

Alcohol in Parks – Program Update

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Community Development Committee recommend that Council approve the continuation and expansion of the Alcohol in Parks program.

HIGHLIGHTS

- This report provides the results of the Alcohol in Parks Pilot Program (the program) and recommends the program continue with some changes for improvement and expansion.
- *What does this mean to Calgarians?* This program provides additional outdoor opportunities to encourage use of parks and provides a connection to nature and each other.
- *Why does this matter?* The program is particularly important for Calgarians who do not have a backyard to socialize with family and friends for outdoor gatherings, especially when indoor gatherings may not be advisable due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The pilot program demonstrated that participants consumed alcohol responsibly, without public disruptions. The pilot received almost 1,600 bookings plus non-booked use, with only two formal complaints.
- Those who did not agree with implementation of the program did not cite this as a reason to avoid parks. Conversely, participants of the program reported increased use, with 73 per cent visiting parks more often and 76 per cent visiting parks they had not been to before.
- Planned program improvements include the following and can be completed within existing budgets:
 - Reallocate and expand table locations, particularly in areas where Calgarians do not have a private backyard, and allow for quicker and easier booking
 - Designate entire parks, or portions of a park, as picnic sites where alcohol can be consumed
 - Allow alcohol at the winter firepit program in parks
- Through Notice of Motion PFC2021-0618, on 2021 May 10, Council directed Administration to allow for consumption of alcohol at park picnic sites as a pilot in summer 2021, and report back on outcomes no later than 2021 November.
- Strategic Alignment to Council's Citizen Priorities: A city of safe and inspiring neighbourhoods

DISCUSSION

This summer, The City launched a pilot program which allowed alcohol to be consumed at designated picnic tables throughout Calgary. The objective of the program was to provide Calgarians with more outdoor social opportunities during the COVID pandemic when indoor visitors were not permitted, especially for citizens who did not have a backyard to host family or friends outdoors.

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The program aligned with the Alberta *Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act* (the Act) that allows owners of public parks to designate picnic sites for alcohol consumption. For the purposes of the pilot program picnic tables were used for a controlled pilot. However, larger areas can be declared through the existing Act, by designating an entire park, or portion of, as a large picnic area. (Attachment 2 outlines further details of the current Act.) It should be noted the Government of Alberta recently introduced amendments to the Act through Bill 80, to allow “Entertainment Districts”. This provides municipalities the ability to allow consumption of alcohol in public within a designated area. Preliminary analysis suggests these amendments will not have a bearing on the program, as the proposed expansion can be done within the existing Act. Should Bill 80 pass we will assess the possibilities that those changes would provide, implications for this program including areas outside of Parks, and adjust as required.

From June to September 2021, 58 tables were designated for alcohol consumption throughout community parks in Calgary. To ensure quick implementation, only existing tables not near a playground or on a school site were used based on feedback to avoid child focused areas. Tables in busy regional parks were also avoided in the pilot program to deter crowds during the pandemic.

The pilot program was very successful with 1,556 bookings in addition to first come first served use, and stakeholder engagement showed support for the program. There were very few issues with only two complaints submitted through 311 regarding litter and public urination, and no issues reported by Police, Bylaw or Parks operations. Tables were most popular in high-density communities or areas with multi-family units. Participants indicated the program could be improved if there was an ability to move around (e.g. lawn games or mingling) and less red tape with the booking process.

A significant concern raised by Alberta Health Services (AHS) was that the program could be contrary to Calgary’s Mental Health and Addictions Strategy, approved by Council in March 2021, as AHS felt there was potential that some individuals might feel less welcome in parks where alcohol is permitted and avoid these public spaces (e.g. due to beliefs or recovering from addiction). Research indicated this was not a factor in Calgarians’ choice to visit a park, and the program increased parks visitation overall.

As a result of very positive feedback, coupled with minimal concerns, the program is recommended to continue and expand in response to public demand. Impact of the program on businesses and festivals when health restrictions lift should be monitored as expansion occurs.

For 2022, planned improvements include:

- 1) Designating entire parks or portions of parks as picnic sites where alcohol consumption is allowed, starting with approximately ten parks in summer 2022.
- 2) Creating new single table locations in high-density areas to better serve citizens without a backyard. This may require the purchase of new tables to place in areas away from

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playgrounds. Up to 20 new tables could be placed in 2022, which could be done within existing Parks budgets.

- 3) Including some larger bookable picnic sites with many tables in the program, to better create the 'backyard experience'.
- 4) Permitting alcohol at winter firepits in parks to further the Winter City Strategy and encourage outdoor activities in colder months.
- 5) Making the program easier to use by allowing instant booking, improving ability to locate designated tables, and improving the website.

More detailed information on findings, including experiences of other jurisdictions, and future plans are found in Attachment 2.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION (EXTERNAL)

- Public Engagement was undertaken
- Public Communication or Engagement was not required
- Public/Stakeholders were informed
- Stakeholder dialogue/relations were undertaken

A Citizens' View Panel gauged opinions of the general public, with 1,253 panelists completing the survey. Full results are in Attachment 3. The Citizens' View Panel is sent to a sample of Calgarians who signed up to participate in surveys. This sample is not statistically representative of all Calgarians, since respondents tend to be older and some geographic areas are not well represented. Survey highlights include:

- 65 per cent of respondents support the program and 33 per cent opposed it.
- 36 per cent feel they would use the program if it is available next year.
- 12 per cent felt the program had a negative impact, citing potential exposure to public drunkenness and irresponsible adults, or generally disagreeing with alcohol consumption in parks.

A second survey gathered feedback from Calgarians who directly participated in the program, with 269 people responding. Full results of this survey are in Attachment 4. Results indicated an overall positive experience with the program:

- 92 per cent reported the program enhanced their park experience
- 73 per cent indicated their park visitation increased because of the program
- 66 per cent indicated they used the program because they did not have a backyard
- 45 per cent used transportation other than a motor vehicle to get to the table

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IMPLICATIONS

Social

This program provides an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of socializing outdoors. Without the program, the ability to have a beer or glass of wine with a barbeque or picnic is limited to those who have access to a private backyard. This is particularly important during the pandemic as there are less recreational and social options for Calgarians to participate in.

Environmental

This program encouraged citizens to connect with nature, as participants reported they visited parks more because of the program. A connection with nature will develop a sense of advocacy for our Parks and natural areas.

Economic

The program likely has a neutral economic impact. At the beginning of the pilot, some restaurants were concerned the program could lure customers away. However, other businesses started to offer “take away” picnics including a bottle of wine, which could then be taken to a table in the program. Impact to businesses and festivals, should be further assessed as the program grows.

Service and Financial Implications

Existing capital funding - base

The cost of purchasing and installing new tables in 2022 to accommodate need in higher density communities is expected to be less than \$25,000, which can be supported within Parks' existing budget. Further expansion could have future capital cost implications. All other elements of the program will not have a financial impact.

RISK

Program participants have demonstrated that alcohol consumption can occur without significant disruptive behaviour. As such, it is anticipated that the risk of incidents, property damage or bodily injury will continue to be low. Similar to other amenities provided by Calgary Parks such as toboggan hills, playgrounds, etc., in the event of a loss, The City would pursue recourse from the responsible parties and their insurance providers. There remains the possibility that The City may be responsible for property damage or personal injury that may occur.

Having been a very successful pilot with very minimal issues, there is a risk to The City's reputation should the program not be continued.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Summary Alberta Gaming Liquor and Cannabis Act
2. Alcohol in Parks Learnings and Plans for 2022
3. Alcohol in Parks Citizens View Survey Report
4. Alcohol in Parks User Survey Report

Department Circulation

General Manager/Director	Department	Approve/Consult/Inform
Doug Morgan	Operational Services	Consult