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Committee Parks, Forests and Utilities Committee
Author Murray Waititi, Manager, Parks

Greater Wellington Regional Council's role in providing regional parks

1. Purpose

To propose that the Council re-examine the purpose for which it holds its parks and to agree a process to undertake that re-examination.

2. Consideration by Committee

The matters raised in this report were considered by the Parks, Forests and Utilities Committee at its meeting on 23 October 2008. The recommendations contained in this report have been endorsed by the Committee for the Council's consideration and decision.

3. Significance of the decision

The matters for decision in this report do not trigger the significance policy of the Council or otherwise trigger section 76(3)(b) of the *Local Government Act 2002*.

4. Overview

In a year from now Greater Wellington Regional Council (GWRC) will be due to review the *Regional Parks Network Management Plan* and *Forest Lands Management Plan*.

However, the purpose for providing parks has not been re-examined since the Wellington Regional Planning Authority developed a framework for regional parks in 1976. Since that time, recreational and leisure requirements for the Wellington Region's citizens have changed. There is now much greater choice available and pressure on people's leisure time

Coupled with this, GWRC has come under increasing pressure to provide alternative uses for its park network, especially easily accessible flat public land. GWRC has been approached to extend the use of its lands to include a heritage precinct, a railway reinstatement, motorised recreation facilities, golf driving ranges and at least one rowing lake (to name just a few) or to add new parks or adjoining land to the network of parks it manages. Added to that,

GWRC has also encountered resistance from the public regarding the possibility of wind energy developments in the parks.

These situations highlight the need for GWRC to re-examine the purpose of holding its parks, given the competing and potentially conflicting uses that can be made of them, and to clearly articulate that purpose to the regional community.

5. Background

Parks' contribution to society is varied. These days parks do not just provide opportunities to recreate, while protecting the environment, landscape and cultural assets. They are also recognised as places of significant economic value that enhance a community's well-being, mitigate the effects of climate change and provide health and rehabilitation, social engagement and crime reduction opportunities.

Local government is taking a much more integrated approach toward the development and growth of the Region, especially in terms of economic growth. In the Wellington Regional Strategy quality open space is recognised as a fundamental requirement of world class cities and regions. The Wellington Region has great potential to achieve high quality, well connected natural areas close to our living areas and thus helps the Region to be seen as an attractive and sustainable place to live. On the other side of the coin, parks can help address many "lifestyle" associated wellness problems associated with increased urbanisation, such as a low levels of physical activity, less connected communities and the effects of stress and mental illness.

GWRC is one of the leading providers of space for outdoor recreation in the Region. Currently we offer outdoor recreation experiences that are mainly less remote than the Department of Conservation "wilderness" opportunities, yet more informal than the highly developed city parks. The regional parks also preserve regionally and nationally important ecological functions and history.

In 1976 several formal policies concerning Wellington's regional parks were made. The focus was on providing for recreational pursuits not readily available within urban areas and parks in ways that did not detract from the natural or cultural features of the Region:

- (1) Protecting, conserving and enhancing open space, and natural and cultural features between or near to urban areas.
- (2) Providing the urban population with the opportunity to experience and study, without the need for excessive travel, a range of natural and cultural features occurring in the Region.
- (3) Being located so that they distribute and reduce recreation growth pressures on other natural areas.
- (4) Providing primarily for passive recreation pursuits requiring for their enjoyment large areas of open natural country.
- (5) Having some parks where there should be the provision for more intensive activities which, because of their nature, require a degree of remoteness from urban development.

- (6) Requiring that all recreational uses be balanced against conservation needs and the ability of natural areas to absorb the activity without detriment.

To that end, the *experience* provided by GWRC and derived by the park user is critical to the benefit that regional parks contribute towards.

It is that experience that we need to re-examine if regional parks are to remain relevant to the needs of the regional community.

6. How do we undertake the re-examination?

At the core of this review is the requirement to re-examine the fundamental purpose of having the regional parks. Officers propose that GWRC completes a data gathering process that collects and reviews all current thinking about the purpose of regional parks, with the *outcome* being the development of a Greater Wellington Regional Parks Network Strategy that clearly articulates their vision and purpose.

In order to fully develop strategic objectives for the regional parks network, GWRC needs to be familiar with community recreational and leisure outcomes, preservation of environmental and heritage assets, as well as identifying possible alternative uses for parks that could be considered appropriate by the regional community.

In order to do that, GWRC needs to understand:

- (1) How parks contribute toward the wellness of communities they serve.
- (2) The local and international appeal of parks and open space, and how that should be translated into regional form - what will appeal to local and international visitors, and migrants who may want to settle here.
- (3) Population demographics and how they will affect recreation and leisure preferences in the future - assessing service provision, pressure points, opportunities and threats.
- (4) Legislative requirements that may set parameters around what services can be provided by parks in terms of recreation, leisure, health and well-being.
- (5) What the general public considers is an appropriate use for their regional parks and what they would resist being developed.

This review will include parks, recreational areas and future water catchments. It will not include existing water catchments, though some of the outcomes may apply to them.

7. Developing a regional parks network strategy

7.1 Background

In order to develop a comprehensive strategy, it is important that the process involves canvassing a wide and varied part of society, as well as having up-to-

date technical and statistical information made available.

For that to be the case, the officers propose the following process be followed:

- (1) Phase 1 - Develop a draft strategy for general public distribution and comment.
- (2) Phase 2 - Gain the public view on the strategy.
- (3) Phase 3 - Confirm the draft strategy, and create an Agenda for Action.
- (4) Phase 4 - Review and update the associated network and park management plans, and other documents.

7.2 Phase 1 - Developing a draft

Phase 1 is effectively a data gathering and familiarisation exercise that enables GWRC to develop a draft strategy for public comment that is appropriate, given the parameters surrounding the complex land ownership and legislation that applies to the existing parks. In order to develop a meaningful draft, officers propose that a comprehensive picture of the Region's future requirement for open space be compiled that addresses issues that relate to the provision of GWRC's parks. This will include:

- (1) Assessing the requirement for Open Space as the Region grows over the next 20 years. This can be done by analysing existing open space and park strategies developed by Wellington Region territorial authorities. This is currently being facilitated by the Wellington Regional Strategy Open Space Study.
- (2) Assessing demographic information and transport nodes influencing the future makeup of society and the associated recreational needs and preferences of those communities.
- (3) Assessing existing strategies developed by recreation and leisure providers, and health providers about what outcomes they are building towards, what their goals are, and what they are doing to achieve them. Much of this information is available in *At the Heart* – the regional physical activity strategy. We expect to have further discussions with organisations like Regional Public Health, SPARC, New Zealand Recreation Association and the local territorial authorities.
- (4) Identifying relevant growth drivers that the Region believes are important for the economic well-being of the Region. This can be done by incorporating the fundamental economic growth principles of the Wellington Regional Strategy.
- (5) Incorporating current knowledge about climate change to assess the contribution that the parks could make toward climate change mitigation. This information is currently being compiled by GWRC.
- (6) Identifying important ecological and historic assets that are a priority for preserving. This can be done by incorporating the principles adopted by the Council through its Biodiversity Implementation Plan and the Regional Policy Statement. A heritage study is also almost

complete that will recommend a course of action for preserving heritage assets on GWRC land.

While this data is being collected, a comprehensive survey will be developed that can be undertaken on a statistically valid section of the regional community on options surrounding the *experiences* they could have in regional parks and their perceptions about the parks. The survey will be designed to question respondents about the nature of outdoor experience they would like to have when in the regional parks, and what other activities or developments could be undertaken in the parks that they would consider to be appropriate, tolerable, or prohibitive.

Officers anticipate that all this information will be compiled and presented to Councillors and Ara Tahi via a series of workshops by 30 April 2009.

We anticipate that the strategy will be prepared and approved for release for consultation by 30 June 2009.

7.3 Phase 2 - General public consultation

The public consultation process will include:

- (1) Advertising in the Region's newspapers,
- (2) Mailing it to key stakeholders that have been involved in the review to date (local territorial authorities and other agencies),
- (3) Notifying all the people on our current contacts database and others of the strategy and asking for their comment.
- (4) A series of workshops held across the Region.

Once consultation is complete, Hearings will be held for those that wish to be heard.

7.4 Phase 3 - Council consideration and approval

Upon completion of the Hearings, Councillors will be asked to consider the public's views and advise officers of changes that need to be made to the draft. The strategy should then be completed and approved by Council by December 2009.

Once the strategy is complete, officers propose that GWRC develop an associated Agenda for Action that incorporates actions that GWRC will undertake to implement key facets of the strategy.

7.5 Timetable for strategy development

Data collection and familiarisation	November 2008 – March 2009
Councillor workshops	April 2009
Draft strategy prepared for Council approval	May 2009
Strategy released for public consultation	June 2009
Public consultation	July to September 2009
Approve strategy	December 2009

7.6 Phase 4 - Realigning existing park management documents

Once the strategy and agenda for action is complete, it would be time to review the *Regional Parks Network Management Plan*, *Forest Lands Management Plan* and individual management plans to incorporate the strategic outcomes developed during the strategy and effectively implement “on the ground” the purpose of the parks. Councillors may also decide that the individual parks and the network plans can be incorporated into one document.

There are currently two management plans that are still under review - Battle Hill Farm Forest Park and Belmont Regional Park.

The *Battle Hill Farm Forest Park Management Plan* is due to go out for final consultation in November 2008 and should be completed by the time the strategy is completed. Given the decisions already made by this Council, it is unlikely that the strategy development will affect the development of that plan.

The draft *Belmont Regional Park Management Plan* has been deferred on numerous occasions since the review started in 2004. This has mainly been because of ownership and designation issues regarding land within the park. The draft plan will require some work to have it ready for public consultation and it is unlikely that this plan will be completed by the time we complete the Parks’ network strategy. With that being the case, it would be advisable that Council continue to defer the plan development until after the network strategy is complete.

8. Communications

Various stakeholders will be advised of the process and an article can be included in *Our Region*. The LTCCP will also include comment on this process.

9. Recommendations

That Council:

1. ***Approves the development of a Regional Parks Network Strategy.***
2. ***Agrees to the process as outlined above.***

Report prepared by:

Report approved by:

Murray Waititi
Manager, Parks

Murray Kennedy
Divisional Manager, Water Supply,
Parks and Forests