

CALGARY PARKS ENHANCED MAINTENANCE PROGRAM REVIEW

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For over twenty years, Calgary Parks has offered a process for communities to request enhanced landscape maintenance in their parks and green spaces. On 2016 March 14, Council directed Administration to undertake a review of the enhanced maintenance program and report back no later than Q1 2017. Administration analyzed the current state of the program and interviewed stakeholder representatives in order to gauge the program's effectiveness and determine if changes are warranted. The review determined that the program is still highly valued by the majority of citizens in participating communities. Adjustments to communications, clarity, and consistency would make the program more efficient and effective for both citizens and Administration, and would further protect taxpayer assets and interests. Alternatives to the current program were also investigated; however no other option is as viable or cost-effective at such a large scale.

ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDATION(S)

That the SPC on Community and Protective Services recommend that Council:

1. Receive this report for information; and
2. Direct Administration to implement the proposed program amendments contained in Attachment 1 over 2017 and 2018.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL DIRECTION / POLICY

In 1996, Council approved Christie Estates Special Tax Bylaw as an alternative method to generate operating funds for the enhancement of community parks and green spaces.

On 2016 March 14, Council received CPS2016-0198 (Calgary Parks Proposed Enhanced Maintenance Program Review) for information and directed Administration to report back on the program review and future state options no later than Q1 2017.

On 2016 March 14, a Motion Arising was moved by Councillor Pincott and seconded by Councillor Chabot: that with respect to Report CPS2016-0199 (Proposed 2016 Special Tax Bylaw), Council direct Administration as part of the Mid-Cycle budget review, to review our city-wide Parks standards and bring options and associated costs back to Council.

In response to the 2016 March 14 Motion Arising, on 2016 November 7, Council directed Administration to continue the banner/flower program to further explore modest floral horticultural improvements in local parks and open spaces city-wide as per CPS2016-0869 (Calgary Parks Enhanced Horticulture Evaluation).

BACKGROUND

Calgary Parks has offered a process for the enhanced landscape maintenance of park spaces and boulevards in Calgary communities since 1996. In 1996, Council approved the Christie Estates Special Tax Bylaw as an acceptable method to collect funds for the enhancement of such spaces. The program was formalized in 2002, following an increase in community interest and Council support.

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The Enhanced Landscape Maintenance Program allows 'operators,' typically community groups such as community associations or home owners' associations, to generate operating funds to enhance the level of service in public parks and boulevards in their community beyond the standard level currently provided by Calgary Parks (ie: mowing and trimming; tree well and shrub bed maintenance; perennial and annual flowers; and litter control).

There are two primary methods to secure funds to operate an enhanced green space maintenance program:

1. Targeted community funds generated through a Special Tax Levy and collected by The City of Calgary on behalf of the operating group; and
2. Privately raised funds from an encumbrance or caveat on property title and collected by a homeowners' association.

There are currently 29 enhanced maintenance agreements within 25 Calgary communities. This represents over 200,000 citizens and an investment in more than 400 hectares of city green space. Just under half of the communities in the program collect funds through a Special Tax Levy, while the remaining communities collect funds privately to fund the enhanced maintenance work. Two thirds of the service providers for the enhanced landscape work are private contractors while Calgary Parks is the service provider for one third. Regardless of the funding method for enhanced green space maintenance, all participating groups are required to complete an agreement with The City of Calgary. These are legal agreements between The City and the 'Operator', to facilitate enhanced landscape maintenance on a public park or road right of way within a community.

In all cases, Calgary Parks provides an annual operating grant to the community group in lieu of standard level maintenance activities; the group then couples the grant amount with the funds they have collected either privately or through a Special Tax Levy to enhance the base level of open space maintenance. Operating grant funds are calculated by using current rates for primary activities such as turf mowing and trimming, garbage removal, and shrub bed maintenance. They do not include maintenance funds attached to the urban forest, irrigation, or capital infrastructure (such as playgrounds, sport field structures, lighting, etc), as Calgary Parks does this work. A summary of the current Enhanced Maintenance Program communities including funding source, contract type, and other background details is included in Attachment 2.

INVESTIGATION: ALTERNATIVES AND ANALYSIS

As per CPS2016-0198 (Calgary Parks Proposed Enhanced Maintenance Program Review), Administration has completed a review of the program using the following framework: define scope, assess current state, develop program options, and report back.

1. Define Scope

Calgary Parks met with Councillors and internal staff to create a project terms of reference. The project includes a review of the entire Enhanced Maintenance Program including communities that raise funds publicly using a Special Tax Bylaw and those that raise funds privately using a caveat on title.

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2. Current State Assessment

The assessment of the current state of the program was based on feedback from representatives of participating communities, prospective communities, opponents of the program, the Federation of Calgary Communities, and internal stakeholders. A summary of the engagement process and key findings such as program benefits and challenges are included in Attachment 3.

The review revealed that the program generally meets the expectations of its participants and is highly valued by participating communities. The program has grown in popularity since its inception and there is interest from communities that are not yet involved. Although the program continues to be successful, the review did identify areas where efficiencies could be realized with improved communication and coordination. In addition, engagement with internal staff indicated that resourcing for standard level of maintenance can be more difficult in areas where Calgary Parks is also the provider of direct enhanced services.

Benefits identified by participating communities through the program review include: aesthetic uplift and improved curb appeal of green spaces; increase in community pride; engagement; use of green spaces and increased property values; and reduced crime. Special Tax Levy communities related the amount of volunteer time, energy and resources that were contributed by community members to establish the program, and the enduring relationships and networks that resulted from that effort.

Challenges identified through the program review generally followed three themes: communication, clarity and consistency. Despite the program working well overall, representatives felt that better public information regarding the program, better communication between The City and communities, clearer parameters regarding eligible services, more defined protocols regarding petitions and votes, and more consistency in terms of how the program was administered would help to enhance and refine the program.

3. Develop Program Options

A key aspect of the current state assessment was a review of program principles. The program was originally established in response to citizen and Council requests for enhanced maintenance options, as well as the trend of developers creating homeowner associations in new communities to maintain local amenities. The original program principles were to facilitate a community-led process; encourage community involvement; increase community pride; and improve the visual aesthetics of neighbourhoods. The community representatives interviewed indicated that although there are exceptions from time to time, the program has been successful in terms of achieving the intent of these principles. Through the review process, additional principles were identified:

- Public assets and interests must be well managed for long term sustainability as the land and site elements are public property;
- Adhere to best practices for public assets as they evolve over time; and
- Ensure the program is self-financed in terms of enhancement activities and administration costs required to support it.

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During the course of its review, Calgary Parks considered alternatives to the current Enhanced Maintenance Program. Several potential alternatives were considered including community endowment funds, corporate sponsorships, volunteerism, and Calgary Parks sponsored programs (such as the flower and banner pilot program that was approved by Council in November 2016). These alternatives could potentially be applied on a limited or adhoc basis, but because they do not provide the same level of consistent funding and reliable labour force, they could not be applied on a broad basis using only a modest investment by taxpayers and having modest involvement by Administration. While discontinuation of the program could be considered, it would need to apply to both tax levy and non-tax levy communities as it would be difficult to justify allowing maintenance only in communities which are privately-funded. Administration determined that the best option was to consider all feedback gathered during engagement and improve upon the existing program. Program options considered are summarized in Attachment 4.

4. Report Back – Future State of Program

Attachment 1 contains recommendations for program amendments that respond to the three main challenges that were identified during the review process:

- Improve **communication** between The City, enhanced communities and citizens;
- Improve **clarity**, in terms of the parameters of the program; and
- Improve **consistency**, in terms of how the program is administered and delivered.

The recommendations will improve program delivery while preserving the public interest and ensuring that the program continues to be carried out in a manner that is efficient and effective. The recommendations reflect the updated core principles of the program. Administration will work with current enhanced maintenance communities to carry out a phased approach to implementation of the recommendations. This will allow changes to be fairly implemented, reduce stress on the communities, and respect work season timelines and contracts that are already in place. The proposed program improvements will be carried out over 2017 and 2018.

Stakeholder Engagement, Research and Communication

Calgary Parks consulted with a range of external and internal stakeholders associated with the program. This included meetings with representatives from communities currently participating in the program, groups who have publicly expressed their opposition to the program, prospective communities, and the Federation of Calgary Communities. Internal stakeholders included Calgary Parks, Roads, Law, Calgary Neighbourhoods and members of Council. At the conclusion of the program review, communities were sent a summary of the engagement results as well as Calgary Parks' proposed recommendations to Council. Feedback was encouraged through a variety of formats and three separate follow up meetings were held to discuss the recommendations. A stakeholder engagement summary is included in Attachment 3.

Strategic Alignment

The enhanced maintenance program aligns with the following Council priorities: a City of Inspiring Neighbourhoods, a Healthy and Green City, and a Well-Run City.

Social, Environmental, Economic (External) Social

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Community based landscape maintenance programs enhance the aesthetics of neighbourhoods and encourage collaboration and community pride among residents.

Environmental

City green space enhancements provide the opportunity to implement best practices which provide environmental benefits. Depending upon the choices made by the communities, environmental benefits may include introduction of native plant species, additional control of invasive species and increased vegetation health, which positively affect biodiversity, air quality and water preservation.

Economic (external)

High quality park space favourably impacts the image and economy of Calgary and is associated with indirect benefits including increased property values and tax revenues. Externalizing the enhanced maintenance in communities could provide economic opportunities for landscape contractors.

Financial Capacity

Current and Future Operating Budget:

The financial wherewithal for the program to operate must come from the participating communities. The City supports the program on a cost-recovery basis. No impacts to current or future operating budgets are anticipated as a result of this investigation, as the program will be run on a cost-recovery basis.

Current and Future Capital Budget:

No impacts to current or future capital budgets are anticipated as a result of this investigation, as the program will be run on a cost-recovery basis.

Risk Assessment

The continuation of the Enhanced Landscape Maintenance Program poses little risk for The City of Calgary, as long as it is administered according to the core principles recommended. The principles protect the interests and assets for Calgary citizens and taxpayers.

REASON(S) FOR RECOMMENDATION(S):

An extension of all enhanced maintenance activities city-wide is cost prohibitive, given current circumstances. The proposed program amendments will improve communication, clarity and consistency which were the three main challenges identified through the review process.

ATTACHMENT(S)

1. Proposed Program Amendments – 2017 and 2018
2. Summary of the Current Enhanced Maintenance Program Communities
3. Summary of Engagement
4. Program Options Considered