

Nelson Park makeover finally underway

Public input strongly influences new design

By Magda Ibrahim

The perimeter fencing that has surrounded the West End's Nelson Park for the past two months serves to punctuate more than two years of debate, private meetings and public consultations concerning the park's much-needed redevelopment. Long awaited by frustrated residents, the park is now receiving an extensive makeover and is scheduled to reopen by the end of the summer.

Nelson Park's redevelopment was originally due to take place last summer, but higher-than-anticipated tenders for the construction work meant Vancouver Park Board, which manages the park at 1030 Bute Street, had to re-tender. The construction contract was finally awarded to Cedar Crest Lands B.C. Ltd. for just over \$715,000.

"The park is very important to West End residents, so I'm very pleased with the progress," says Kate Davis-Johnson, park development manager for the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation. "It has been a long process, but it's been very inclusive, and we've heard from everyone with an association with the park."

Despite various setbacks and long delays, West End Residents Association director Aaron Jasper says he is delighted with the park's new design and is excited by the prospect of a renovated community park.

"As frustrating as it was, I think the process was one of the best things about this, because it was all about the community coming up with the solutions," says Jasper. "There were competing views and it wasn't perfect, but everyone was in agreement that we wanted to turn this into a park for everyone."

"When you try to build consensus, it's a slower process. But at the end of the day, we got something which people buy into."

The 1.16-hectare green space, which operated as an off-leash dog park from 6 a.m. to

8 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., is being given a thorough overhaul. A new fenced, off-leash dog area will fill the southwest corner at Comox and Bute, leaving the rest of the park for other users. Jasper says this was a particularly controversial part of the planning stages, but he feels confident that the new design will prove agreeable to everyone. "It's a sizeable area for the dogs to run in, and it means a lot to people who have an issue with dogs," he says. "The spirit of the exercise was to make this a park where everyone feels welcome."

Historically, Nelson Park has been known to locals as a prime place to run their pets, so debate may still continue to rage over the decreased dog area, which will occupy 21,000 square feet.

Indeed, dog owner and West End resident Connie Derksen says she is disappointed with the plans and will no longer take her pet to Nelson Park, despite eight years of daily use. "A long time was spent working on this plan, but



PHOTO: DOUG SHANKS

West End Residents Association director Aaron Jasper concedes that the process leading up to Nelson Park's current redevelopment was "frustrating," but it was "all about the community coming up with solutions."

I do feel, as a dog owner, I've been ignored to a certain extent," says Derksen, whose main gripe is the gravel-type material that will cover the new dog area, which she believes will be hard on dogs' feet and difficult to clean off.

Another area of dispute was the park's public washroom, which was a known magnet for

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'Congestion pricing' system would require drivers to pay for peak-time road access

It may not be a popular option, but making people pay to use their cars on busy roads could be the best way to help ease congestion in Vancouver and its surrounding areas.

The highly controversial system, known as congestion pricing, has had great success elsewhere, says traffic expert Lee Munnich, and Vancouver should be no exception.

Munnich, who has been a leader in the field of congestion pricing since the 1990s (most notably, he spearheaded its implementation in Minnesota), says most drivers are initially against the idea but tend to favour it once it's put into practice.

"For many years, it was thought to be too politically sensitive," Munnich says. "Drivers don't necessarily want to pay for something they have always had for free, but if there's a purpose and [it produces] benefits such as a quicker trip time and improved transit, then they are more positive."

Munnich discussed the idea of congestion pricing during a public presentation organized by Better Environmentally Sound Transportation (BEST) on May 16 at SFU Harbour Centre. He described the system that he helped implement in Minnesota, which uses an electronic reader mounted onto vehicles windshields to allow drivers to pay for using express lanes.

Munnich also compared the scheme with those used in European countries. In London, England, there is a charge of approximately \$16 for cars entering the congestion-pricing zone at busy times of day.

"There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution at the moment," says Munnich, "but if people see it working, then they will support it."

"I think Vancouver already has a transit advantage over what there is in Minnesota, but we need to look at ways to build and strengthen on that."

According to Munnich, there are several reasons why congestion pricing provides benefits, including encouraging people to lessen their use of cars, thus helping with climate change, and raising revenue which could be used to improve transit.

Vancouver councillor B.C. Lee, who is chair of the city's standing committee on transportation and traffic, says although there are no immediate plans to introduce a congestion-pricing system, it is an issue the city is interested in researching. He adds that a recent visit to Singapore to study their system proved that it could be an effective means of managing congestion, as long as alternatives are in place.

"Instead of forbidding people to do something, you give them incentives to make decisions which are good for the city, such as taking transit or walking, otherwise it is difficult and unfair," Lee says.

"The reason we would hesitate to initiate pricing just in Vancouver or the downtown area is that city staff have indicated they are worried it could push business outside the city and actually encourage people to drive more."

Magda Ibrahim 

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do you approve of Nelson Park's new design?



Jacquie Thomas, 39, graphic designer, West End
"I like that the dog area will now be fenced off because I think it'll make the whole park more appealing to everyone — especially people who are afraid of dogs. I also like the planned water feature."



Bob Woolsey, 23, teaching assistant, West End
"I'm really looking forward to when it reopens because it's a lovely place to hang out and do a bit of reading or writing... I'm all for improvement and I can't wait to see the finished product."



Nigel Alexander, 30, bar manager, West End
"I really like the look of the new plans. It's always been a great place to go... I think it's really important to promote parks in the city because it gives people more attachment to nature."



Michelle Kaarto, 29, kinesiologist, West End
"Overall, it's just nice to have the green space here, and anything that can be done to make it a more attractive place for everyone in the community is a good thing."

NELSON PARK

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illegal and anti-social activities. Parents from nearby Lord Roberts Annex Elementary School raised concerns about people lurking around the field house, and Davis-Johnson says they were the driving force in having it removed. The building has now been torn down, but Vancouver Park Board Commissioner Spencer Herbert said it was an issue the community was divided over to the very end.

"From talking to people, I felt that they did want some sort of washroom facility, but they didn't like the field house as it was because it was very hard to see around and into it, which made them uncomfortable," says Herbert. "I would like to see a new washroom built sooner rather than later, because it's a blow for park users that it's gone."

Although the washroom has now been razed, the

design does plan for one to be installed at a later stage, and the plumbing for that is part of the current construction work.

Although eight new self-cleaning washrooms have been allocated for the city, the nearest one to Nelson Park is near Davie and Thurlow. Aaron Jasper believes this will cause problems for children and people with mobility problems, who will be especially inconvenienced by having to travel so far from the park. "We would like to have some early conversations with the city council and put the bug in their ears that this is what we would really like to see," he says.

Jasper has already been in touch with city engineer Grant Woff, who manages Vancouver's street-furniture contract, to discuss the possibility of a washroom in the park. Woff confirms Nelson Park might receive a self-contained washroom, which would be paid for and maintained by outdoor-advertising company CBS/Decaux, at some point. 

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