



The Corporation of the City of Courtenay

# STAFF REPORT

**To:** Council

**File No.:** 6120-20

**From:** Director of Recreation, Culture, and Community Services

**Date:** September 11, 2024

**Subject:** Let's Play, Courtenay! Final Draft Park Playground Design Standards

## PURPOSE:

For Council to approve the Let's Play, Courtenay! Park Playground Design Standards (Attachment 1).

## BACKGROUND:

The Park Playground Design Standards (PPDS) are 2023 - 2026 Council strategic priority. These standards provide guiding principles and best practices for improving Courtenay's park playgrounds, emphasizing diversifying play experiences and enhancing accessibility and inclusion. They are informed by the vision and goals of the Official Community Plan (OCP, 2022) and the recommendations of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan (PRMP, 2019), in addition to feedback through community engagement. The project phasing and project process is outlined in Image 1:

Image 1: Project Process

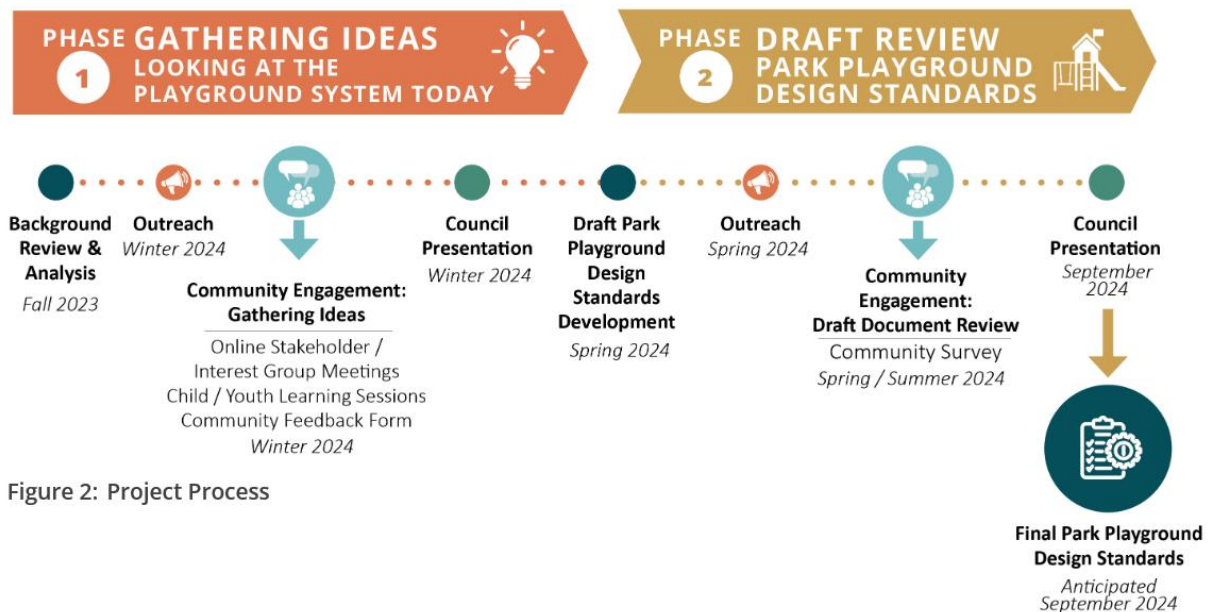


Figure 2: Project Process

In January 2024, the City initiated the "Let's Play, Courtenay!" Park Playground Design Standards project to involve residents in envisioning the future of play in Courtenay. The PPDS project included community engagement as well as leading practice reviews to establish draft design guidelines, followed by internal and external review, to develop this report outlining recommended park playground design standards for the

City's consideration. The playground design standards, if adopted, will guide the City's approach to playground renewal and development by identifying recommended standards to be applied.

At the March 13, 2024 Council meeting, staff presented the Phase 1 Community Engagement Summary and Emerging Directions, including a draft vision statement, goals, and guiding principles.<sup>1</sup>

### **Phase 1 Community Engagement Summary**

Phase 1 community engagement heard from 397 participants and respondents and included the following activities:

1. Community questionnaire available on-line between January 23rd to February 20th, 2024.
2. Two in-person child and youth workshops: aged preschool and 8-12.
3. Online interest group meetings: community interest groups and one internal City department interest group.
4. *Let's Play, Courtenay!* Park Playground Design Drawing Contest

The Phase 1 engagement revealed the following key findings related to Courtenay's park playgrounds:

- Preferences for outdoor play
- Desire for nature-based play areas and inclusive spaces
- Innovative and imaginative play structures,
- Splash pads and opportunities for adventurous play
- Need for improving public washroom access
- Enhancing connectivity through active transportation
- Ensuring playgrounds are usable year-round
- Issues related to safety, cleanliness, and maintenance
- Concerns related to substance use in parks, litter, drug paraphernalia, sheltering in parks, and mental health issues.

The results also highlighted the potential for playgrounds to serve as vibrant community gathering spots that foster a sense of belonging and connection to local neighbourhoods. Participants expressed the importance of having playgrounds near their homes, connected by walking and bike paths, and featuring comfortable meeting spaces and amenities, while also reflecting Courtenay's unique character.

Some of the concerns raised, such as sheltering in parks and substance use in playgrounds, fall outside the scope of the Park Playground Design Standards project. However, to reflect the significant amount of responses related to safety, the project's goals were updated to include safety and comfort as a lens in the development of the draft PPDS.

### **Emerging Directions: Draft Vision, Goals, and Guiding Principles**

At the March 13, 2024 Council meeting, staff presented the draft vision, goals, and guiding principles for the development of the Park Playground Design Standards.

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<sup>1</sup> [Park Playground Design Standards Community Engagement Summary and Emerging Directions \(escribemeetings.com\)](https://www.escribemeetings.com)

The following draft vision statement was developed as an aspirational benchmark for future choices about new or upgraded playgrounds. It evolved from the engagement process, previous park planning work and strategic documents, background research and informed by City staff and Council.

*“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 following draft guiding principles were presented with the goal of bringing the vision statement to life by offering direction for the development of playground design standards and future projects. These principles serve as a checklist; if the design standards align with them, they will support the goals of the Park Playground Design Standards project.

Image 2: Revised Park Playground Design Standards Goals and Guiding Principles



Following receipt of the staff report, Council resolved the following:

*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.*

*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.*

## **DISCUSSION:**

### **Phase 2 Draft Park Playground Design Standards and Engagement**

Building on the emerging directions presented to Council at the March 13, 2024 council meeting and informed by the Phase 1 engagement process, as well as leading practice reviews, the draft playground design standards were developed during phase two of the project. The draft standards were made available to the public for review on the City's project website. A survey was open between June 20 and July 12, 2024, to collect feedback on the proposed vision statement, guiding principles, and nine design standards. The survey included an open question to collect any further input the public had on the draft PPDS. A detailed summary of the community engagement findings from Phase 2 can be found in the Let's Play, Courtenay! Park Playground Design Standards Community Engagement Summary Update – Phase 2 attached as an appendix to the PPDS.

The draft Park Playground Design Standards received significant support from the community:

- 87.7% of respondents supported the draft vision statement
- 92.6% of respondents supported the draft guiding principles
- 87.7% of respondents supported the draft design standards

An open-ended question was provided for respondents to contribute additional information on the draft PPDS. The following themes arose from the feedback and have been addressed in the document accordingly:

1. **Safety Concerns:** Safety concerns around substance use in or around playgrounds, pathways and connecting trails and sheltering in parks was highlighted by respondents.
  - a. While substance use and sheltering are outside the scope of the PPDS project, the PPDS highlights a range of actions to encourage safe and activated parks playgrounds such as community or recreational programming, increased opportunities for safe garbage disposal including sharps bins on an as-needed basis, and integration of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles as a lens in site planning, lighting and other placemaking elements.
2. **Need for Shade in Playgrounds:** Respondents indicated a desire to increase shade in playgrounds by planting trees and including shade structures.
  - a. The PPDS have been revised to include recommendations regarding shade trees and shade structures at all park playgrounds (not just Community Park Playgrounds), including considerations for alternative shade methods while trees are established.
3. **Fencing as a Safety Measure:** Fencing is desired in playground areas to prevent young children or individuals who are neurodivergent from bolting or running from unfenced playground areas and to address safety concerns related to traffic and roads.
  - a. The PPDS have been revised to include the requirement for fully-fenced playgrounds in immediate proximity to highways, arterial, or collector streets and at universally accessible playgrounds.

4. Request for Swings or a Variety of Swing Equipment: Significant desire for more swings or different types of swings in Courtenay's playgrounds.
  - a. The PPDS have been updated to prioritize locating swings in playgrounds where there is sufficient adjacent open space to address the safety surface area requirements for swings.

### **Park Playground Design Standards Summary**

The Park Playground Design Standards document pulls together community feedback, highlighting the voices of children and families, and research to present to Council a set of standards and guidelines to inform playground renewal and development in the City into the future. It reflects not only the physical amenities required for successful and engaging play structures, but also the community value and potential associated with well-designed play elements and amenities. If adopted by Council, the PPDS will lead Courtenay towards a future where park playgrounds bring people together, enhance social connection and physical well-being, and attract positive use and visitation in Courtenay's parks.

The PPDS outlines Courtenay's current park playground system, a vision for the future including guiding principles, provides nine recommended design standards, and outlines next steps for implementation.

#### *Playground Benchmarking and Future Needs Assessments*

An important project step was to benchmark Courtenay's current playground system and inventory. As established by the Parks and Recreational Master Plan, 2019, Courtenay has eight community park playgrounds and thirteen neighbourhood park playgrounds, with an additional playground being added in 2022 (Cozy Corner Preschool playground), and a new playground (Brookfield Park) to be added later this year or early next year.

These parks were mapped along with Courtenay's community, neighbourhood and nature parks that do not currently have any playground infrastructure as well as School District 71 school playgrounds. Each playground was also mapped with its most recent condition score ranging from one through five: one (1) rating being in excellent condition and a five (5) rating being in poor condition and needing replacement within one year. At the time of this report, based on condition assessments, three playgrounds are due for replacement in the next year, 11 playgrounds in the next two to five years and nine playgrounds in the next 15-25 years. The PPDS will help inform capital budget planning through the community-informed service levels established through this project. The mapping of the current system will be combined with future mapping work being conducted through the Complete Communities project later this year. The combination of these mapping exercises will identify gaps in playground infrastructure, including taking into consideration both the City's park playgrounds and the School District's inventory, alongside population growth projections. The future mapping exercise will also identify any gaps related to the following planning considerations for playground distribution:

- As per the PRMP, all residents are to have access within 800 metres to a community park and 400 metres to a neighbourhood park (PRMP, 2019).
- Universal accessibility and inclusive features
- An age range inventory to identify the distribution of tot lots (0-4), pre-school aged (2-5), and school aged (5-12), as well as intergenerational opportunities such as fit parks.
- Nature based playground additions to parks classified as Nature Parks based on a needs basis, supported by park management plans, and only in the absence of any restrictive covenants.

The process as described will be key to identifying key priority investment areas in Courtenay's park playground system, including considerations and opportunities to consolidate investments. As per the PPDS, there are likely areas that are well-served by playgrounds, that through the reduction of playground infrastructure or integration of alternative play strategies that are less capital intensive (i.e. nature based play), the City can increase its investment in certain locations in order to achieve higher quality play experiences.

#### *The Park Playground Design Standards*

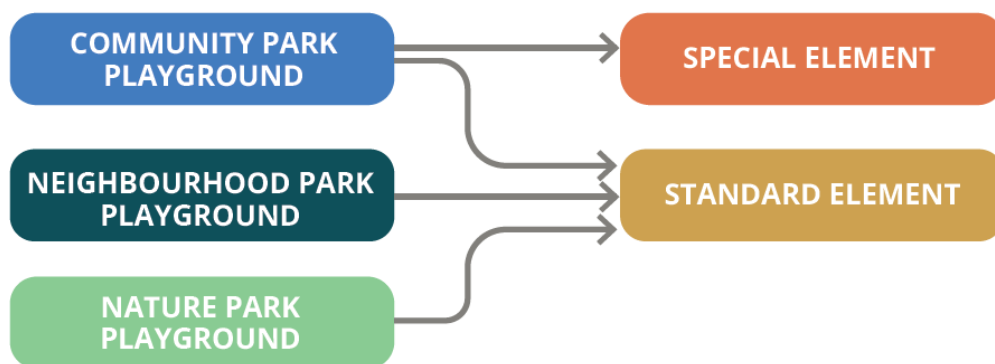
The PPDS provides nine standards that will direct the development and enhancement of Courtenay's park playgrounds, and are aligned with the vision and guiding principles established through the engagement and research process. Each design standard is accompanied by background and rationale, key elements to be implemented, and additional considerations such as public art, playground themes, and elements that reflect the unique local character of the Courtenay region.

The nine standards are:

1. Accessible and Inclusive Design: Plan welcoming inclusive, fun play environments for all ages and abilities.
2. Siting the Playground: Integrate the playground seamlessly with the park and surrounding neighbourhood.
3. Pathways and Connectivity: Provide safe, well-connected paths of travel to access park playgrounds.
4. Boundaries and Enclosures: Assess site features to determine appropriate boundaries and levels of enclosure.
5. Playground Surfacing and Edging: Implement resilient, easy to maintain, inclusive surfacing and edging.
6. Play Elements and Opportunities: Provide a wide range of play opportunities for all to enjoy.
7. Trees and Planting: Integrate shade trees and planting areas surrounding playgrounds.
8. Supporting Amenities: Provide a range of supporting amenities to activate park playgrounds.
9. Programming: Encourage community use of park playgrounds with diverse programming.

The playground standards are structured based on three playground classifications: community, neighbourhood, and nature play areas. The standards articulate what features and amenities are to be included in all park playgrounds and other special features that are prioritized for Community Park Playgrounds, as these serve residents from across the city and beyond, as depicted in the following flow chart (Image 3). In addition to providing guidance on play structure elements and other design considerations, the standards provide recommendations on the supporting amenities that should be included in park playground designs.

Image 3: PPDS - Standard Elements and Special Elements Flow Chart:



### Implementation of the Park Playground Design Standards

The implementation of the Park Playground Design Standards will occur over time through playground renewals and new playground developments. As each current playground comes up for renewal or new playgrounds are developed, the PPDS will be applied in the design of the play structure, siting within the park, and supporting amenities.

Community park playgrounds, and some neighbourhood or nature park playgrounds, will require the support and expertise of landscape design professionals to ensure the delivery of playgrounds and amenities that align with the PPDS, including play elements, siting, boundaries, pathways, accessibility, plantings and amenities, as well as support community engagement.

The City's current financial plan budgets for one playground renewal every two years, with historical playground renewal project budgets of \$120,000 (including in 2025) which would result in each current playground being renewed on a 46-year schedule. However, starting in 2027 the playground capital renewal budgets were increased to \$320,000 every two years with additional funds on alternating years to support playground design. These budget adjustments were made prior to the completion of the PPDS and as per the financial implications section of the PPDS, neighbourhood park playgrounds can range in costs from \$75,000 to \$385,000, while community park playgrounds can range in costs from \$240,000 to \$1,770,000. The PPDS provides recommendations to support lifecycle planning for playgrounds, with play equipment lifespans ranging from ten to 25-plus years.

Should Council adopt the PPDS the next steps to support the implementation of the standards include:

1. Asset Inventory of Courtenay's Playgrounds: Conduct a comprehensive inventory of Courtenay's playgrounds as they relate to the nine playground standards. This inventory should be reviewed regularly.
2. Life-cycle planning: Ongoing life-cycle analysis to support asset management planning by considering factors such as usage levels, safety issues, accessibility, the age and condition of play elements, manufacturing quality, materials, climate and weather, and location.
3. Playground Infrastructure and Amenities Mapping: Include playground infrastructure in the Complete Communities Project to identify Courtenay's playground infrastructure and amenities needs and gaps, especially as it relates to growth.

The completion of these steps will inform updated capital budgets, based on life cycle planning and infrastructure mapping, which will be included in the City's financial planning for Council's consideration.

As Courtenay moves forward with the PPDS guidelines, it is important to note that Courtenay's playground system is part of an interconnected ecosystem that is affected by changes in neighbourhoods and the community as a whole as it grows. It is crucial to plan, implement, and continuously reassess, as well as remain flexible in response to unexpected developments and ongoing public feedback.

#### *Next Steps*

Should Council adopt and approve the Parks Playground Design Standards, the standards will be applied to upcoming playground projects starting with: Brookfield Park new neighbourhood park playground and Woodcote Park playground replacement. Brookfield park is anticipated to be completed by the late fall of this year or early in 2025.

As a community park, Woodcote Park will require further park planning with a landscape design professional to ensure the PPDS guidelines are appropriately applied, other supporting amenities in the park are considered in addition to the park playground replacement, and the community engagement and feedback received on the Woodcote Park playground replacement project are all considered as part of the playground renewal process. The Woodcote Park Playground replacement is anticipated to be completed in the Spring of 2025.

#### **POLICY ANALYSIS:**

##### **Official Community Plan (OCP), 2022:**

###### *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 PPDS outline the following financial implications of adopting the design standards, and are based on general assumptions and historical construction data from similarly-scaled projects.

Neighborhood park playgrounds can range in costs from \$75,000 to \$385,000, while community park playgrounds can range in costs from \$240,000 to \$1,770,000. Nature play areas can range between \$50,000 to \$220,000.

Based on the Playground Condition Assessments – Map C of the Park Playground Design Standards, the following are the projected capital implications (including planning, design, and construction costs):

- 2024 – 1 Community Park Replacement (Woodcote Park \$577,500) & 1 new Neighborhood Park (Brookfield \$225,000)
- 2025 – 2 Community Parks (\$480,000-\$3,540,000) & 1 Neighborhood Park (\$75,000-\$385,000)
- 2026-2028 – 3 Community Parks (720,000-\$5,310,000) and 7 Neighborhood Parks (\$525,000 - \$2,695,000)

The City has allocated \$1 million in grant funding from the Province of BC Growing Communities Fund (GCF) for Courtenay playgrounds in the 2024-2028 financial capital plan. Staff anticipate the \$1 million budget will be fully spent on the following playground capital projects: Park Playground Design Standards, Woodcote

Park playground replacement, Brookfield neighbourhood park playground (new), and one further neighbourhood park playground renewal.

The 2024-2028 capital plan also includes the following funding allocations

- \$120,000 in 2025 (tax funded) and \$320,000 in 2027 (gaming funded) for playground renewal
- \$30,000 in 2026 and 2028 for playground design (tax funded)
- Harmston Park: \$75,000 design (2024), \$750,000 construction (2025) with \$500,000 funded through GCF and \$250,000 through Park Reserve.
- Bill Moore: \$75,000 design (2024), \$1,000,000 construction (2026) with \$500,000 funded through GCF, \$250,000 through Park Reserve and \$250,000 through tax funding.

The capital budget for playground renewals will be mainly funded by tax revenue. However, there are other funding opportunities that can be considered and staff will be exploring through the relevant bylaw updates:

- Funds through the Development Cost Charges bylaw to fund park amenities in growth areas limited to:
  - o Fencing
  - o Landscaping
  - o Drainage and irrigation
  - o Trails
  - o Washrooms and change rooms
  - o Playing field equipment
- Amenity Cost Charges (ACCs) for funding playground equipment in play areas that are part of the new housing legislation Bill 44 to support infill and new growth.
- Third-party grant sources: senior government funding, non-government funding, donations, fundraising, community partnerships and private-public partnerships

As per the PPDS, the annual operating and maintenance cost implications estimates for new or renewed playgrounds are as follows:

- \$4,500 to \$75,000 for Community Parks
- \$1,500 to \$19,250 for Neighbourhood Parks
- \$1,000 to \$6,600 for Nature Park Play Areas

Operating budgets will be adjusted based on the addition or renewal of playgrounds in line with the PPDS standards and according to the unique elements of each playground, and will be included in financial plans for Council consideration.

Based on the above high-level financial review, it is clear that the City will need to be strategic in its investment in playground replacements through the Five Year Financial Planning Process as well as consideration of alternative funding sources to achieve a sustainable service level. A needs assessment and asset inventory as recommended by the PPDS that considers the School District 71 inventory, playground design standards and implementation strategy and an assessment through the Complete Communities Project will provide an investment strategy that may result in a reduction in traditional out of the box playgrounds and transition to fewer well-designed playgrounds that meet the desires of the community. Once this assessment work is complete it will inform adjustments to the City's financial plan moving forward.

**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. Implementation of the Park Playground Design Standards will require collaborative efforts from the following internal departments: Development Services, Operational Services, Infrastructure and Environmental Engineering, and Recreation, Culture, and Community Services.

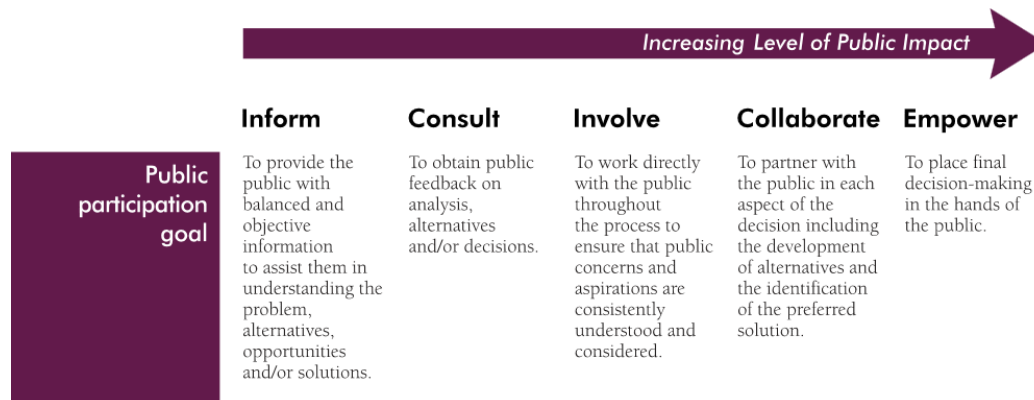
**STRATEGIC PRIORITIES REFERENCE:**

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 Council adopt the *Let's Play, Courtenay!* Park Playground Design Standards (Attachment 1); and, THAT Council direct staff to proceed with the implementation of the *Let's Play, Courtenay!* Park Playground Design Standards.
2. THAT Council provide alternative direction to staff.

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Attachment 1: Let's Play, Courtenay! Final Park Playground Design Standards

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

Reviewed by: Stuart Carmichael, Acting Manager of Parks Services, Operational Services  
Susie Saunders, Director of Recreation, Culture and Community Services

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