

1. Seal Bay Park Master Plan Update



Purpose of the park plan update

The current Seal Bay park master plan dates back to 1998. While most of the information about the park's natural features has not changed, other information is out of date, such as site plans and trail maps and proposed improvements.

A plan update is an opportunity to check in with residents and park users on their long term vision for the park.

The Comox Valley Regional District wants to hear whether any trail use designations (e.g. multi-use, hike only) should be changed, how trail signs can be improved for better orientation within the park, improvements at the park entrances and how to protect the park's natural ecosystems into the future.



What is a park master plan?

A park master plan **describes the park's** natural ecosystems, history, recreation and cultural uses. It establishes a long-term vision, management objectives and implementation strategies.

Based on the vision and objectives, the park master plan may establish **management zones** such as wilderness conservation zones to be managed to protect special natural features or environmentally sensitive areas, low intensity recreation zones with trail systems and high intensity recreation zones which include parking lots, picnic areas and other public amenities.

Implementation strategies may identify improvements to trails, parking areas, signs and maps or initiatives to control invasive species, protect and restore ecosystems.

Public involvement

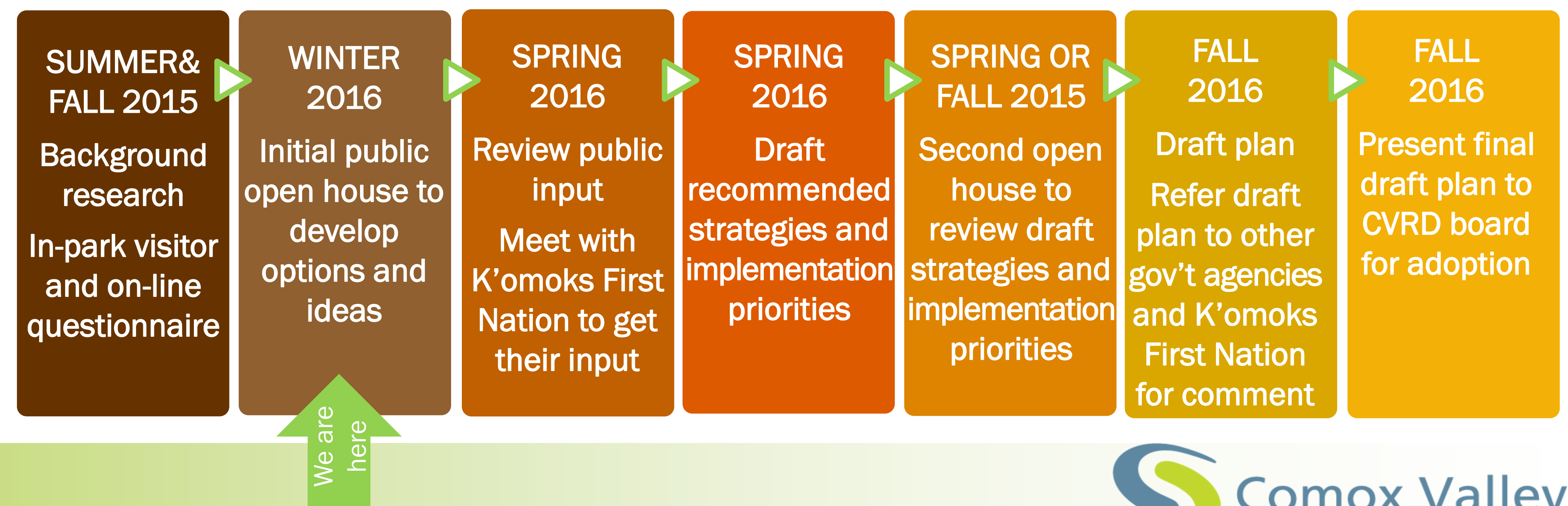
Based on the input gathered through in-park survey this summer, the CVRD developed questions for discussion at this open house.

Please review the poster boards and provide us with your feedback on the accompanying questionnaire.

You can also participate in focused discussions on key topics starting at 4:30 p.m. and again at 5:45 p.m.

All open house information and questionnaire will be posted at: www.comoxvalleyrd.ca/sealbay.

»»» The Planning Process



2. Survey Results, Trail Use

Seal Bay Park survey responses

During summer 2015, CVRD staff surveyed park visitors in the park to learn what they appreciate most about Seal Bay Park and want to see preserved and what they think needs improvement over the coming years. A questionnaire was also posted on-line and promoted in the local newspaper and on facebook.

As of January 8, 2016, 241 residents have completed the in-park and on-line questionnaire. Following are highlights of the results.

Most visitors drive to the park, 10% walk or bike

91% of questionnaire respondents say they drive to the park or share a ride. However, a significant number, 10%, either bike or walk.

Bates Road parking lot is busy weekends

81% of respondents say they do not usually have a problem finding parking. 19 % say they do. Many of those who say they do, indicate that parking is usually a problem on weekends.

Walking or dog-walking are the most popular activities

51% respondents say when they visit the park, they most often walk (without dog), while 39% visit the park to walk their dogs. 24% jog, 15% bike and 18% say they ride their horse. Note that the percentages do not add up to 100% since some people indicate more than one activity.

48% visit the park at least once a week or more often

20% of respondents say they visit the park almost daily in the summer, 28% once or twice a week, 26% once or twice a month. The remaining 25% visit the park every other month, once or twice a year or very irregularly.

Steady visitor use continues through the off-season, with 13% visiting the park almost daily, 30% once or twice a week, and 23% once or twice a month. 34% visit the park every other month or less frequently in the off season.

Conflict with other users is low

A majority, 73%, of respondents, say they never experience conflict with other users. 24% say once in a while, and 4% say every few visits. No one indicated “every second visit or so” or “almost every visit”.

Trails on water side most popular

45% usually use the trails on the water side; however, many use a variety of trails. The Swamp loop (35%) and horse-bike loop (32%) are the most popular trails on the inland side of Bates Road.

Park a destination for residents from across the valley

28% of survey respondents say they live in the City of Courtenay, 25% live in electoral area ‘B’, 15% are from the Town of Comox, 14% are visitors from outside the valley, 10% come from electoral area ‘C’, 5% from Cumberland and 4% from electoral area ‘A’.

Residents are generally satisfied with Seal Bay Park

Overall satisfaction rating is high with 55% rating the park at 5, 16% give it a rating of 4.5 and 24% give it a 4. Only 5% rate the park at 3 or lower.

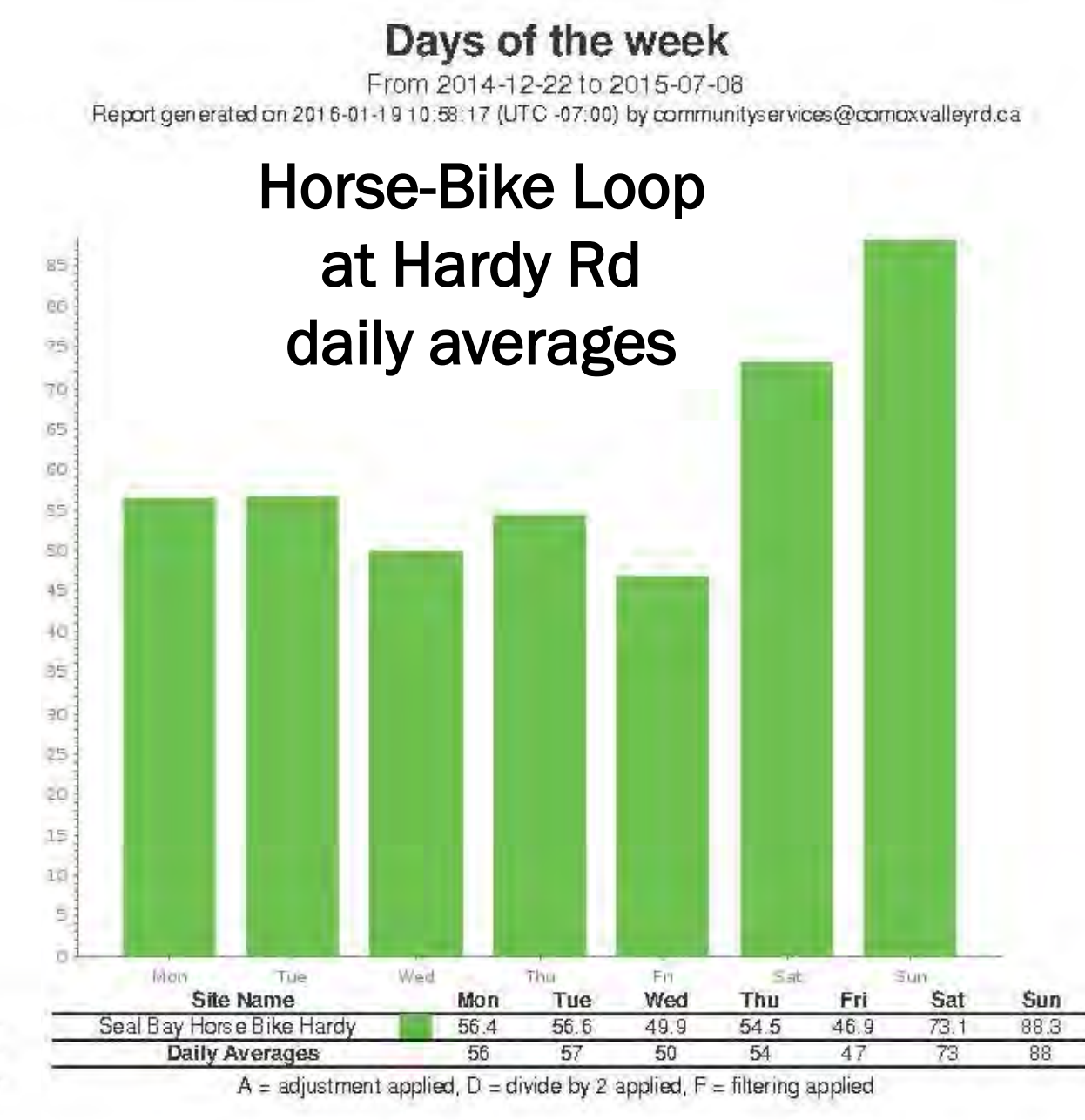
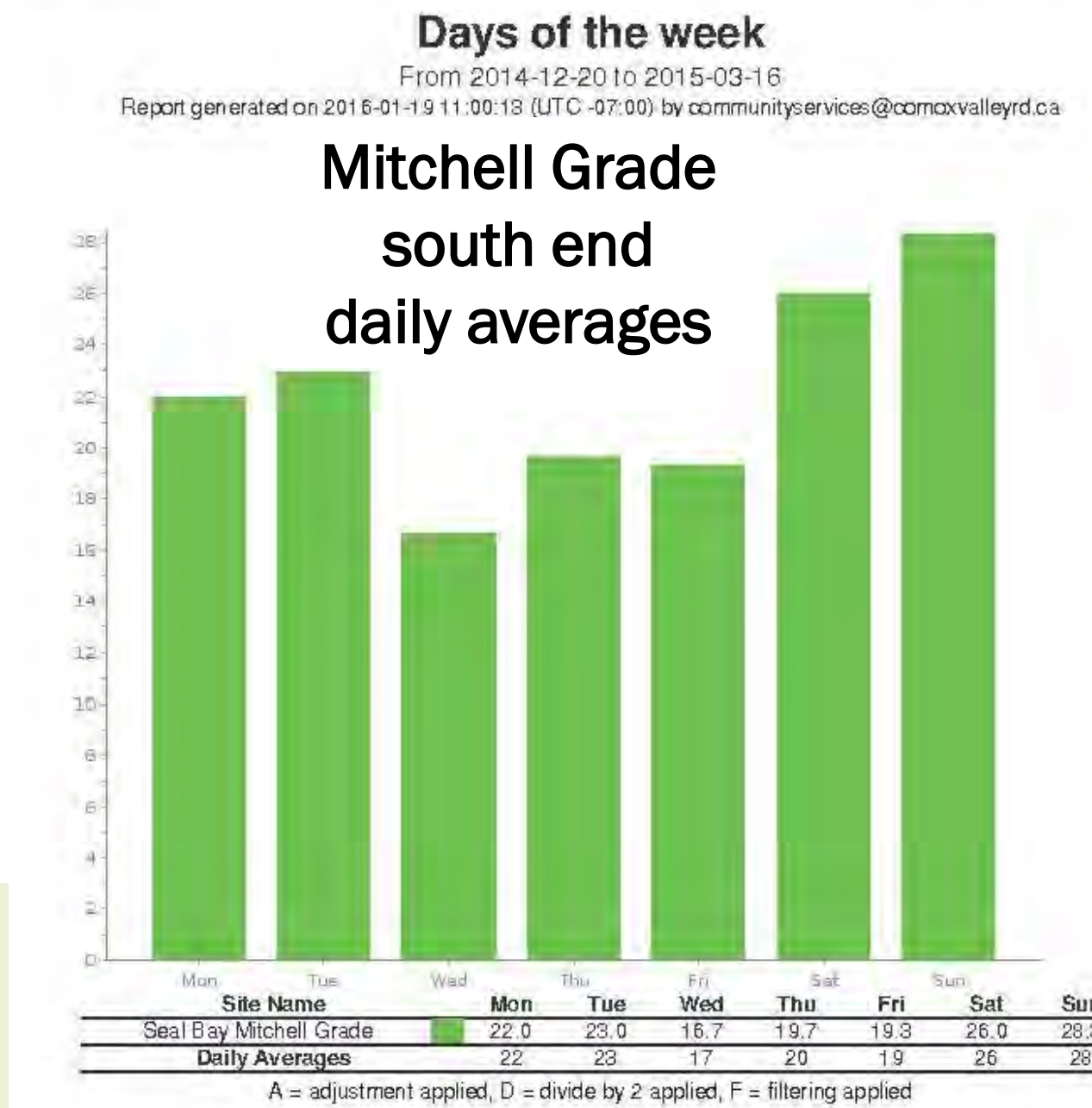
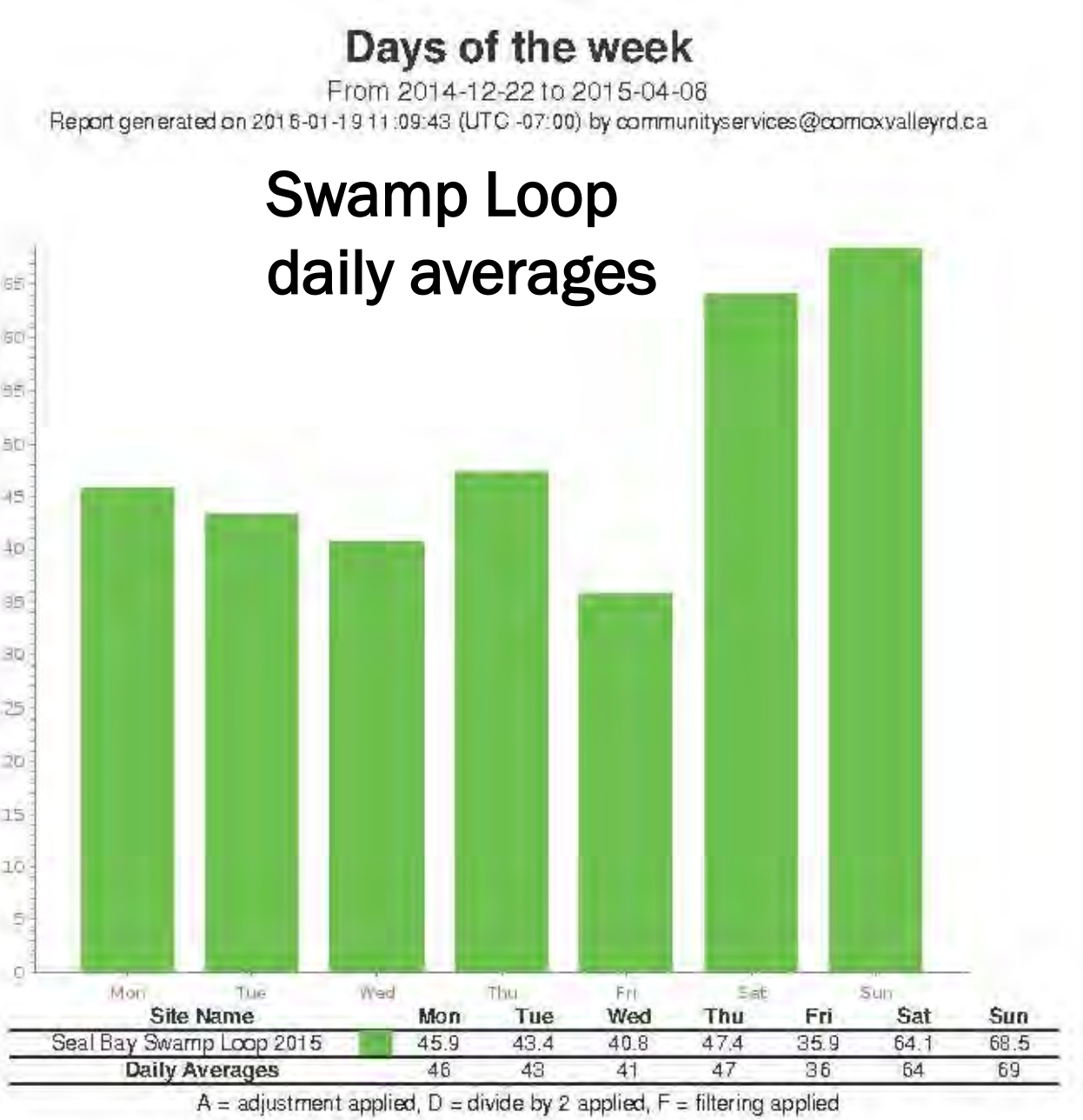
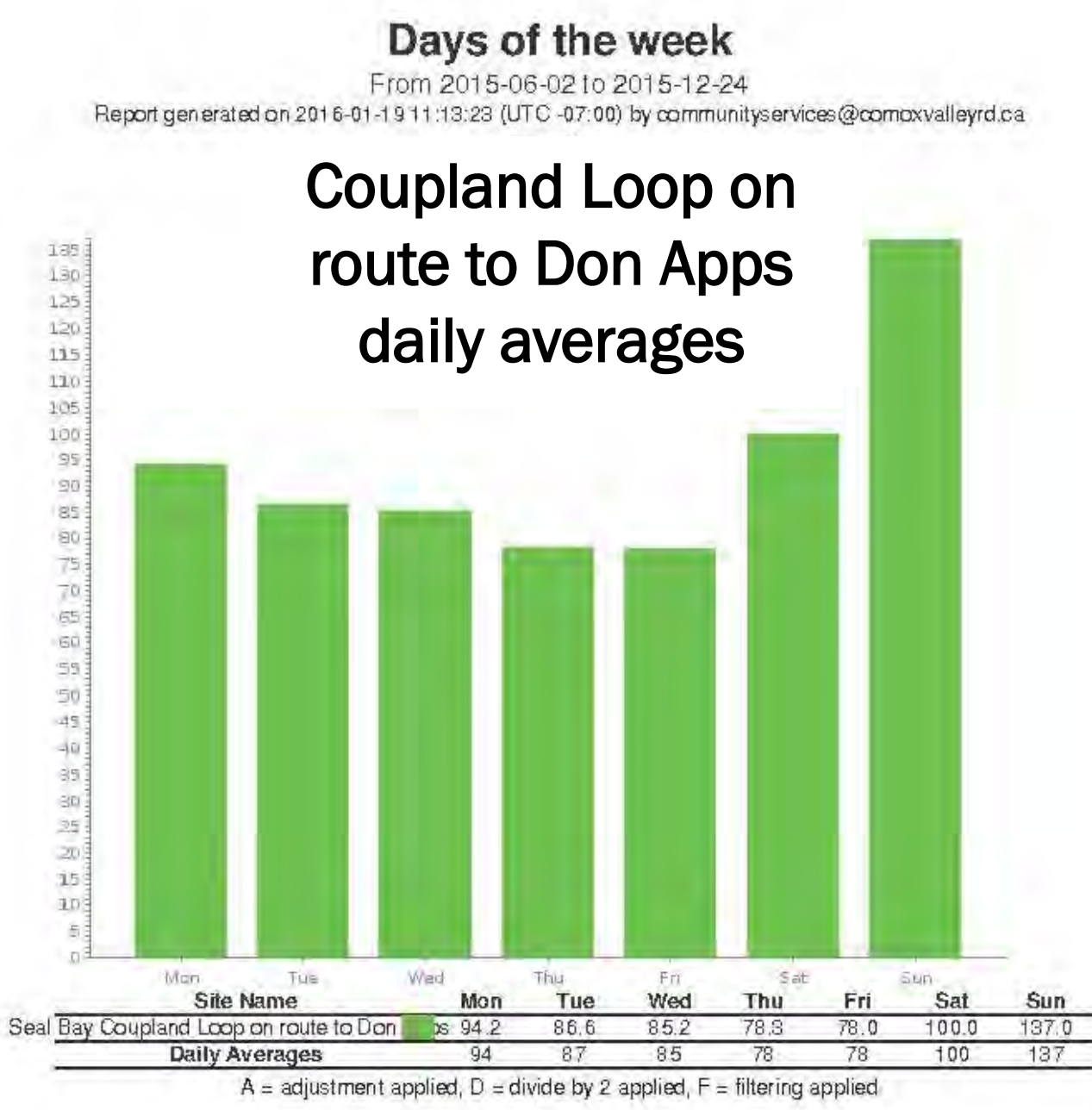
Park values and park improvements

The survey also asked park visitors what they like most about the park and what they would like to see improved. Responses to those questions are summarized on panels 3 and 8.



Trail use statistics

Trail counter data shows that the trails on the water side are the most popular. Sunday tends to be the busiest day in the park on all trails; however, trails are also well used on other days of the week.



3. Park Values and Proposed Vision



Park values

The word cloud above captures the most common words that survey respondents used to describe Seal Bay Park. Survey responses suggest Seal Bay Park is valued most for:

- The diverse natural ecosystems, including mature second growth Douglas-fir forests, mixed forests, wetlands and the pebble beach.
- The wildlife.
- The peaceful and secluded feeling of the forest.
- A well-maintained multi-use trail system for hiking, horseback riding or running.
- Dog off-leash trails.
- On-leash trails to hike without worrying about encountering dogs that might be out of control.



Proposed vision for Seal Bay Park

The Seal Bay Park Master Plan will include a vision statement that speaks to the long term desired future condition of the park.

The vision statement is proposed to include the following, drawn from the 1998 park master plan and the values expressed by the public:

- Healthy, functioning ecosystems – including a large contiguous stand of mature second growth Douglas-fir forest, mixed forests, hardhack wetlands and pebble beach.
- Recognition of First Nation cultural values and history.
- Respect for sensitive ecosystems and wildlife habitat.
- Adaptive management to protect or restore functioning and resilient natural ecosystems.
- A well maintained trail network for low impact walking, dog walking, running, horseback riding and biking in a natural setting
- Park improvements are unobtrusive and blend in with the natural environment.
- A variety of trails: wide and inviting, narrow and windy, sloping or stepped, accessible and natural.



- Open House Survey Questions:**
- 3.1 Do you agree with the key values identified for Seal Bay Park?
If not, what values are missing?
- 3.2 Do you agree with the components of the proposed vision to be drafted?
If not, what would you change?

4. A Home for Wildlife and Plant Communities

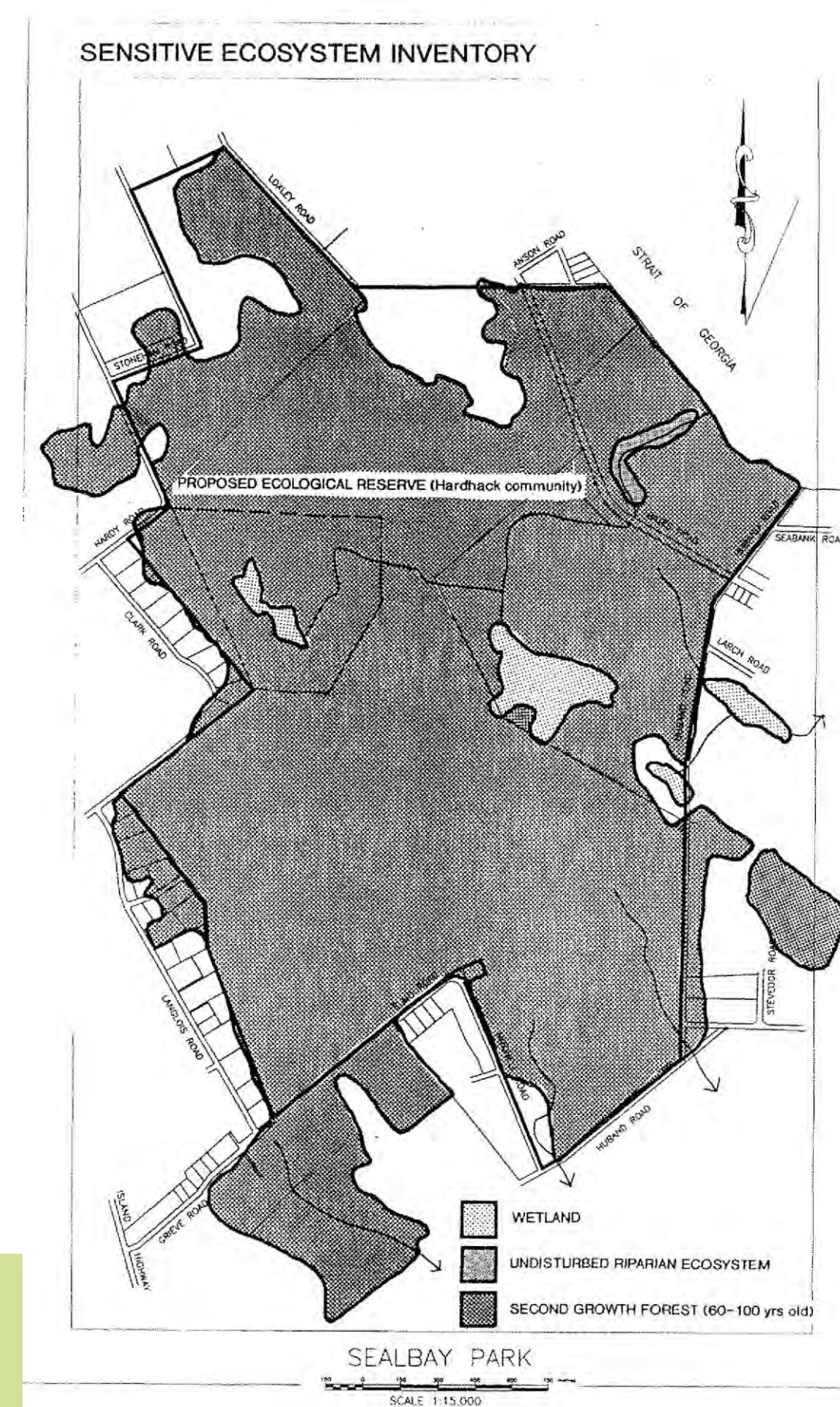
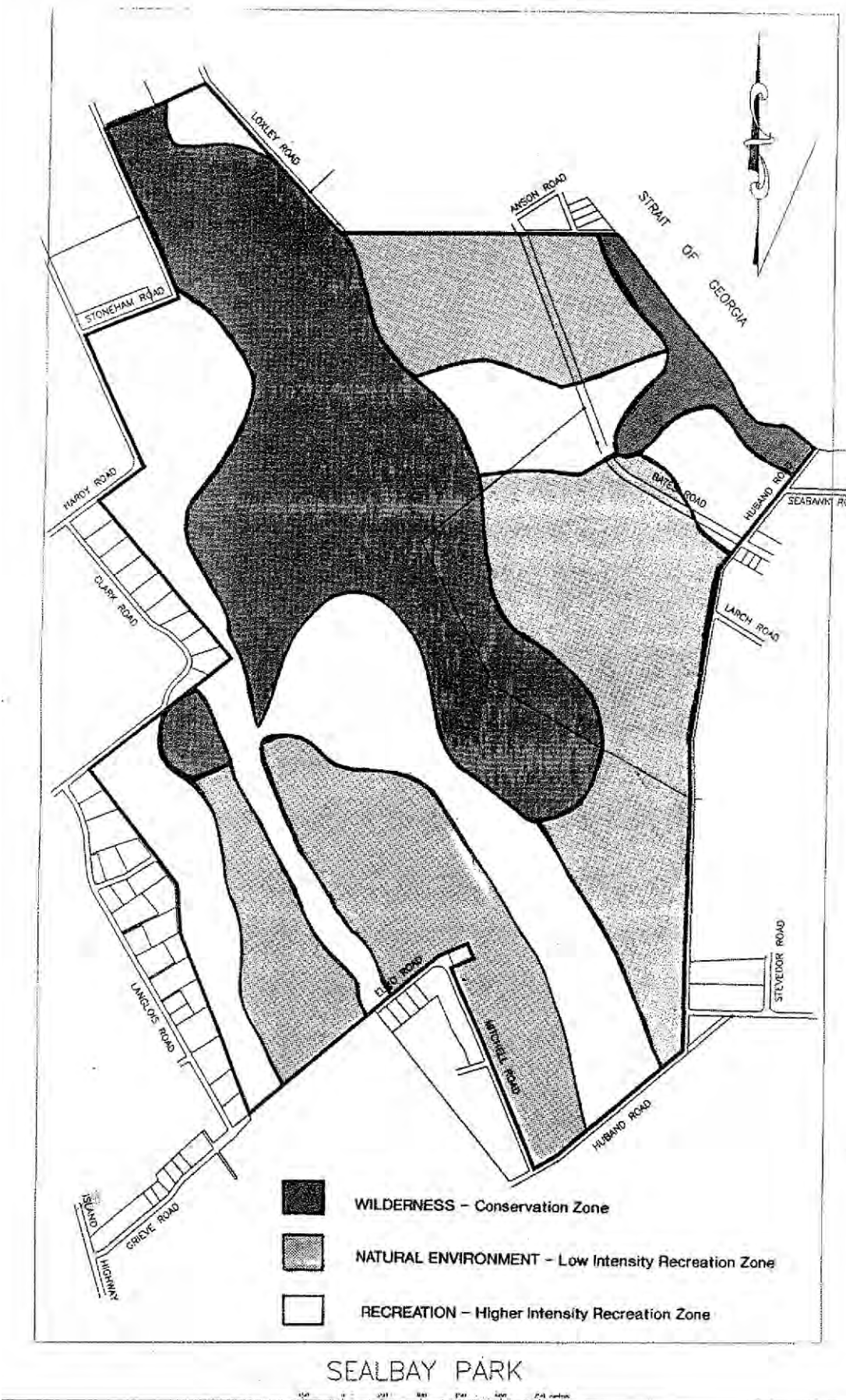


Preserving space for the wild things

At 652 hectares (1,610 acres) in size, Seal Bay Nature Park is one and a half times the size of Stanley Park in Vancouver. The park protects second growth Douglas-fir forests, mixed forests and wetlands and a large diversity of wildlife.

As the preceding Sensitive Ecosystem of the Comox Valley map shows, Seal Bay Nature Park is one of few remaining contiguous natural areas in the lower elevations of the Comox Valley – the other being Williams Beach Forest, Wildwood Forest and the forests between Royston and Union Bay.

It is important to protect the ecological integrity of the few remaining unfragmented natural areas so that wildlife and native plant communities persist.



Wilderness conservation zone

Managing a nature park such as Seal Bay involves striking a balance between recreational use and protecting wild plants and animals.

The 1998 Park Master plan proposed a wilderness conservation zone in the heart of the park and extending to the north end (see map to right). To date, this area has not been managed in a different way than the rest of the park.

Seal Bay Park also contains an ecological map reserve, originally proposed to protect a rare hardhack (*spirea douglasii*) wetland plant community.

As the population grows and use of the park intensifies, it is important to establish refuge areas for wildlife within the park. Active management of a wilderness conservation zone would mean no new trails in that area and possibly closing existing trails that bisects the area.

Open House Survey Questions

4.1 Do you agree with a wilderness conservation zone in the heart of Seal Bay Park?

If yes, should it be located within:

- a. the area in the 1998 park master plan;
- b. the area of the Ecological Map Reserve
- c. Other: _____

4.2 What should be restricted within that zone?

- a. No new trails.
- b. No multi-use trails.
- c. Other: _____



5. Education and Interpretation

Seasonal dog leashing rule



The CVRD has a seasonal dog leashing rule in place to protect nesting and fledging birds and young fawns in the park. Dogs are required to be leashed on all trails from April through June. On the ocean side of the park and on the Swamp Loop, dog leashing is mandatory year round.

Park users are informed of leashing rules through signs and occasional patrols by a park steward. Compliance with the dog leashing rule is mixed.



Ways to protect native species and ecosystem

Invasive species such as English ivy, lamium, and English holly can grow successfully in the understory and outcompete native species. The CVRD uses contractors and volunteers to remove invasive plants.

In-park and on-line survey respondents suggested to educate people about invasive plants through signage. Others asked for interpretive signs on how to recognize different native trees and shrubs and to increase understanding of the natural environment. Yet another suggestion was to close short-cuts and place small signs requesting trail users to stay on the main trails to protect native vegetation.

One survey respondent said park visitors should be encouraged to report salal pickers and firewood cutters.

Picking of native vegetation in a park is prohibited, yet it sometimes happens and the CVRD has fined for illegal salal picking.

The CVRD is trying to rationalize signage in the park. Let us know what your priorities are for new interpretive or regulatory signs.



Open House Survey Questions

- 5.1 What could be done to better explain and get support for the April through June seasonal leashing rule to protect nesting birds and fawns?
- 5.2 What kinds of interpretive / educational signs would you like to see in the park?
 - a. native plant identification
 - b. why not to pick native plants in a park
 - c. Seal Bay Park history
 - d. other: _____
- 5.2 What else could be done to protect wildlife and the natural ecosystems of Seal Bay Park into the future?

6. Trail Use Designations

Seal Bay Park in Numbers

652 hectares
(1,610 acres)
40 km of trail

Accommodating different trail users



Seal Bay Park has two different trail use designations – hiking only trails and multi-use trails for horses, bikes and hikers.

Respondents to the in-park and on-line survey reported low levels of conflict between different trail users. 72.5% said they never experience a problem, 24% said once in a while. 4% reported they experience conflicts with other users every few visits.

Conflicts listed include angry/cranky walkers, conflict between dogs, owners not in control of their dogs, dogs off-leash where they shouldn't be, cyclists not announcing themselves, conflict between cyclists and horse riders and horse riders or cyclists using hiking only trails.

The current trail use designations try to accommodate the interests of all user groups: hikers who want trails where there is little chance of conflict with other users; non dog-walkers who want trails where they can feel secure that they won't encounter a dog out of control; dog owners who need a place where they can let their pet run; and cyclists and horse riders who need a place where they can pursue their favourite activity in the park.

Request for more horse and multi-use trails

The CVRD has received a petition signed by 40 residents (a mix of horse riders, runners and cyclists) agreeing with “increasing, re-designating and creating multi-use trails in Seal Bay Park for enjoyment by all user groups: walkers, runners, cyclists and horses.” In June 2014, the CVRD received a similar petition by the Backcountry Horsemen of BC signed by 57 residents, asking more specifically to open up the Mitchell Grade and other connector trails, such as the Catch-up Loop, to horse riders. Horse riders have also voiced safety concerns about the section of the horse-bike trail that runs alongside Bates Road.

Considerations re: more multi-use trails

- Multi-use trails are more costly to maintain, especially if poorly drained and used during the wet season. These trails also tend to be wider.
- The Mitchell Grade goes through the Ecological Map Reserve and proposed wilderness conservation zone (see panel 4). It was identified for closure in the 1998 Park Master Plan. It passes between two wetlands and some sections are muddy after heavy rainfall. If supported, it would have to be widened and improved to accommodate horses and cyclists.
- Most horse riders access the trail system at Elmo and Mitchell roads where trailer parking is available. This is close to the Catch Up Loop, Horse Bike Loop and Mitchell Grade.
- The Catch Up loop is not very busy but a narrow and windy trail with many snags. Visibility is good since there is little mid-storey.



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Open House Survey Questions:

- 6.1 Would you like to see more multi-use trails in Seal Bay Park for horses, cyclists and hikers?
 - If so, which trails should be re-designated multi-use? _____
- 6.2 Should the multi-use trail along Bates Road be relocated further inland or should a new connection be constructed in the park, on the West side of Bates Road, so that horses would not have to cross the road to ride the full horse-bike loop? (both options require construction through fairly wet terrain but are possible).
- 6.4 What additional trails could be opened up to horses that are accessible from the Mitchell Road entrance where horse trailer parking is available?

7. Wayfinding in the park



Improving way finding in the park

As the cartoon to the left ‘hints’ at, there are a lot of signs in Seal Bay Park. Yet, unless you know the park well, it is easy to get lost, especially on the inland side of the park where the trail system is extensive.

Over the years, the CVRD has added signs to designate multi-use trails and hiking only trails, dog on-leash and off-leash trails and identify short and long distance running routes. The resulting signage is not consistent and can be confusing.

The CVRD proposes to start fresh:

- develop a sign plan;
- take down the signs that are no longer needed;
- apply a new sign standard (see example in top right hand corner)
- over the coming years, place signs at each trail junction;
- sign only official mapped trails, do not sign informal or deer trails;
- post trail maps in key locations inside the park where a number of trails meet.



Maps at trail heads and park entrances

The park entrances at Bates Road, Hardy Road, Mitchell-Elmo Road, Grieve Road, Seabank Road and Seaclyff Road all have large trail network maps. There are also two maps on the Swamp loop. A few of the maps date back to 1999. A number of the small entrances with a single trail head (e.g. Avonlee, Huband and March roads) do not have any maps.

Should each park entrance (there are 17) have a map or should maps only be placed at main entrances? Should older maps be replaced first before adding new ones?



Open House Survey Questions:

7.1. What should be the priorities to improve wayfinding in the park? Please rank the following in order of priority.

- ___ Replace any old maps still in the park.
- ___ Maps at entrances that currently don't have any.
- ___ Small trail maps at intersections inside the park where a number of trails meet.
- ___ Sign posts with trail names and arrows at each trail junction.
- ___ QR codes on trail posts for on-line map.
- ___ Other: _____

7.2. What other signage do you think is needed?

8. Park Amenities (continued on panel 9)

Proposed improvements

On the in-park and on-line questionnaires, park users listed the following possible improvements:

- a place to drop dog poop bags;
- get rid of dog bags, people hang them up;
- garbage cans at some entrances;
- improve drainage on water logged trails;
- remove tripping hazards (rocks and roots) or raise trail surface;
- get rid of the library box or repaint to blend in;
- drinking water fountain;
- interpretive sign on history of area;
- info where to report bear and cougar sightings;
- a toilet facility along the beach;
- more outhouses;
- wheelchairs and strollers access through gate on inland side of Bates Road;
- lower speed limit on Bates Road and a crosswalk;
- get horse riders to clean up after their horses;
- guard rails;
- better bike rack at Bates Road;
- parking area/pull-offs on Huband Road;
- educate people that it is natural habitat first, a park for people second;
- signage identifying invasive plants to help people recognize and remove them;
- interpretive signs of how to identify native trees and shrubs.

Garbage cans for dog poo bags



Park garbage cans sometimes get abused by residents dumping their household garbage. For this reason, the CVRD keeps garbage cans to a minimum.

There is one garbage can at Bates Road, close to the outhouse, that dog owners can use for dog poop bags.

Let us know what the key locations for garbage cans are.

Don't do signs

Park contractors have complained about dog poo on the trails and poo bags hung up in shrubs. Park users have complained about other users not respecting trail use designations. While no one likes to see too many regulatory “don't do” signs, some are needed to ensure the protection of park wildlife and to provide enjoyable experiences for all users.

Move trail away from property line

South of the Ftizell Road entrance, the Horse-Bike Trail runs right along the back property line of Langlois Road residents. The CVRD has received requests to move the trail further into the park. A possible route has been identified.



Outhouses

The CVRD recently removed the outhouse on the Swamp loop and one close to beach. They did not meet health and environmental standards. Any new outhouses need to be at park entrances or off a wide trail where they can be accessed to be serviced/pumped out. Currently, there are outhouses at the Hardy and Bates road entrances and on Seal Flipper Trail.

Possible locations for an additional outhouse within the park are:

- at a three way junction close to assembly point SB40
- along the Horse Bike loop at a four way junction close to the Mitchell Road entrance at assembly point SB50
- at the Mitchell Road entrance.

See Open House Survey question asking you to prioritize new park amenities over the next 10 – 15 years on panel 9.

9. Park Amenities



Gates to hike-only trails

The existing gates restrict access to strollers and wheelchairs.

The CVRD will investigate possible gate designs that allow strollers and wheelchairs to go through but keep out bikes and horses.

Bates Road speed limit and cross-walk

Bates Road is under the jurisdiction of the provincial Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure (MoTI). The current speed limit is 70km/hr. MoTI establishes speed limits based on sight distances, shoulder width, accident history, traffic volume and type of users (e.g. vehicles, bikes or other modes of transportation).

Cross-walks can only be established in speed zones of 60 km/hr or less and have to be illuminated.

The CVRD has succeeded in a request to have the speed limit reduced through Goose Spit Park, although the process took a few years.

Bates Road entrance

The Bates Road entrance area has grown 'organically' over the past decade or so with a kiosk on one end of the parking lot, a trail map in the middle and a gate and outhouse on the other end. The CVRD proposes to create a single entrance on the Bates Road side with all amenities close together.

Wheelchair loop

The wheelchair loop is bumpy and not very wheelchair friendly. It could be resurfaced with hard packed gravel or gravel mixed with a stabilizer to make it smoother.



Parking needs

The CVRD monitored use of the Bates Road parking lot during summer 2015. While the lot is often very busy on weekends, turn-over is high since most park visitors only stay in the park for one to two hours at a time. 81% of survey respondents said they do not usually have problems finding parking. The CVRD could consider expanding the parking lot in the future as use increases or add more parking at another park entrance.

Prioritizing improvements

The updated Seal Bay Park Master Plan will include priorities for improvements over the next 10 – 15 years. You can help us identify short, medium and long term priorities by responding to the open house survey.

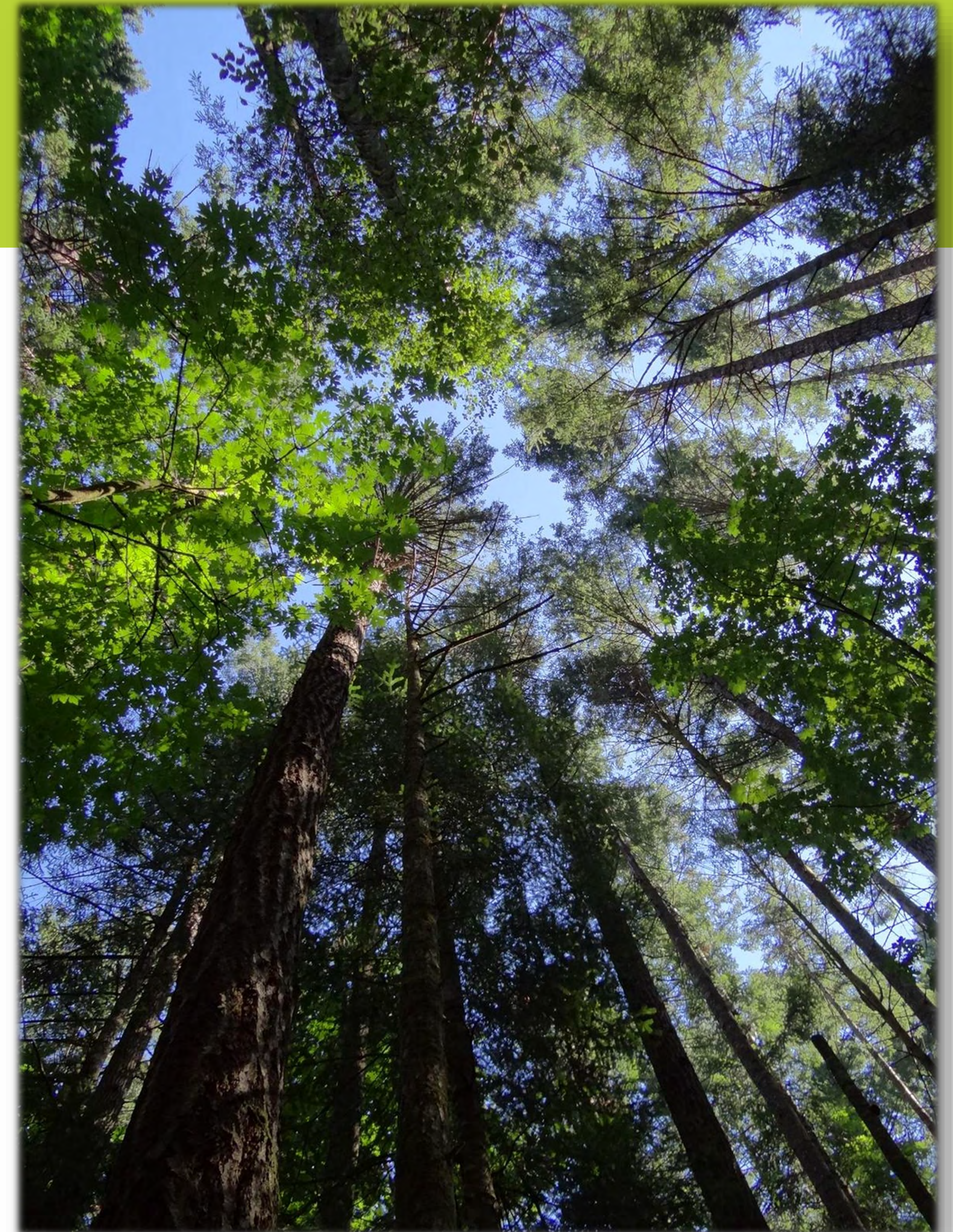
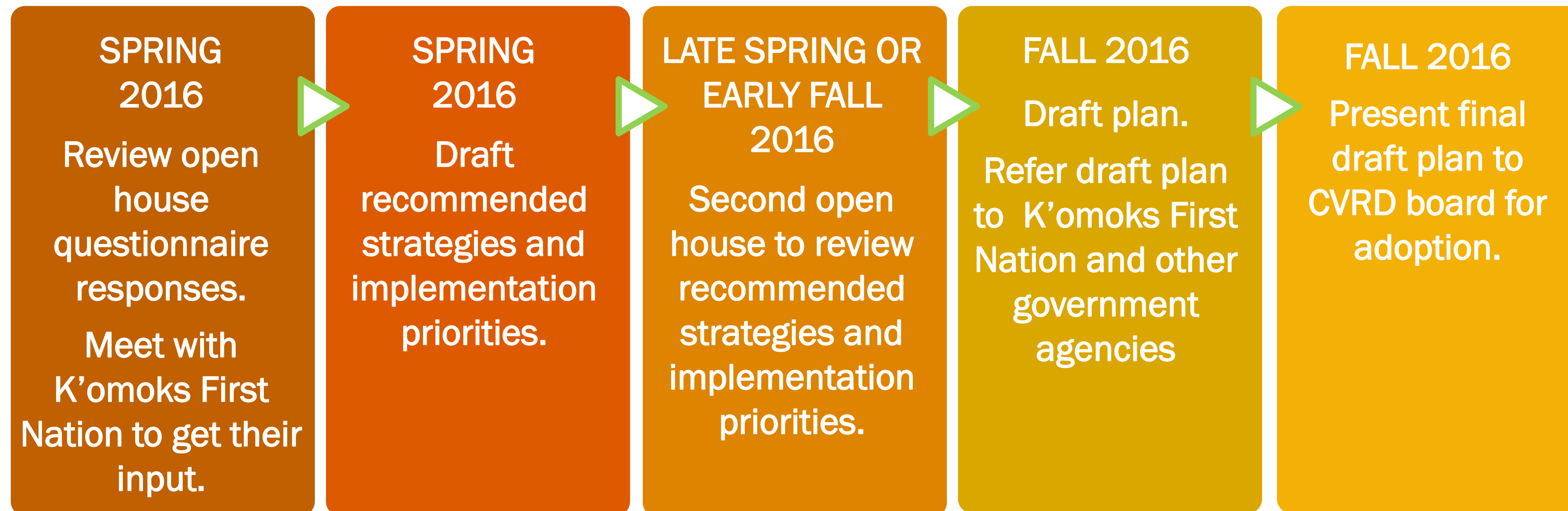


Open House Survey Questions:

9.1. Please indicate what priority you assign to the potential park improvements below – high, medium or low.

- ___ Garbage cans for dog poo bags at _____
 - ___ New outhouse at assembly point SB40, SB50 or close to Mitchell Road entrance (circle preference)
 - ___ Make gate to hike-only trail on Bates Road accessible to strollers and wheelchairs.
 - ___ Request that Province lower speed limit to 60km/hr on Bates Road.
 - ___ Explore a crosswalk at Bates Road with the Province.
 - ___ Re-organize the park map, information kiosk, garbage can and bike rack at Bates Road to form one central 'service' area.
 - ___ Improve the trail surface of the wheelchair loop.
 - ___ Move trail away from private property lines south of Fitzell Road entrance.
 - etc.
- Further items on open house survey.

10. Next Steps



Stay in touch

For project updates and to receive notification of the second public open house, please make sure you signed in at the door with your email address. You can also check for project updates at: www.comoxvalleyrd.ca/sealbay

Thank you for your input