

City of Nanaimo

BUSINESS CASE – Community Watershed Restoration Grant Program

CURRENT OVERVIEW

At the July 15th Finance and Audit Committee meeting, Council passed a motion requesting Staff to prepare a business case for an annual Community Watercourse Restoration Grant.

Environmental responsibility is a key component of Council's 2019 – 2022 Strategic Plan. Taking environmental responsibility includes showing environmental leadership from all City departments and supporting residents volunteering their time and talent to protect and enhance the environment in their community.

City Council adopted the Climate Change Resilience Strategy (the Strategy) in June 2020. Several recommendations within the Strategy highlight the need to work with and support the community in building a climate resilient City. Some of these actions include environmental restoration and enhancement of the City's watercourses and riparian areas. The Strategy also highlights the importance of reaching out to build capacity with residents and neighbourhood groups to help the community become more aware of climate change and the actions they can take to address it.

Although there is currently no dedicated annual grant funding for restoration projects, Council has allocated funding to specific restoration and enhancement projects, such as a recent 3-year \$69,000 commitment to the Watercourse Restoration and Enhancement Program, which included the following:

- A salmon side channel feasibility study within East Wellington Park,
- Riparian restoration and hydrological study within Buttertubs Marsh Conservation Area,
- Chum Salmon spawning bed feasibility and design in the Millstone Estuary, and
- A pilot project to test the effectiveness of native alder and willow exclusion fencing in the Nanaimo Estuary, to protect sedge grass beds from Canada goose predation.

BUSINESS ISSUE

The City's watercourses and riparian areas have been identified as areas of focus for ongoing restoration and enhancement work:

- Water quality testing and stream assessments provided by the Regional District of Nanaimo's Drinking Water and Watershed Protection program, show a number of watercourses in the City have ongoing water quality issues (Ecoscape Environmental Consultants, 2018).
- The Millstone River, Catstream, Chase River, Walley and Departure Creeks have been monitored since 2011 and a recent trend analysis has confirmed that water temperature, specific conductivity, and turbidity are not consistently meeting the requirements to sustain healthy fish populations (Ecoscape Environmental Consultants, 2018).
- Significant stretches of riparian ecosystem along our urban watercourses lack adequate tree cover and are heavily impacted by a number of invasive plant species. Efforts to plant more native trees and shrub species will help add more biological diversity to these spaces, which will help improve conditions for fish over time.

The City currently works with a broad range of volunteers, both individuals and organizations, that are interested in environmental stewardship in the City.

Currently, 17 community organizations, such as Bill's Place, John Barsby School, Nanaimo District Secondary School, Departure Bay Scouts, etc., work with the City through the Partners in Parks program, on 12 volunteer environmental restoration projects. The projects primarily focus on native tree and shrub planting and invasive plant control throughout the City Parks system. Some projects have included an educational focus with volunteers working with the City to design interpretative signs to raise public awareness on various environmental topics. Many of these organizations see a number of co-benefits that help with their core function, while adding a community stewardship component to what they do.

City staff are often involved in providing training, material support and oversight for the restoration work. City staff also review and finalize the layout and installation of interpretative signage.

In addition, the City also collaborates with a number of environmental non-profit organizations (i.e., Nanaimo Area Land Trust, Broombusters, BC Conservation Foundation, Guardians of Mid-Island Estuaries, Streamkeepers groups etc.) to work on larger scale projects that require more technical oversight and planning. Often these groups seek funding and material support from the City and require formal review of the restoration plans presented. Support from the City comes in a variety of ways: technical input, onsite training, material support and/or funding contributions, however, there is currently no dedicated grant funding for volunteers or environmental organizations working on environmental projects in the City. This gap can lead to delays in projects proceeding and community groups missing opportunities to leverage additional funding.

While staff will continue to bring forward requests to fund specific restoration and enhancement projects for consideration with supporting business cases, the establishment of annual grant funding for community groups undertaking restoration projects will allow the City to be more nimble and flexible in providing support to community groups looking to leverage other funding sources.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Establishing a dedicated Community Watershed Restoration Grant program will:

- Support environmental stewardship volunteers (both individuals and groups) who come forward with good ideas;
- Will help harness the energy and talent of many residents who wish to contribute to improving the City's environment;
- Allow the City to build stronger partnerships with residents and community groups with good ideas to restore the environment and build a resilient community; and
- Establish a more consistent stewardship program that the City can offer to residents.

Such a program can also act as seed funding that can help leverage additional funding for environmental projects that the City may not be able to access otherwise. Helping to lower overall costs to the City and enhancing community volunteer opportunities, overall.

OPTIONS

Option #1: Fund a Community Watershed Restoration Grant Program

The grants would be available to community organizations, environmental non-profits or individual residents with approved environmental project ideas that educate the public or address environmental issues focussing on: Climate change adaptation solutions, urban stream and riparian restoration enhancement. The grant program would work with staff from Environment, Engineering and Parks, Recreation and Culture and would involve community environmental groups.

The grant program would follow a set application process and evaluation criteria that would be finalized and presented to Council for consideration prior to implementation. The application process is anticipated to include the following:

- Formal application with a detailed description and rationale of the project. Focus will be on projects that educate or address issues focussing on:
 - Urban stream and riparian restoration enhancement with the potential for leveraging other funding sources,
 - Climate change adaptation solutions,
- A Letter of Support confirming the proposal has been vetted with a neighbourhood association or an environmental organization (i.e. Neighbourhood Association, School District, Streamkeeper Federation, etc.).
- Support for the project from Engineering and Environment and Parks, Recreation and Culture staff
- Recommendation of support from the Environment Committee and Finance and Audit Committee to Council

Benefits:

- Greater progress and momentum toward enhancing habitat for fish and subsequent increase in biodiversity within the City;
- Taking action to address climate resiliency and urban stream water quality issues;
- Capacity to be more nimble and flexible in providing support to community groups looking to leverage other funding sources; and
- The City builds stronger partnerships with residents and community groups with good ideas to restore the environment and build a resilient community.

Weaknesses:

- Water quality issues are complex and solutions will likely need to come from many sources. These projects alone will not address all stream water quality issues.

Financial Analysis:

- A grant budget of \$20,000 is proposed to be added to Development Services' project budget

Option #2: Do Not Fund the Grant Program

Benefits:

- The requested funding can be allocated to other initiatives / projects.

Weaknesses:

- Staff time and resources will continue to go into looking for funding to support volunteers;
- The City will miss opportunities to leverage funding through collaborating with the environmental community;
- Lost potential to build partnerships with residents and community groups and to support good ideas to restore the environment and build a resilient community; and
- Lack of action may lead to continued degradation of environmental habitat.

RECOMMENDATION

Option #1 Fund a Community Watercourse Restoration Grant Program

Sources

1. Ecoscape Environmental Consultants Ltd., 2018. Surface Water Quality Trend Analysis for Regional District of Nanaimo Community Watershed Monitoring Network Data (2011 – 2017). Prepared for Regional District of Nanaimo