



The Corporation of the City of Courtenay

STAFF REPORT

To: Council

File No.: 6120-20

From: Director of Recreation, Culture, and Community Services

Date: March 13, 2024

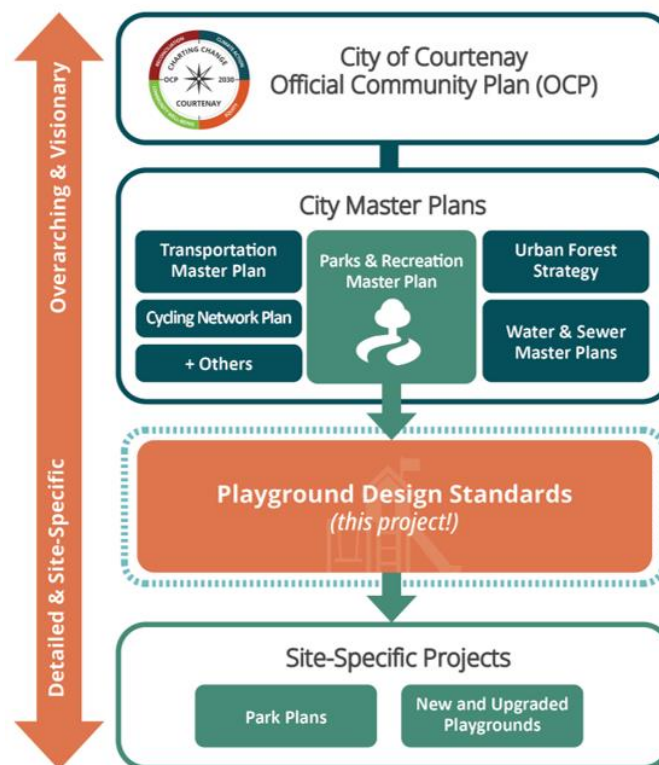
Subject: Park Playground Design Standards Community Engagement Summary and Emerging Directions

PURPOSE: To provide Council with an update on the *Let's Play, Courtenay!* Park Playground Design Standards project and for Council to receive for information the public engagement findings in the Park Playground Design Standards Community Engagement Summary (Attachment 1) and the initial emerging directions from the project to date.

BACKGROUND:

The Park Playground Design Standards (PPDS) are a 2023 – 2026 council strategic priority. The Park Playground Design Standards project was awarded to Lanarc Consultants and work on the project began in late fall of 2023.

Guided by the vision and goals from the Official Community Plan (OCP, 2022) and the direction and recommendations in the Parks and Recreation Master Plan (PRMP, 2019), the Park Playground Design Standards will support capital planning efforts by identifying guiding principles and best practices for future playground improvements that diversify play experiences and improve accessibility and inclusion.



With 19 park playgrounds, one child care playground, and one fitness park in the City of Courtenay, the PPDS will provide recommendations on leading playground design practices including but not limited to: universal accessibility, nature-based play structures, amenity provision at playgrounds, gathering spaces and amenities for youth, and climate adaptation (i.e. shade). The PPDS will also help inform the provision of public amenities at playgrounds by establishing service level standards as informed by the community engagement findings. Planning for specific playgrounds across the city will happen over time as they are upgraded or developed with the number of playgrounds installed or upgraded each year based on the City's annual budget.

DISCUSSION:

The City launched Let's Play, Courtenay! in January 2024 to engage residents in reimagining the future of play in Courtenay. The PPDS project includes community engagement and leading practice reviews to establish draft design guidelines, followed by internal and external review, before presenting a final report outlining recommended park playground design standards for the City's consideration. The playground design standards will guide the City's approach to playground renewal and development by identifying recommended standards to be applied. This report provides the summary of community engagement activities and findings, as well as emerging directions for the project.

Before embarking on the community engagement activities, the consultant team developed draft project goals based on a review of the City's relevant documents, discussions with internal city departments, and review of leading practices for park playground design. The following draft goals outline the overall key considerations for developing the park playground design standards. These goals were shared through the community questionnaire, interest group workshops and project website. Community responses to these goals will be summarized later in this report.

Image 1: Draft Park Playground Design Standard Goals



Community Engagement Activities

The *Let's Play, Courtenay!* community engagement activities consisted of a public survey, interest group and children's design sessions, and a drawing contest, for a total of 397 participants and respondents. A key focus of the engagement activities was to hear directly from children and youth. Details on the engagement activities are as follows:

1. Community questionnaire available on-line between January 23rd to February 20th, 2024: the community was encouraged to have adults fill out the questionnaire and help children in the household fill it out too.
2. In-person child and youth workshops: held in early February, one workshop was hosted in collaboration with the Lake Trail Community Education Society for children aged 8-12 and a preschool session was hosted by Courtenay Recreation, Cozy Corner preschool staff.
3. Online interest Group Meetings held mid-February: community interest groups and one internal City department interest groups.
4. *Let's Play, Courtenay!* Park Playground Design Drawing Contest: Children and youth were encouraged to submit their park playground design drawings and be entered into a prize draw. One SD71 teacher took this opportunity to have each student in class design a park as part of their instructional government unit. The class submissions can be viewed in Attachment 2.

Summary of Community Questionnaire Key Findings

During the first phase of community engagement, ideas were gathered from the community to better understand how people play today, big ideas for tomorrow including goals and guiding principles, and other ideas for future playground improvements. The engagement results demonstrate Courtenay's passion for outdoor play as feedback highlighted desires for nature-based play, inclusive spaces, innovative and imaginative play structures, splash pads and water play, as well as opportunities for risky play. Results also demonstrate the potential for playgrounds to act as active community gathering places that support a sense of belonging and connection to local neighbourhoods, as highlighted in participants' feedback regarding having playgrounds close to home that are connected by walking and bike paths, comfortable meeting and gathering spaces and amenities, as well as opportunities to highlight Courtenay's unique sense of place.

The engagement process also heard from participants about their concerns regarding Courtenay's current playgrounds. The concerns shared included safety, cleanliness, and maintenance, as well as suggestions regarding public washroom access, connectivity via active transportation, and all season use. Specific concerns were also shared regarding substance use in parks and playgrounds, garbage and drug paraphernalia, sheltering in parks, and mental health and illness. Some of the issues raised are outside of the scope of the Park Playground Design Standards project (i.e. sheltering in parks or substance use in playgrounds), while other concerns informed updates to the project goals. More information is provided throughout this report and the Community Engagement Summary.

Demographics

The demographics of survey respondents are as follows:

- 68% are ages 35 - 65
- 91% indicated they were parents with children under the age of 18 living at home
- 68% identify as woman/girl, with the remaining identifying as man/boy (21%), gender diverse (2%), or preferred not to answer (9%)
- 80% live in Courtenay

Courtenay's Playgrounds Today

When asked where respondents usually play, the majority of respondents (70%) said in Courtenay's natural areas (e.g., forests and beaches,). Many also play in their backyard or their friend's / neighbour's backyards (62%), followed closely by neighbourhood park Playgrounds (61%).

Most respondents indicated that they value playgrounds that are safe and close to home, however proximity to other activities was not selected as a top priority (9%). Other important playground features included: having the most fun things to play (35%), being close to natural play experiences (36%) and having a different choices of play experiences (37%). Many participants commented that they often visit playgrounds in nearby communities (e.g., Comox, Cumberland, Parksville) because they feel safer in those locations and they offer more diverse play experiences and amenities.

Most people either walk (62%) or drive (62%) to the park playground that they visit the most. Walking or driving to the park playground was the most common response with other modes of transportation such as biking garnering only 27%. Many noted that they would prefer to walk or bike more often but they are concerned about safety, especially in urban areas.

When asked about barriers to accessing and using Courtenay's playgrounds, a majority of the respondents indicated that they do not feel safe (40%). Many respondents noted specific concerns about substance use happening in parks or near playground areas. However, additional reasons included that there are not enough fun and interesting things to do (32.1%) and the age / condition of play equipment (29.6%) doesn't meet their needs. Other key barriers frequently noted included lack of washrooms and lack of shade or covered areas for all seasons use.

Vision for Courtenay's Playgrounds

Respondents shared that the things they enjoy the most when playing outside are:

- Nature Play / Natural Features (boulders, logs, sand/mud play)
- Water Play (splash pads / water features, lazy rivers, creeks, fishing)
- Active Play Opportunities (climbing walls, slides, swings, monkey bars, hills for climbing and rolling, trampolines)
- Games (tag, hide and go seek, grounders)
- Free Play (pretend play, imaginative play)

Respondents shared a broad range of thoughts, ideas, and memories about how they love to play outside, indicating Courtenay's park playgrounds could provide positive experiences for the community by including many different types and ways to play.

Respondents were asked to share three words to describe their ideal outdoor play area. The top three words respondents used were:

- Safe / Clean
- Fun
- Accessible / Inclusive

Other frequently mentioned words included: Natural / Nature, Challenging, Variety, Diverse, Creative, Trees, Adventure, Engaging, Interactive, and Colourful.

The survey also set out to test the draft project goals by understanding the level of support from the public and determine if there were any gaps. Overall the project goals were strongly supported, with over 70% of respondents agreeing with each goal. A large number of respondents requested a greater emphasis on safety within the project goals or as separate goal altogether. Many also agreed that playgrounds play an important

role in bringing people together as a place of connection, family gathering and community, pointing to a strong case for including these as part of the project goals.

Additional feedback on the draft goals included:

- Ongoing maintenance and upkeep.
- Supporting amenities such as washrooms and benches/seating areas.
- Playground amenities that support all season use.
- Features for those with diverse sensory needs by providing quiet spaces.
- Using renewable, locally sourced materials where possible.

Respondents shared that they have the following preferences in relation to playgrounds:

- Experiencing nature (59%)
- Being adventurous (55%)
- Gather with family, friends, others (54%)

The least supported activities included being competitive / winning (6%), being alone / reflecting (11%), and being creative (14%). When asked about any experiences missing from those listed, respondents commonly answered that they would like to feel safe and enjoy a strong sense of community.

The top five playground elements that respondents want to see in new playgrounds are:

- New Play structures (59%)
- Nature Play Opportunities (55%)
- Splash Pad/Water Play (43%)
- Areas for Exploration (42%)
- Inclusive Play Features for all Ages (41%)

Image 2: Playground Inspiration – Most preferred elements



In addition to the play idea suggestions that focused around diverse multi-purpose play opportunities, spaces for community gathering, and places that are unique to Courtenay, a large number of responses expressed

concerns regarding safety in Courtenay's parks and playgrounds, with the primary focus on the evidence of substance use in these areas. Other general concerns outside the scope of park playground design included sheltering in parks, bylaw enforcement, and community mental health support.

Park and Playground Safety

There was a common theme in the overall community questionnaire where respondents expressed concerns regarding safety in Courtenay's parks and playgrounds. Respondents provided the following safety-related feedback in the open-ended options for each question:

- Cleanliness and safety (e.g. garbage, drug paraphernalia)
- Maintenance of the equipment itself
- Concerns regarding mental health and substance use related behaviors
- Sheltering in parks and playgrounds

A unique result of the community survey was that 68% of respondents identified as a woman or girl, well above the proportion of women in the general population. It is well documented that women and girls do not feel as safe in public space, including parks, as men. Emerging research out of the University of Leeds is demonstrating this difference in safety¹ and is providing insights into park design and programmatic interventions to increase the experience of, and actual safety for women in public spaces.² These research outcomes will be reviewed along with other leading practices as part of the development of the project standards.

Cleanliness and Maintenance

It must be noted that while survey respondents shared concerns regarding cleanliness and safety as it relates to the presence of garbage and drug paraphernalia, the data collected by the City's Park Operations team through its regular site inspections and public inquiry system do not reflect the heightened levels of issues expressed by some respondents. Staff acknowledge that there is likely a discrepancy between what is reported to the City through the public inquiry system and the direct experiences of residents, however staff would surmise based on their presence in the parks and playgrounds that there is likely a conflation of social issues and perceptions leading to some of these heightened concerns.

Signs are posted in all parks and playgrounds with contact information for the public should they observe an issue (i.e. garbage, maintenance) and wish to report it to the City's Operational Services division. The City encourages the public to use this information to report concerns so that staff can respond to address the issue in a timely manner. Any specific park and playground feedback regarding maintenance will be shared with the Park Operations department. Additionally, it is the one of the objectives of the Park Playground Design Standards project to consider the maintenance implications of different playground materials and equipment.

¹ "In Britain, women are three times more likely than men to feel unsafe in a park during the day..." *Safer Parks, Improving Access for Women and Girls*, Keep Britain Tidy, Make Space for Girls, the University of Leeds and West Yorkshire Combined Authority, (2023), [646341c95ad76799fa9240fe_230509_Safer Parks \(reduced size\).pdf \(website-files.com\)](https://www.files.com/646341c95ad76799fa9240fe_230509_Safer_Parks_(reduced_size).pdf)

² *Safer Parks for Women and Girls Guidance*, Make Space for Girls and University of Leeds, [Make Space for Girls](#)

Parks and Open Spaces Bylaw

The open-ended survey responses included approximately thirty (30) responses indicating support for the proposed Parks and Open Spaces Bylaw and for increased bylaw enforcement in parks. The feedback received was related to:

- Regulation of temporary sheltering in parks
- Enforcement of dog on leash regulations
- Addressing offensive and indecent behavior

Substance Use & Mental Health in Parks and Playgrounds

The majority of safety related concerns raised were in regards to substance use in parks and playgrounds, particularly in relation to the presence of drug paraphernalia, children witnessing substance use, and experiences related to individuals in mental health or substance use crisis. Some respondents also indicated they no longer access local parks and playgrounds due to fear of and experience with negative and upsetting interactions, indicating they travel to parks in other jurisdictions where they feel safer. Based on City data related to reported issues in parks and playgrounds, it is likely that there is a conflation of social issues occurring throughout the City with concerns and perceptions of safety in parks and playgrounds. However, there is clearly a need for increased support for individuals suffering from mental illness or the harms of substance use, as the increase in erratic behaviors is causing concern for children and families as they make decisions about attending local parks.

The City does not have the authority to regulate substance use in parks or public spaces. Substance use occurring in parks is currently permitted under Provincial statute and although the Province of BC has attempted to amend the decriminalization policy to prohibit substance use in parks, playgrounds and other similar spaces, a recent BC Supreme Court decision has struck down location prohibitions in the public interest.³ The concerns raised in the consideration of the case highlight the complexity and difficulty of balancing the current toxic drug supply crisis and associated harm reduction efforts to reduce deaths from toxic drug poisonings, with community safety and amenities that support healthy child development. It reinforces the importance of advocating to the Province for adequate harm reduction, mental health and addiction treatment facilities, as well as supportive and affordable housing in the Comox Valley, especially as residents share that they are not engaging in healthy and active pursuits in their neighbourhoods.

Investment in Playgrounds as a Strategy to Address Safety

Well designed and maintained playgrounds can act as centres of community, bringing diverse groups together to play, socialize, and recreate in the outdoors. Activated and well-used parks and playgrounds increase perceptions and experiences of safety and contribute to neighbourhood and community well-being. Investment in Courtenay's playgrounds, and by extension in the City's parks and public spaces, is one of the strategies and tactics the City can utilize to respond to concerns raised about safety. Examples of how this can be done are as follows:

- Effective design (specific to this project) can reduce safety concerns through application of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED); considerations for lighting, materials, and visibility; building of attractive and interesting play spaces that draw the community in and activate the play spaces.

³ Reasons for Judgement, Supreme Court of British Columbia, Harm Reduction Nurses Association v. His Majesty The King in Right of The Province of British Columbia and the Attorney General of British Columbia, (2023), <https://drugpolicy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Chief-Justice-Hinkson-re-Harm-Reduction-Nurses-Association-v.-British-Columbia-Attorney-General-12-29.pdf>

- Effective placemaking whereby the investment in playgrounds and parks in a thoughtful way results in increased usage and activation of the space, making it a more welcoming and engaging environment for all community members.
- Utilizing playgrounds and surrounding amenities as a way to bring communities together in diverse and inclusive ways to build relationships and connections, i.e. as “village commons.”

Emerging Directions: Vision Statement, Goals and Guiding Principles

The following working vision statement has been developed through the feedback and comments received from the community engagement process:

“Our City’s park playgrounds are safe, fun, and inclusive places, where community members of all ages and abilities can gather, socialize, and play. Well-connected by paths and trails, playgrounds are the centre of activity in Courtenay’s parks - inviting and comfortable to enjoy at all year long.”

The playground system will offer a diverse range of innovative and exciting play opportunities, allowing everybody to challenge their abilities, stimulate their curiosity, and foster exploration and imagination. Each park playground will provide a different experience, all while celebrating Courtenay’s unique identity and sense of place.”

The original project goals have been revisited and revised to reflect key principles highlighted through the community engagement process and are identified below:

Image 3: Revised Park Playground Design Standards Goals and Guiding Principles



The following emerging focus areas have been identified as key considerations to be addressed in the Park Playground Design Standards:

- Accessible / Inclusive Design
- Siting the Playground
- Pathways and Connectivity
- Enclosure and Boundaries
- Surfacing and Edging
- Play Elements and Opportunities
- Trees & Planting
- Supporting Amenities
- Standard Amenities (e.g., gathering spaces, waste receptacles, shade)
- Special Amenities (e.g., washrooms, picnic shelters, game tables)
- Programming

Next Steps

With the community engagement phase complete, the project will now move into Phase Two (2). The consultant team will draft the Park Playground Design Standards based on the draft vision, goals, and guiding principles as presented. The draft will be posted for public feedback followed by another presentation to Council this Spring 2024 for finalization.

POLICY ANALYSIS:

Official Community Plan (OCP), 2022:

The Park Playground Design Standards Project considers and incorporates several OCP thematic policies and objectives:

Building and Landscapes:

- Objective 6: Municipal buildings and site design demonstrate leadership in building performance, accessibility, and design.

Parks and Recreation:

- Objective 1: Parkland in the form of natural areas, open spaces, and outdoor recreation is of sufficient amounts, is well-connected, equitably distributed, and is of high quality to enhance liveability throughout the city.
- Objective 2: Recreation amenities, services, and programming are expanded and enhanced to support increased health, wellness, and social connections for all residents.
- Objective 4: The parks and recreation system exemplifies leadership in reconciliation, climate action, equity, and community well-being through its services, programs, and partnerships.
- Objective 5: Partnerships are in place to achieve parks and recreation objectives.

Social Infrastructure

- Objective 1: All Courtenay residents experience equitable access to services.
- Objective 2: Coordinated, inclusionary, and systems-based responses are in place to address evolving complex social issues.
- Objective 3: Physical spaces are designed with the needs for social connection and accessibility in mind.
- Objective 4: Neighbourhood and community development-based organizing are leveraged as a source of community capacity and resilience.

Parks and Recreation Master Plan, 2019

3.2.1 Apply the design guidelines below to the design of new and upgraded parks:

- Use universal design principles to welcome all park visitors, including some pathway loops that are fully accessible in City-wide parks, and other parks where possible
- Encourage parks to include gathering places, with seating and spaces appropriate for picnics and group activities according to the type and size of the park
- For parks that include parking areas, design the parking efficiently, minimize the amount of hard (or gravel) surface, and keep the parking as close to the perimeter of the park as possible
- For large parking lots, include trees, planting and rain gardens during upgrading projects or new construction
- Plant trees in parks to the degree possible for shade and as a contribution to the urban forest
- Use Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles, balancing these with the need to protect and enhance habitats
- Provide seating in all parks with significant levels of use
- Design parks with the goal of increasing creativity and interest, e.g., more interactive play environments and equipment, allow children to experience more nature in parks, and provide options for all ages of children, youth and adults
- Explore opportunities to integrate outdoor exercise equipment in or near playgrounds in community parks
- When planning and designing new parks, consider life cycle cost analysis and water and energy consumption
- Design parks with consideration for protection and enhancement of environmental resources and include rainwater/stormwater infiltration where possible
- Celebrate local artists in parks, with more public art such as murals, mosaics, and sculptures

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

The project costs and engagement activities required to develop the Park Playground Design Standards are funded in the 2023 capital budget through the Growing Communities Fund received from the Province. The City has allocated an extra \$1 million in grant funding from the Province of BC Growing Communities Fund for Courtenay playgrounds over the next two years.

ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS:

The development of the Parks Playground and Design Standards is part of the 2023/2024 Recreation, Culture and Community Services Department work plan. RCCS will be the strategic lead on the project and include Operational Services - Parks Services, Engineering Services, and Development Services as internal interest holders in the project.

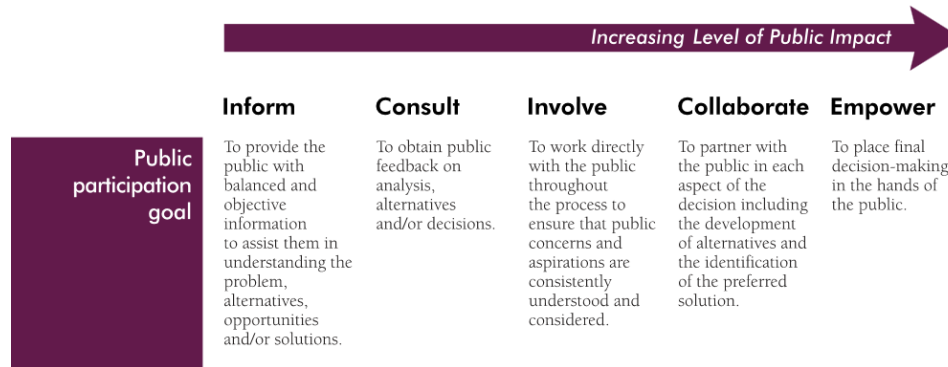
STRATEGIC PRIORITIES REFERENCE:

This initiative will help address the following strategic priorities:

- Parks and Recreation - Provision of public amenities through development (requirements for parks, trees, accessible benches, and public art)

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

Staff consulted the public based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation:



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OPTIONS:

1. THAT the *Let's Play, Courtenay!* Park Playground Design Standards Community Engagement Summary (Attachment 1) be received for information; and THAT Council direct staff to proceed with the next phase of the project based on the Emerging Directions draft vision, goals and guiding principles contained in this report.
2. THAT Council direct staff to report back with recommendations on sharing the Park Playground Design Standards survey results and feedback with the Provincial government as it relates to mental health, substance use, and homelessness in municipal playgrounds and parks.
3. THAT Council provide alternative direction to staff.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Park Playground Design Standards Community Engagement Summary
2. Let's Play Playground Design Contest – Grade 5/6 Class Submission
3. Park Playground Design Standards Emerging Directions: Vision Statement, Goals and Guiding Principles

Prepared by: Joy Chan, Manager of Business Administration, Recreation, Culture and Community Services

Concurrence: Susie Saunders, Director of Recreation, Culture and Community Services
(Acting City Manager)