250,000 a year for acquisitions.