

Section 3 – Descanso Bay Regional Park

3.1 Setting and Context

In May 2002, the Regional District of Nanaimo acquired a 61.5 ha parcel of land from the Coastal Community Credit Union (CCCU). The land contained the Gabriola Campground that had been operated by the Credit Union since the early 1980s. At the time of purchase, the land was subdivided into three parcels. Two of the parcels, totaling 15.8 ha in size, were purchased using funds from the Regional Park Function and were designated as a Regional Park. The remaining 45.7 ha of land was created as a Community Park and funds to purchase that portion of the property were approved by residents of Electoral Area ‘B’ in a community parkland acquisition referendum that was held November 24, 2001.

The Regional Park is located adjacent to Descanso Bay on the northwest side of Gabriola Island. Descanso Bay Regional Park is the first regional park and is the only public campground on Gabriola Island. It is a regionally significant oceanfront site with a sandstone beachfront and three bays with natural sandy pockets. The Regional Park campground contains 32 campsites that were developed by the Credit Union. There is also a car top boat launch and large areas for picnic and group type activities as well as extensive natural forest cover. Near the waterfront is an old farmhouse. In the past, the building was rented out for accommodation and meetings; however, it has deteriorated and has been closed off to the public for safety reasons.

Taylor Bay Road and McConvey Road separate the Regional Park from the Community Park. The Community Park property consists of an irregular shaped forested area 10.5 ha in size and is located north of McConvey Road. This portion of the Community Park is within the Agricultural Land Reserve. East of Taylor Bay Road is the balance of the parcel and is 35.2 ha in size and is in a naturally forested state. A well developed trail system currently exists and is currently being upgraded and expanded and when complete it will provide a pedestrian and cycling link to the ferry, the west side of the island, and Descanso Bay Regional Park.

While the RDN is the local government responsible for parks on Gabriola Island, the Islands Trust is the local government authority for other functions including land use.

3.2 Background Summary

The park is located on the west side of Gabriola Island on Taylor Bay Road, approximately 1 km from the ferry terminal. The park is 15.8 ha in size and contains significant environmental and archeological features including an eagle nest tree, abundant marine and bird life, and five separate archeological sites. The park is adjacent to three large shallow bays that are rich in marine life. Unique sandstone rock and cliff formations are also found here. The five archeological sites located on the property indicate the productivity of the beaches for the First Nations.

Gabriola Island attracts visitors from Vancouver Island, the rest of BC, elsewhere in Canada and other parts of the world. As the park has operated as a campground for many years and no other

public campground on the island exists, this park provides alternative accommodation for visitors to Gabriola Island. Additionally, a trail is currently being developed through the community park and will connect the regional park with the north side of the island for local residents walking or cycling around the island. The car top boat launch is well used by locals and visitors to provide marine access to Malaspina Galleries and provides a link to a marine trail for kayakers paddling around the southern Gulf islands.

The park is well treed throughout the property and the vegetation is generally consistent with a mature second growth Douglas-fir forest that includes Douglas fir, hemlock, spruce, salal, and Oregon grape. An old orchard is also located on the north portion of the park. Adjacent to the orchard on the most northerly portion of the park are well-vegetated steep slopes and sandstone cliffs.

The developed portions of the park consist of an old farmhouse located on one of the points. In the past, this house has been used for group accommodation but now requires extensive renovations to make it useable. The property is serviced by hydro and telephone. There are 32 campsites and related facilities, park operator's gatehouse and garage, picnic area, car top boat launch, parking areas and trail network. A reservoir for fire fighting purposes is also located on the park. The property is bounded by fence on the southern property line, ocean, Taylor Bay Road to the east, and McConvey Road at the northern edge of the property.

The facilities at the park serve outdoor recreational opportunities including camping, swimming, picnicking, fishing, kayaking, cycling, and hiking.

3.3 Vision

Descanso Bay Regional Park is an accessible public park located on the northwest side of Gabriola Island adjacent to three large shallow bays and sloping sandstone shelves that have been formed by millions of years of wave action and are unique to a few Gulf Islands. The park offers visitors an opportunity to participate in outdoor recreation and camping experiences in tranquil surroundings.

Existing and future park uses will be designed and operated such that they recognize the natural environment and incorporate sustainable and best management practices. The management of the park is intended to continue to allow various park uses that have historically occurred at the park and to avoid any new uses that create conflict with neighbours or other park users or the environment.

Management policies and standards are intended to provide quality park facilities in a safe and secure setting with a goal to minimize hazards, avoid environmental conflicts, and respect for the interests of the community and adjacent landowners. The management of the park also requires ongoing cooperative relationships between the RDN, adjacent landowners, users of the adjacent community park, other public agencies, area residents, and the Park Operator. The park is intended to be self-supporting and will also provide economic and tourism spin off benefits and opportunities for local and regional businesses.

3.4 Objectives

The objectives outlined below summarize the key components for the management of Descanso Bay Regional Park.

3.4.1 Accessibility

To provide a public Regional Park that is open and accessible for the benefit, enjoyment and use for all residents of the region and beyond.

3.4.2 Public Safety

To create and operate a park that is secure, strives to protect public safety and minimizes hazards, both natural and man-made.

3.4.3 Environment

To strike a balance between the impact of human use and development on the natural environment by incorporating sustainable and best management practices and by promoting education and interpretation about the natural environment.

3.4.4 Park Use

To provide a park with a focus on outdoor recreation within a natural setting and a wide range of activities, including, but not limited to, individual and group camping, boating, swimming, hiking, interpretation, and education.

3.4.5 Standards

To develop Descanso Bay Regional Park to have quality facilities and standards that correspond with Islands Trust and RDN bylaws and are on par with or better than provincial parks of similar size and scope.

3.4.6 Operations and Administration

To develop and operate Descanso Bay Regional Park to be self-supporting.

3.4.7 Economic Development

To provide spin-off economic and tourism opportunities for Gabriola Island, as well as the region as a whole.

3.4.8 Cooperation

To liaise with adjacent landowners, Islands Trust, and senior agencies in the planning, management and operations of Descanso Bay Regional Park.

Map No. 3.1 Park Facilities

