



The Corporation of the City of Courtenay

Staff Report

To: Council

File No.: 5810-20

From: Director of Recreation, Culture and Community Services

Date: December 10, 2025

Subject: Park Bench Donation Policy and Implementation Strategy

PURPOSE:

To request Council's approval of the Park Bench Donation Policy (Attachment 1), for Council to receive for information the Park and Donation Bench Guidelines (Attachment 2) and to direct staff to proceed with the Implementation Strategy as detailed in this staff report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The report outlines a proposed Park Bench Donation Program based on Council's direction in July 2024, that aims to address the reasons the previous Memorial Bench Program was discontinued. This includes proposing a new park bench donation program that provides clear guidelines for plaques, establishes service level guidelines for park and donation benches, considers other municipal donation bench best practices, policies, and programs, and sets the fee at 100% cost recovery. The staff report includes a Park Bench Donation Policy for Council's consideration and approval, as well as Park and Bench Donation Guidelines as supporting reference material for selection and installation of benches and seating in Courtenay parks and trails.

BACKGROUND:

Since 2008 the City of Courtenay Memorial Bench Program has been on hiatus as the City was unable at the time to meet community expectations for installation of memorial benches in highly popular locations.

After being suspended for over ten years, staff brought the issue back to Council for consideration in 2019 where staff highlighted the challenges associated with delivering the program. The fees collected for the program were insufficient to cover costs and resulted in a highly subsidized service, with the associated subsidy benefiting a select group of donors. Although the donors were informed of the ten-year term of the donation, there remained expectations that the donation was to be in perpetuity. Additional considerations included the significant administrative and operational impacts of a memorial program and discussion of whether public memorials outside a cemetery were an appropriate City service. Recognizing these challenges, Council directed that the program be formally discontinued.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the development and implementation of a decommissioning policy for the previous memorial bench program never commenced. When the topic was brought back to Council on July 31, 2024, Council directed staff to revisit the memorial bench program and return to Council with a Memorial Bench Donation Policy, as well as proceed with the decommissioning of previous memorial benches as per the following resolution:

THAT Council direct staff to develop a new memorial bench donation program and return to Council with a staff report on the memorial program that includes a Memorial Bench Donation Policy; and

THAT the memorial bench donation program establish its fees at 100% cost recovery.

THAT Council direct staff to proceed with the decommissioning of existing memorial benches as outlined in the “Memorial Bench Program Options” report.

As identified in the July 31, 2024 staff report, the development of a new policy and program is based on the following:

- The new policy and program are being developed to address the backlog of requests from families and individuals seeking to memorialize loved ones.
- With the cessation of the previous memorial bench program, new donations would be subject to updated fees and contracts.
- To align with the Recreation Fees and Charges Framework (2022) benefits continuum, the new program aims to eliminate the tax subsidization of the program by increasing the required donation fee to 100% cost recovery.
- The program will align with the City’s park planning standards for amenities such as benches and contribute to community beautification by funding and maintaining public seating areas.
- Benches donated through the former memorial bench donation program will have their plaques removed and stored in the City of Courtenay Operations yard for one year.
- Should a new program be approved by Council, the City will provide past donors an opportunity to donate a new bench and plaque before opening the program to the waitlist or new requests.

Following Council’s direction in the July 31, 2024, staff report, staff initiated decommissioning the existing memorial benches by removing all memorial plaques by December 31, 2025. Past memorial bench program participants were sent an informational letter in May 2025. In addition, staff arranged for newspaper ads and social media posts (on November 19th and November 26th, 2025). This additional step was taken to reach past participants, including 81 individuals whom the City was unable to contact due to outdated information or who did not respond. To date, staff have heard from 31 of the 96 past memorial bench donors.

DISCUSSION:

The proposed new program aims to address the issues which led to the discontinuation of the original program identified in the background section of this report. It takes into account the administrative and operational financial impacts of offering a bench donation program and considers processes and best practices from other municipal bench donation programs. In addition, the new park donation bench program integrates this information into a policy document for Council’s consideration to ensure the proposed new park bench donation program:

1. Aligns with the City’s strategic direction as identified in the Official Community Plan (2022), Parks and Recreation Master Plan (2019), Parks and Open Spaces Bylaw No. 3121 (2024), and the Parks Playground Design Standards (2024); and
2. Is implemented in a fair, transparent, and consistent manner.

Park and Donation Bench Guidelines

The Park Bench Donation Program will follow recommendations outlined in the Park and Donation Bench Guidelines. These guidelines have been created to ensure park bench service levels remain consistent across the City’s different types of parks—whether community parks, neighbourhood parks, nature parks, or trails. It also considers balancing bench donation demand with the need for open spaces, park planning best practices, and other park amenities. The program will follow established guidelines to prevent the challenges experienced by other municipalities, where an excessive number of memorial benches were installed. These guidelines aim to ensure that benches are placed based on park needs rather than solely to meet memorial or donation requests, helping to maintain balanced and functional park spaces. The Park and Donation Bench Guidelines identify the following areas for consideration:

3. Accessibility – Ensuring benches are placed in inclusive, accessible locations with minimal barriers for use.
4. Bench Styles – Standardized designs for consistency and durability.
5. Locations – Criteria for selecting suitable park areas.
6. Sustainability – Environmentally responsible materials and practices.
7. Life Cycle Cost – Long-term financial planning for installation and upkeep.
8. Maintenance – Ongoing care to preserve quality and safety.
9. Case Studies – Examples from other municipalities to inform best practices.

With these established guidelines, a new park bench donation program has been developed for Council’s consideration that considers the service level impacts and associated costs as discussed in the next section of this report.

Proposed Park Bench Donation Program

Program Name Change

The new program will not use the term “memorial,” as this has created an expectation for some past donors or extended family members that donated benches will remain in perpetuity, similar to memorial products in cemeteries. Additionally, the new program name broadens the scope to include other types of donations, such as tributes to significant events or organizations. For this reason, the program has been named the *Park Bench Donation Program*.

It is important to note that despite the name change and the inclusion of donation application forms that clearly outline the terms and conditions, there may still be an expectation from some participants that the donated bench will be in place in perpetuity—particularly when a plaque includes a memorial message.

Memorial bench programs often require a higher level of service compared to similar amenities because donors typically expect their bench to be maintained by the municipality at its original location indefinitely. For many, these benches hold deep personal significance—sometimes serving as an alternative to a headstone—making them feel sacred. This can lead to challenges when family members, who were not informed of the ten-year term and were not part of the original donation, assume permanence. Staff are currently addressing this issue with past donor families who are learning about the decommissioning of memorial benches through recent newspaper advertisements and social media posts.

Some jurisdictions have attempted to address this issue through their bench donation policies with language that clarifies that the bench and plaque are not permanent and that wording on the plaque is to be appropriate in a recreational or park setting. Other municipalities indicate that the plaque wording is subject to the final approval of a designated city staff member and a donation may be denied if the proposed wording does not fit with the policy guidelines. Proposed Park Bench Donation Policy language that will address this includes:

- No political, commercial business names, advertisements, or slogans will be permitted.
- Proposed language that contravenes the City’s statement in support of 2SLGBTQIA2S+ inclusion, equity, and safe spaces in City Facilities, or future anti-racism policy will not be permitted.
- Language should be non-denominational.
- No discriminatory language or hate speech language will be permitted.
- Plaque messaging should be appropriate in a park and recreational setting.

Donation Fees

In accordance with the July 31, 2024 Council direction, fees will aim to achieve full cost recovery, whereby the donation fee will be applied towards the purchase, administration, installation, maintenance and/or repair of a bench donation over the proposed ten-year term with no tax-funded subsidization. The official fees will be brought forward for Council’s consideration through a fees and charges bylaw and reviewed and updated regularly to ensure 100% of the costs are recovered.

A charitable tax receipt will be offered for the donation. To ensure that CRA requirements for charitable donations are met, the fee for the plaque will be deducted from the receipt, due to the personalized message on the plaque which infers a direct benefit to the donor. According to the Income Tax Act, the act of a gift or donation constitutes a voluntary transaction, and a donor must not draw any personal benefit, either directly or indirectly, in consideration for the transfer. Furthermore, with the issue of a charitable tax receipt to be in compliance with Revenue Canada, the donated bench is non-returnable and becomes the property of the recipient (i.e. the City).

Ownership of the Donation

Under the proposed Park Bench Donation Program, participants will be informed through program materials and applications forms that once a park bench donation has been made, the ownership of that park bench (including plaque) is vested in the City.

It's important to note that the original Memorial Bench Program did have this language in the application form, however some participants or extended family members claimed ownership over the memorial bench and wanted it returned to them when the plaques are removed.

Donation Maintenance Service Level

The City will maintain the donated bench in accordance with park bench maintenance standards and the donation period will come to conclusion at the end of the ten-year term with the removal of the plaque. The City may return the plaque to the owner. It will be the responsibility of the donor to provide up-to-date contact information. If the donor cannot be reached due to outdated contact information, the plaque may be stored for a period of up to one year, then disposed through a metal recycling program.

The bench donor would be provided an opportunity to donate a new park bench at the same location at an updated fee, as established by the fees and charges bylaw at the time. The original plaque may be reused if it's in good condition and it meets the City's current standard for donation plaques. It would not be feasible to offer the same bench to the donor, as it becomes difficult to establish a fee for a bench that is, or may be, near the end of its life cycle within the ten-year term and will thus need to be replaced or the cost to repair or maintain exceeds the cost of replacing the bench with a new bench. The reasoning is as follows: if the donor requests a bench at no donation fee and the bench requires replacement within the additional ten-year term, the City would be subsidizing a new bench entirely through tax revenue.

An exception would be replacement due to damage from vandalism, which will be addressed on a case-by-case basis, with parts replaced as necessary. In the event of ongoing or severe vandalism, a donor plaque may be installed on another similar bench or, if not available, a new bench; however, the original ten-year donation term will still apply. The City will be responsible for costs associated with damage due to vandalism.

The City, however, will not be responsible for stolen or damaged plaques. Replacement of the plaque would be subject to the current fees and charges bylaw. The donor may request the return of the plaque at the end of the ten-year term, provided the plaque can be located.

Location of Benches

Through the Park and Donation Bench Guidelines, standards for locations and distribution of park benches have been developed and will guide the placement of benches in parks and trails. Staff will initially focus on identifying bench donation locations in the City's community parks and trails through a database of available sites. The potential sites will be accessible to the public through a dedicated bench donation program website, with available locations shown on a publicly accessible GIS map. New locations in neighbourhood parks, nature parks, and trails will be considered after the community park locations are filled. However, if a neighbourhood or nature park is scheduled for renewal, bench donation locations will also be considered for those parks through a park design review process. This approach will provide a transparent way for interested residents to understand available bench donation locations, with preset limits for highly desirable areas. Also, this approach avoids the mistake other jurisdictions have made with an oversupply of benches, which may distract from other park amenities.

Sustainable Service Level

Under the new program, bench donations will be limited to fifteen per year. This limit has been established to reflect a sustainable service level increase to existing park operations, given existing staff capacity which has not included a bench donation program since 2008, when the original program was put on hold. In terms of service response times, staff anticipate it will take four to six months between the time the City places the order for the custom bench and plaque to the time it is installed due to supply availability and ordering timelines.

Currently, at the time of the drafting of this staff report, there were 14 past patrons who expressed interested in the new program, however there may be less interest based on the new proposed fee which is substantially higher than was offered in the original Memorial Bench program.

Proposed Park Bench Donation Policy

Below is a summary of the proposed Park Bench Donation Policy (Attachment 1) for Council's consideration.

A park bench donation will be received subject to the following conditions:

1. There is an available bench donation location as approved by the Director of Recreation, Culture and Community Services or approved designate.
2. A form is completed by the donor that outlines the terms and conditions the donor is agreeing to as a participant in the program.
3. Payment in full of the current fee for the bench donation as established by the City of Courtenay Fees and Charges Bylaw No. 1673, 1992, including future amendments.
4. The wording on the plaque conforms to the approved inscription guidelines for donated benches. Language shall be uplifting, in the present tense, and befitting in a recreational park setting, and:
 - a. Will not be memorial markers or contain wording indicating year of birth and death
 - b. No political advertisements, endorsements, or slogans, nor any commercial business advertising or promotional messaging, shall be permitted on a donated bench
 - c. Plaque messaging will not contravene the City's official statements in support of 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion, equity, and the creation of safe spaces within City facilities and parks, nor conflict with the City's current or future anti-racism policies.
 - d. All language on donated bench plaques must be non-denominational.
 - e. No discriminatory language or hate speech language will be permitted
 - f. Plaque messaging should be appropriate in a park and recreational setting
 - g. Is subject to the approval of the Director of Recreation, Culture and Community Services or their delegate.
5. The donated bench and plaque will be in accordance with the standard specifications approved by the Director of Recreation, Culture and Community Services or an approved designate.
6. All donated benches and plaques purchased and installed under this Policy will become the sole property of the City of Courtenay.
7. The park bench donation term will be for ten years and will not be in perpetuity. The park bench donation will come to conclusion at the end of the ten-year term with the removal of the plaque.

The City may dispose of the donated bench and plaque at its sole discretion. The City may choose to return the plaque to the donor. It will be the responsibility of the donor to provide up-to-date contact information. If the donor cannot be reached due to outdated contact information, the plaque may be stored for a period of up to one year, then disposed through a metal recycling program.

8. At the end of the ten years, the disposition of the donated park bench is at the sole discretion of the City.
9. The bench donor would be provided an opportunity to donate a new park bench at the same location at an updated fee, as established by the fees and charges bylaw at the time.
10. The City of Courtenay will be responsible for the repair and maintenance of the donated park bench in alignment with City standards for park bench maintenance. No additional maintenance requirements are created or agreed to as a result of the donation.
11. City of Courtenay may alter, maintain, repair or replace a bench under this program at any time and at its sole direction.
12. The City is permitted to relocate the donated bench due to operational or capital works that require it to be moved at the City's sole discretion. If the relocation is permanent, staff will work with the donor to determine an alternate acceptable location.
13. The Director of Recreation, Culture and Community Services is delegated authority by Council to develop and implement the park bench donation program that aligns with the principles, objectives, standards, and requirements established within this policy.
14. The Director of Recreation, Culture and Community Services is authorized to expand the donation program to include other park amenities (such as picnic tables, bike racks, etc), provided the expanded park donation amenity program aligns with the principles, objectives, standards, and requirements established within this policy.

NEXT STEPS

Park Bench Donation Implementation Strategy

Staff recommend the following key steps for implementation of the new program, including but not limited to:

1. Develop Park Bench Donation Procedures for the new Park Bench Donation Program.
2. Develop an application form for the Park Bench Donation Program;
3. Select new bench donation sites within the City of Courtenay in alignment with the Park and Donation Bench Guidelines, with community parks prioritized for implementation of the new program;
4. Create a Park Bench Donation website that includes a public-facing interactive map of bench donation sites to assist program participants with site selection during the application process;
5. Update the City's website to include the Park Bench Donation Policy and the online bench donation application form;
6. Create informational and marketing materials to support the new program;
7. Update the City of Courtenay Fees and Charges Bylaw 1673, 1992 with the proposed bench donation fee based on 100% cost recovery; and

8. Subject to the completion of steps one through seven, open the program to the community in the following order of priority: past donors, past waitlist individuals, and new participants.

If Council directs staff to proceed with the implementation strategy, it is anticipated that the proposed Park Bench Donation Program will be ready in Spring 2026.

POLICY ANALYSIS:

Official Community Plan, 2022

Parks and Recreation Objective 2: Recreation amenities, services, and programming are expanded and enhanced to support increased health, wellness, and social connections for all residents.

Parks and Recreation Master Plan, 2019

3.1.3 In neighbourhoods that are deficient in active parkland where new parkland cannot be acquired, explore opportunities to add play areas, benches, and other neighbourhood park amenities, based on resident interest, within linear parks and greenspace.

3.3 Park Amenities

The City has some excellent park amenities, but in general the parks are underdeveloped with outdated infrastructure and some popular amenities lacking. Focus efforts on adding and improving amenities in the City's parks.

Benches improve the accessibility and enjoyment of existing parks and trails, especially when placed in attractive locations, near playgrounds and other amenities, and under shade trees. As the population grows and use increases, more benches will be needed.

3.3.11 Add and upgrade the following amenities as part of park development: more picnic tables and benches in parks and along trails.

3.4.8 Add infrastructure along these linear parks as use increases, e.g., signs, benches, waste bins including but not limited to, Courtenay Riverway, Arden Road, Cumberland & 20th, Hawk Greenway, Idiens Greenway, Crown Isle Greenway.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

As per Council's direction to establish fees at 100% cost recovery, the estimated donation fee is \$5,500.00 for a ten-year term. This fee includes: the cost of the donated bench, cost of the donated plaque, materials, cost for labour for assembly and installation, staff maintenance and repairs, and program administration. This is the best estimation of the cost based on a high-level review. Should Council approve the Bench Donation Policy and Implementation Strategy, staff will review costs with further detail to capture the administrative costs required to deliver a park bench donation program. Staff will return to Council with the recommended fee through a request for amendment of the Fees and Charges Bylaw No. 1673, 1992.

A high-level comparison of current fees in existing programs in British Columbia (Attachment 4) indicates that this fee is higher than in the other municipalities surveyed with the exception of the City of Vancouver which has a bench dedication fee that is approximately double the average. However, it is important to note that staff cannot directly compare the proposed Bench Donation Program fee with others from a cost recovery perspective, as it is unclear how other municipalities determine their fees. The proposed donation fee is based on current estimates at this time, and the proposed fee through the future amended fees and charges bylaw may be higher after the program procedures are developed and the cost associated with operating the program is fully established.

The anticipated impacts to the 2026-2030 financial plan would be as follows (see Table 1):

- Annual capital expense of \$61,575 to allow for the purchase of approximately 15 benches per calendar year.
- Annual operating expenses of \$20,925:
 - Approximately \$13,500 annually for the costs associated with repair and maintenance of donated benches.
 - Approximately \$7,425 annually for the costs associated with administering the program.
- Revenue of approximately \$82,500.00 per year based on a 100% full cost recovery model (15 benches / year).

Table 1: Estimated Financial Costs and Revenues of Park Bench Donation Program

	Per Bench	Annual (15 benches)
Capital Costs	\$ 4,105	\$ 61,575
Maintenance Costs	\$ 900	\$ 13,500
Administration Costs	\$ 495	\$ 7,425
Total Costs	\$ 5,500	\$ 82,500
Estimated Fees	\$ 5,500	\$ 82,500
Net Cost	\$ -	\$ -

It is anticipated the financial impact to the City will be approximately net zero as the required capital expense to start and implement a new Park Bench Donation Program and maintain the donated benches will be offset by the fees collected, which aims to be set at 100% cost recovery.

Option: the donation fee could be reduced to cover the direct costs of bench purchase and installation only (approximately \$4,105.00). Any anticipated administration and maintenance costs would be excluded from the cost recovery calculation. This option would bring the donation fee in line with other local jurisdictions; however, total gross revenue would be reduced to 75% of total costs (\$61,575 annually). The operation of a Bench Donation Program however has higher than average administrative implications due to the nature of the donations and the service expectations and thus increased interactions with donors. Should Council decide to only recover direct costs, the additional administration costs required to support the program will need to be funded from another source, likely taxation.

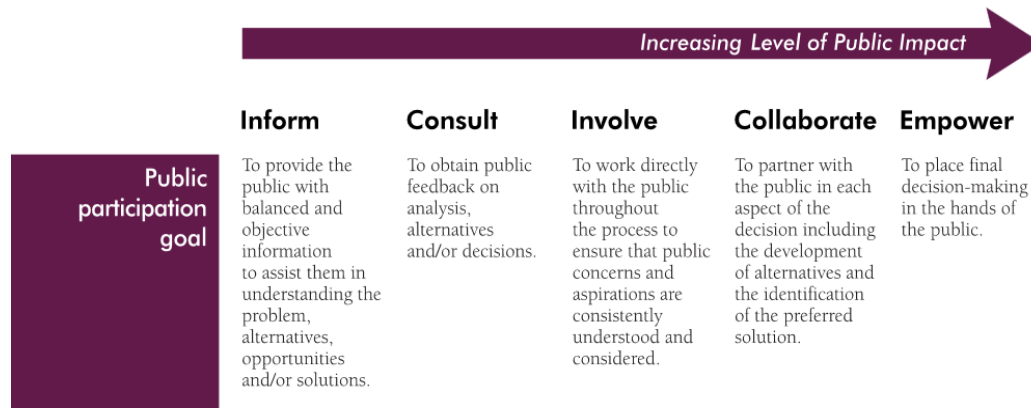
Replacement due to damage from vandalism will be addressed on a case-by-case basis, with parts replaced as necessary. In the event of ongoing or severe vandalism, a donor plaque may be installed on another similar bench; however, the original ten-year donation term will still apply.

ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS:

The Park Bench Donation Program has been developed by the Recreation, Culture and Community Services Department with input from internal departments with overlapping service areas. While the steps required for implementation will continue to be led by RCCS, the actual administration of the program will be determined through inter-departmental discussions to identify the most appropriate department to facilitate this program. The Park Services Division of Operational Services will be overseeing the installation, maintenance, and decommissioning of the benches. The program will only apply to the donation of park benches at this time. However, there is potential to open the program to other park furnishings and amenities as found in other municipalities such as picnic tables, bicycle racks, and water stations at a future date.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

Staff would inform the public based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation. Staff would inform past program participants and waitlisted individuals, offering them the opportunity to participate in the new program. Staff would then inform the public of the new program through the City’s website and marketing materials.



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STRATEGIC PRIORITIES REFERENCE:

This initiative addresses the following strategic priorities:

- Financial Sustainability - Review City Financial processes: Review fees, charges, and fines
- Parks and Recreation - Optimize active public spaces to respond to density increases and increased park use

OPTIONS:

1. THAT Council receive for information the Park and Donation Bench Guidelines; and

THAT based on the December 10th, 2025 staff report “Park Bench Donation Policy and Implementation Strategy,” Council adopt the Park Bench Donation Program Policy and direct staff to proceed with the Implementation Strategy detailed in the staff report; and

THAT Council direct staff to return to Council with a proposed fees and charges bylaw amendment of the Fees and Charges Bylaw No. 1673, 1992 that includes the proposed fees for the Park Bench Donation Program at 100% cost recovery; and

THAT the Park Bench Donation Program shall accept bench donations after the adoption of the amendment to the Fees and Charges Bylaw No. 1673, 1992 that includes Park Bench Donation Program Fees. (RECOMMENDED)

2. THAT Council provide alternative direction to staff.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Park Bench Donation Policy
2. Park and Donation Bench Guidelines
3. Fee Comparison of Bench Donation Programs in British Columbia Local Governments

Prepared by: Peter Williams, MBCSLA, Planner 2 – Parks & Recreation

Reviewed by: Joy Chan, Manager of Business Administration
Stuart Carmichael, Manager of Parks Services
Adam Langenmaier, BBA, CPA, CA, Director of Financial Services
Susie Saunders, Director of Recreation, Culture, and Community Services

Concurrence: Geoff Garbutt, M.Pl., MCIP, RPP, City Manager (CAO)