

STAFF REPORT

PARKS, OPEN SPACE AND TRAILS ELEMENT

To: Members of the Parks and Open Space Commission

Date of Report: November 13, 2009

Staff Contact: Fred Evander, Community Planner (221-4246 ext. 25)

Meeting Date: November 23, 2009

Subject: PUBLIC HEARING – Parks, Open Space and Trails Element

Attachments: New Comprehensive Plan Parks, Open Space and Trails Element
SEPA Determination of Nonsignificance, November 6, 2009

This staff report presents a new draft Parks, Open Space and Trails Element for the Langley Comprehensive Plan. The purpose of this element is:

1. To replace the existing Parks and Open Space Element to create an implementable framework to achieve a great parks and open space system;
2. To meet the Countywide Planning Policies for Parks, Recreation, Open Space and Natural Lands;
3. To create an element for the Langley Comprehensive Plan that is consistent with the Growth Management Act of the State of Washington (RCW 36.70A.070(8)); and
4. To meet Langley residents' expectations for the parks and open space.

The Parks and Open Space Commission will conduct a public hearing on this proposed amendment, and following due deliberation, forward a recommendation to the City Council.

TIMELINE

The Parks, Open Space and Trails Element is the result of a seventeen-month planning process conducted by the Parks and Open Space Commission of the City of Langley. This Commission is made up of five volunteers, two of which have professional experience related to Parks and Open Space.

The Commission has held twenty meetings over this seventeen month period, each of which has been open to the public. Five of these meetings featured tours of existing parks and open space system, and one of these meetings was a public workshop designed to present the Commission's concept for the parks and open space system. Beyond these meetings, the Commission has also conducted a number of subcommittee meetings and has presented to the Langley City Council four times. The general timeline of the creation of this element is presented below:

August 2008 to January 2009 – The Parks and Open Space Commission held its first nine meetings and worked to establish a basic understanding of existing parks and open space in Langley. Over these meetings, the Commission conducted five tours of Langley that featured visits to: Seawall Park, lands between the Langley Woodmen-Cemetery and the Langley Middle School, Generation Park, the

Saratoga Creek ravine, the Noble Creek corridor, Cedars Subdivision – Tract 100, the Fossek Farm, and the Cascade Avenue Walkway.

December 15, 2008 – The Commission presented the general scope of their planning effort and their preliminary findings to the Langley City Council.

February 2009 to April 2009 – The Parks and Open Space Commission held three regular committee meetings and a number of subcommittee meetings over this period. The Public Participation Subcommittee worked to determine how to involve the public in the planning process and the Technical Subcommittee analyzed data from the tours and worked to create a framework for the parks and open space system. The full Commission established definitions for different types of parks and natural areas and, at the meeting of March 9, 2009, created the Core Area and Corridor concept for open space.

April 2009 – The Commission sent a parks survey, developed by the Public Participation Subcommittee, to residents of the City of Langley. Of the 750 surveys distributed, 202 surveys were returned with comments related to existing park use and desired park facilities.

May 18, 2009 – The Parks and Open Space Commission presented the draft Core Area and Corridor concept to the Langley City Council.

May 28, 2009 – The Parks and Open Space Commission presented the findings of the survey and the Core Area and Corridor concept on a series of tri-fold display boards at a public meeting at Saint Hubert's Catholic Church. 38 residents attended the meeting, and 17 out of the 18 individuals that filled out evaluation forms said the meeting met or exceeded their expectations. A number of public comments were also recorded on butcher paper and were integrated into the element.

June 2009 to November 2009 – The Parks and Open Space Commission held seven meetings to work on drafting the Parks, Open Space and Trails Element. Draft versions of the element were posted online prior to each meeting and public comment was allowed at each of the meetings.

June 15, 2009 – The Parks and Open Space Commission presented the tri-fold display boards from the public meeting to the Langley City Council. Audience and council members were invited to study the materials and offer any comments or concerns.

August 13 to August 16, 2009 – The Parks and Open Space Commission displayed the tri-fold display boards from the public meeting at the Island County Fair. Comments were solicited on sheets of paper and the City of Langley was presented a blue ribbon for the educational content of the boards.

September 21, 2009 – The Parks and Open Space Commission presented a draft version of the element to the Langley City Council.

November 6, 2009 – The City of Langley issued a Determination of Nonsignificance for the draft Parks, Open Space and Trails Element of the Langley Comprehensive Plan. A fourteen day comment period was established for the determination. No comments on the determination have been received as of the date of this staff report.

November 23, 2009 – After due and proper notice, the Parks and Open Space Commission will conduct a public hearing on the Parks, Open Space and Trails Element. No written citizen comments have been submitted to be included in the public record as of the date of this staff report.

PRIORITIES:

Out of this seventeen-month process the Parks and Open Space Commission identified four key priorities for the parks and open space system.

Priority 1: Implement the Core Area and Corridor Concept

Through the study of the existing natural systems in Langley, the Commission found that critical areas formed a number of natural corridors that provided a foundation for the open space system (these critical areas are currently regulated under Title 16 of the Langley Municipal Code). The Commission developed the idea that large core habitat or open space areas, including agricultural land, should be protected adjacent to this system and that the combination of these features would create an integrated open space system comprised of a series of core areas and corridors.

This concept, called the Core Area and Corridor concept, is summarized by the following six principles:

1. Critical areas are the foundation for the parks and open space system;
2. Critical areas form a pre-existing belt/ corridor system around much of the City of Langley;
3. For habitat and open space purposes, the corridors should be as wide as possible;
4. Core habitat or open space areas should be connected to the corridor system;
5. A diversity of core areas should be provided; and
6. Core areas should be as large as possible for habitat and open space purposes.

This element seeks to implement this Core Area and Corridor concept through two primary mechanisms: the continued protection of critical areas as required under Title 16; and the acquisition of key prioritized core and corridor conservation areas. The areas of prioritized conservation land within the element are: large areas of agricultural land; lands adjacent to wetlands and streams; connections between critical areas and parks/ critical areas; areas of complex forest; areas of other forest; and shorelines.

Priority 2: Enhance existing parks and open space amenities

During the creation of the element, the Commission also found that Langley contained a number of parks and natural areas. However, the use of existing parks and natural areas varies widely between features. Some parks are used frequently, while others (including some parks in prominent locations) are little used. The Commission determined that a number of factors contribute to this wide variation: some parks have no or little identification to show that they are available for public use and others do not possess facilities or a design that make them attractive to the public, among other factors.

To address these issues, the Commission established the priority of enhancing existing parks and open space amenities. This priority seeks to create and implement management plans for each park and

natural area in Langley. These management plans would include a variety of items including signage, maintenance procedures and timelines, and strategies to increase the overall public use of each feature.

Priority 3: Develop a trail system throughout the City of Langley.

Through the survey sent to residents of the City, the Commission found that walking trails are one of the most desired park and open space features in Langley. Respondents to the parks survey on average rated trails as a 4.3 score (with a five being the highest ranking possible). However, few publically accessible trails are present in the Urban Growth Area at this point. Trails that exist are fragmented, privately-owned, and, in many instances, were created without a larger trail system in mind. Further, prior to this element no planned system has existed. This element articulates a desired trail system and seeks to achieve this system through two major actions: acquiring trail easements and developing trails; and working with Island County to achieve a non-motorized trail connection with the Saratoga and Putney Woods complex.

Priority 4: Support Community Agriculture

The Parks and Open Space Commission, lastly, established the priority of supporting community agriculture. This priority grew out of the desire for local food production, and the realization that community agriculture could help retain some of the unique features of the Langley landscape while allowing public use of an area. This priority also fits within Goal 6 Policy 1 of the Sustainability Element of the Comprehensive Plan which states “preserve and protect land for growing food.” No action steps are associated with this priority at this point.

PARKS AND OPEN SPACE COMMISSION ROLE

The matter before the Parks and Open Space Commission is a proposed amendment to the Langley Comprehensive Plan. As an amendment to the Comprehensive Plan, the Commission must conduct a public hearing on this proposal and make a recommendation to the City Council. The public hearing has been scheduled for November 23, 2009, after proper public notice. The order of business will be to open the hearing, hear a report from the staff, accept public testimony (the Commission may set a time limit on public comment), ask questions of the public or staff, close the public hearing, deliberate on the draft element itself, and pass a recommended action on to the City Council. The Commission may also choose to continue the public hearing (leaving the public record open or closing it to additional information) to a date and time certain.

FORM OF MOTION

I move to recommend that the City Council approve a new element for the Langley Comprehensive Plan entitled “Parks, Open Space and Trails Element” as written/ amended.