

DATE OF MEETING April 26, 2021

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SUBJECT **NEIGHBOURHOOD ASSOCIATION ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY
REVIEW, SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT**

OVERVIEW

Purpose of Report

To provide the Governance and Priorities Committee with options for City recognition, support, and engagement of neighbourhood associations, and propose a new way in which the City can better incorporate community-identified investment priorities into its community development processes, with a renewed focus on implementation.

Recommendation

That the Governance and Priorities Committee recommend that Council direct Staff to:

1. formally support neighbourhood associations that meet and maintain the following organizational criteria:
 - a) Have an elected executive that meets on a regular basis;
 - b) Have a membership structure (not necessarily fee paying);
 - c) Hold an annual general meeting (AGM);
 - d) Keep minutes for executive and general membership meetings;
 - e) Engage with its neighbourhood for input prior to responding to City development referrals such as rezoning, Official Community Plan amendment, and development permits;
 - f) Provide periodic updates to members related to the activities of the group; and
2. develop a detailed Partners in Community program and annual budget for consideration.

BACKGROUND

At its regular meeting held 2020-FEB-10, the Governance and Priorities Committee (GPC) received an information report from Staff on the status of neighbourhood associations ("Associations") in Nanaimo and the nature of the City's relationship and engagement with these groups. An updated version of this information is provided in Attachment A.

Over the past year, and in particular through the REIMAGINE Nanaimo Phase 1 engagement process, the City's neighbourhood associations were invited to provide input on priorities for the neighbourhoods they represent. Broad community input on neighbourhood priorities was also received through REIMAGINE Nanaimo's online surveys and a statistically valid mail-out survey. This input was intended to build upon neighbourhood priority input provided as part of an Empowering Neighbourhoods Event hosted by the Community Engagement Task Force in 2018, and in response to the Task Force's key recommendations for strengthening community engagement.

DISCUSSION

In response to the discussion at the 2020-FEB-10 GPC meeting, Staff invited 20 active neighbourhood associations to respond to a questionnaire to gather their perspectives on:

- organizational capacity;
- most positive neighbourhood change(s) observed over the last ten years;
- top priorities for change within their neighbourhood;
- role they think they should play for their neighbourhood; and
- what organizational criteria (if any) should be used by the City in order to formally recognize and support a neighbourhood association.

Summary highlights of responses to this questionnaire are provided as Attachment B.

A New Approach to Neighbourhood Engagement, Support, and Priority Implementation

Since the Imagine Nanaimo visioning process in 1992, the City has considered neighbourhoods the vital building blocks of the community and valued the role of community participation in planning decisions to guide change. The City's existing Official Community Plan ("OCP", planNanaimo) includes objectives to support neighbourhood and area planning, and as part of this, includes a specific policy to "promote the establishment of neighbourhood associations to support neighbourhood planning initiatives".

Through the REIMAGINE Nanaimo strategic review, there is opportunity to evaluate and reconsider the City's relationship with neighbourhoods and consider new ideas for supporting more inclusive participation in neighbourhood groups recognized by the City, and for addressing neighbourhood priorities. This is particularly relevant given the comprehensive advances in on-line communication and idea sharing that have occurred since the adoption of the existing OCP in 2008.

The City has been using neighbourhood associations as representative groups to engage with their broader neighbourhoods for over three decades. While this relationship has generally functioned well, there have been instances where questions have arisen regarding the representative value and community accountability of a group. Most often, this has arisen where external pressures, such as social issues or new development proposals, have impacted a neighbourhood, and has led to conflict amongst residents and between residents and City Staff. This sort of conflict was instrumental in initiating Council's review of the City's relationship with neighbourhood associations and their organizational capacity. Reviewing this relationship fits directly with the REIMAGINE Nanaimo strategic planning process, given the key role community engagement has played, and continues to play in shaping policies that impact how neighbourhoods evolve.

Based on the feedback from neighbourhood associations and Staff review/research, it is recommended the City establish clear organizational criteria for associations that wish to be formally engaged on community planning and development matters (e.g., development referrals, funding opportunities) on behalf of their neighbourhoods. These criteria would include:

- a) Have an elected executive that meets on a regular basis;
- b) Have an inclusive membership structure (not necessarily fee paying);
- c) Hold an annual general meeting (AGM);

- d) Keep minutes for executive and general membership meetings;
- e) Engage with its neighbourhood for input prior to responding to City development referrals such as rezoning, Official Community Plan amendment, and development permits; and
- f) Provide periodic updates to members related to the activities of the group.

Neighbourhood groups that do not satisfy the above organizational criteria will still receive informational updates and support, but will not be provided the same level of support or recognized as providing representative viewpoints of their neighbourhoods until such time as they can meet the organizational criteria.

In addition, for any groups (including formally recognized neighbourhood associations) that wish to undertake specific projects in their neighbourhood, Staff also recommend the following program expansion to support participation in community well-being projects and activities in their neighbourhoods.

Proposed Expansion of the Partners in Parks Program into a Partners in Community Program

Background

Since its inception, the Nanaimo parks system has been built with assistance from many community groups, service clubs, and volunteers. In 1982, Nanaimo City Council built upon this success by initiating a Partners in Parks Program (PIP). This program was created to provide funding assistance for neighbourhood-based groups to create or improve local neighbourhood parks and public spaces in a way that is meaningful to residents and neighbourhoods as they evolve. Over the last 40 years, many neighbourhood-driven improvements have occurred on municipal parkland and underutilized City-owned property.

PIP projects are typically initiated by residents and facilitated by City Staff. Residents within a five-minute walk of a site are typically invited to site meetings and are invited to collaborate in improvement planning and implementation.

These projects are sometimes, but not always, consistent with the priorities of neighbourhood associations, and in many cases, projects occur where there are no existing neighbourhood associations. The projects are important to nearby residents, as demonstrated by fundraising and volunteer efforts. Where they exist and where appropriate, neighbourhood associations have been invited to be part of relevant PIP processes; however, to date, they have not participated in most projects. In many instances, informal and neighbourhood groups have developed as a result of the PIP process and remained active on social media as neighbourhood teams but not as formal neighbourhood associations.

Volunteer Areas

The PIP program has evolved over the past 40 years to meet community needs. Currently, the PIP funds and facilitates the following:

- Neighbourhood park improvements, planning and playground installation
- Community public art
- Edible landscapes and food-forest development

- Park maintenance
- Park ambassadors
- Adopt a park
- Litter, stream, and shoreline cleanups
- Park naturalist walks
- Park and street parties
- Gate-keepers
- Recreational amenities

More information about each of these volunteer areas can be found in Attachment C.

REIMAGINE Nanaimo and Current Partners in Parks Projects

Through the REIMAGINE Nanaimo Phase 1 process, many PIP volunteers expressed a desire for greater networking so that volunteers across the city are connected and can share knowledge and resources. Also expressed, was a desire for a revised PIP process in some program areas, processes that match the current Council committee structure, as well as increased funding options to implement local-level projects. Volunteers also requested more direction from the City on focus areas and goals, especially in the area of natural park management and stewardship.

The pandemic has increased the value of local open spaces and requests for further amenities in neighbourhood parks. There is currently a long list of projects and groups waiting to begin the PIP process and access funds (see Attachment D). This is partly due to the limitations of the pandemic for community engagement and participation, partly due to staffing capacity, and also due to the growing popularity of the program and desire for more local public space amenities. This list may grow once pandemic restrictions are lifted and the community once again wants to be more involved in shaping community spaces.

Other Supports from Council

At their meeting on 2020-07-20, Council supported the creation of a neighbourhood grant program to facilitate neighbourhood-led active transportation projects. This support was part of discussions around roadway space re-allocations. A neighbourhood grant looking at public spaces in streets could fit perfectly into a revised neighbourhood grant program focussing on partnerships with communities.

Program Evolution

As the PIP program continues to evolve to meet community demand, Staff recommend expanding the program into a Partners in Community (PIC) program. Growing the program, redefining processes, increasing Staff participation and direction, and increasing networking, could help more community groups to access funds in ways that are more meaningful to residents. The grass-roots nature of the PIP program could be maintained with increased participation, prioritization, asset management planning, equitable geographic distribution, and continued collaboration through the formal neighbourhood associations (where they exist).

PIP requests often involve numerous departments in their approvals and touch upon many corporate areas and priorities. In some cases, they also mirror local-level improvement priorities of neighbourhood associations. The new program could involve a more integrated and

coordinated approach with Staff from Community Planning, Parks Recreation and Culture, Transportation Planning, Public Works and Park Operations.

The scope of an expanded program could include streams of community-focused investment including:

- Wellness and play
- Beautification and food production
- Neighbourhood improvement
- Street and mobility improvement
- Environmental and open space stewardship
- Community safety

The PIP program currently has an annual capital budget of \$100,000, as well as a small operational fund. Typically, in order to reflect current community desires, funding and Staff resources for the PIP program have been delivered on a first-come, first-served basis rather than strategically or geographically. Council and Committees of Council (previously the Parks Recreation and Culture Commission) have approved PIP projects and funding allocation.

In addition to a new PIC program, Staff also recommend considering a change to the City's approach to neighbourhood planning by foregoing future detailed neighbourhood plans in favour of neighbourhood priority-based planning and implementation. This new approach could be used to determine neighbourhood priorities every 2-3 years and implement improvement priorities identified by recognized neighbourhood associations and supported by wider neighbourhood engagement. This could involve a review of priorities in existing neighbourhood plans that are not otherwise captured by other City funding or capital projects.

An example of such a priorities list can be found in Attachment E. This list includes top priorities derived from the following:

- Neighbourhood Association Organizational Capacity Questionnaire Response Summary
- REIMAGINE Nanaimo Stakeholder Discussions
- Community Engagement Task Force Empowering Neighbourhoods Session held on 2018-NOV-21
- Neighbourhood Plans (where adopted)

In addition, a further list of top priorities by Planning Area can be found in Attachment F – Top Five Challenges and Priorities By Planning Area Based on the REIMAGINE Nanaimo Statistically Valid Survey.

In lieu of creating new neighbourhood plans or updating existing neighbourhood plans, these priority lists could be reviewed with recognized neighbourhood associations on a regular basis and updated every two years to ensure the priorities are still relevant, consistent with other City strategies and projects, and allow for the addition of any new priorities that may be identified.

If this concept is acceptable in principle to Council, Staff will develop a detailed PIC program and annual capital and operating budget for Council's consideration. PIP projects already approved or underway will not be affected by the program expansion or any new procedures. Staff would engage with the neighbourhood associations and PIP volunteers to ensure their

support. Wider community engagement with respect to the PIC program could also take place through Phases 2 and 3 of the REIMAGINE Nanaimo process.

Further Engagement with Neighbourhood Associations

On 2021-APR-15, Staff provided the neighbourhood associations with an opportunity to respond to the proposed Governance Options and concept. Several associations who attended were in favour of having formalized organizational criteria, noting that they are already meeting the proposed criteria for being recognized. However, clarity was requested on what their role would be in giving feedback to Council on development applications and other processes where they would represent their neighbourhoods. A few neighbourhoods with less structure, did not see the need for criteria in order to be recognized.

Comments about outstanding neighbourhood plan development and updating and implementing existing neighbourhood plans were also shared. Possible public realm improvements and neighbourhood plan implementation projects were briefly discussed under a potential Partners in Community framework. Staff also noted that there will be continued engagement with neighbourhood associations through the REIMAGINE Nanaimo Phase 2 and 3 process and that neighbourhood associations and other stakeholders will review the draft PIC program as details are developed.

Feedback received from the meeting and subsequent submissions are attached as Attachment G – Neighbourhood Association Feedback on Proposed Criteria for Recognition and Expansion of Partners in Parks Program.

OPTIONS

1. That the Governance and Priorities Committee recommend that Council direct Staff to:
 1. formally recognize and support neighbourhood associations that meet and maintain the following organizational criteria:
 - a) Have an elected executive that meets on a regular basis;
 - b) Have a membership structure (not necessarily fee paying);
 - c) Hold an annual general meeting (AGM);
 - d) Keep minutes for executive and general membership meetings;
 - e) Engage with its neighbourhood for input prior to responding to City development referrals such as rezoning, Official Community Plan (OCP) amendment and development permits;
 - f) Provide periodic updates to members related to the activities of the group; and
 2. Develop a detailed Partners in Community program and annual budget for consideration.
- Advantages: The existing neighbourhood association engagement protocol will be retained fundamentally intact; however, it will also ensure that those groups who wish to receive formal development referrals on behalf of their neighbourhoods have a reasonable organizational structure that is responsive to the neighbourhood in which it is located. Broadening the scope of the existing PIP program to support a wider range of neighbourhood prioritized investment will focus resources strategically into many different forms of community-based

improvements. Will better address community improvement priorities identified by neighbourhood groups on a periodic basis.

- **Disadvantages:** Six neighbourhood associations will no longer be formally recognized by the City until such time as they demonstrate that the minimum organizational criteria are met. This may encourage the groups to revise their organizational structure, disband, or simply continue to function regardless of the City's requirements. The PIC program could raise community improvement expectations that cannot be resolved through the program based on budget limits and scope. With the switch to neighbourhood priority planning and project implementation under the PIC Program, no new neighbourhood plans would be created or existing neighbourhood plans updated.
- **Financial Implications:** Staff time would be required for ongoing engagement and implementation related to ensuring that associations that wish to be recognized provide details to support that. At this time, there are no cost implications involved in directing Staff to develop further details and a budget for the proposed PIC program. However, should Council consider pursuing this at a later date, it is anticipated the PIC program may require greater investment to make an impact and may require redirection and coordination of capital funding from other City infrastructure budgets. This would result in a shift of focus from comprehensive local area planning to a focus on neighbourhood priority identification and implementation.

2. That the Governance and Priorities Committee provide alternative direction.]

SUMMARY POINTS

- Since the Imagine Nanaimo visioning process in 1992, the City has considered neighbourhoods vital building blocks of the community and valued the role of community participation in planning decisions to guide change.
- Through the REIMAGINE Nanaimo strategic review, there is opportunity to evaluate and reconsider the City's relationship with neighbourhoods and consider new ideas for supporting more inclusive participation in neighbourhood groups recognized by the City, and for addressing neighbourhood priorities.
- Based on the feedback from neighbourhood associations through the neighbourhood association organizational capacity questionnaire process and Staff review, it is recommended the City establish clear organizational criteria for associations that wish to be formally engaged on community planning and development matters (e.g., development referrals, funding opportunities) on behalf of their neighbourhoods.
- Since its inception, the Nanaimo parks system has been built with assistance from many community groups, service clubs, and volunteers. In 1982, Nanaimo City Council built upon this success by initiating a Partners in Parks Program (PIP). This program was created to provide funding assistance for neighbourhood-based groups to create or improve local neighbourhood parks and public spaces in a way that is meaningful to residents and neighbourhoods as they evolve.
- As the Partners in PIP program continues to evolve to meet community demand, Staff recommend expanding the program into a Partners in Community (PIC) program to

include a wider array of community projects. Growing the program, redefining processes, increasing Staff participation and direction, and increasing networking, could help more community groups to access funds in ways that are more meaningful to residents.

- In addition to a new PIC program, Staff also recommend considering a change to the City's approach to neighbourhood planning by foregoing future detailed neighbourhood plans in favour of neighbourhood priority implementation. This approach could be used to implement improvement priorities identified by recognized neighbourhood associations, as well as in existing neighbourhood plans that are not otherwise captured by other City funding or capital projects.

ATTACHMENTS:

- ATTACHMENT A: History of City Support and Engagement with Neighbourhood Associations
ATTACHMENT B: Neighbourhood Association Organizational Capacity Questionnaire Response Summary – Highlights (2021-FEB-18)
ATTACHMENT C: Partners in Parks (PIP) Volunteer Areas
ATTACHMENT D: Partners in Parks (PIP) Project List
ATTACHMENT E: Neighbourhood Association Priorities Summary (2021-FEB-24)
ATTACHMENT F: Top Five Challenges and Priorities by Planning Area Based on REIMAGINE NANAIMO Statistically Valid Surveys
ATTACHMENT G: Neighbourhood Association Feedback on Proposed Criteria for Recognition and Expansion of Partners in Parks Program

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