

DISTRICT OF SAANICH

REPORT TO: MAYOR AND COUNCIL
DATE: FEBRUARY 12, 2014
FROM: DOUG HENDERSON, DIRECTOR OF PARKS & RECREATION
SUBJECT: PANAMA FLATS CONCEPT PLAN

Purpose:

The purpose of this report is to:

1. Outline the steps leading up to the development of a Concept Plan for Panama Flats;
2. Provide an overview of the community engagement process undertaken during the development of the Plan;
3. Outline key elements and issues addressed in the Plan;
4. Provide a summary of the feedback received and how it has been addressed and/or incorporated in the final Plan; and
5. Outline the next steps should Council wish to adopt the Plan.

Background:

In February, 2011, Saanich Council approved the purchase of farm land on the Colquitz River floodplain known as Panama Flats (Flats) See Figure 1: Context Map). The sale and land transfer occurred in December, 2011.

The property consisting of 25.26 ha has been previously used for a variety of agricultural purposes since the 1870's. Currently 8.5 ha of the total area of the Flats (26.53 ha) is included in the ALR. The Flats are zoned A-1 which permits agricultural use. The Colquitz River, which is important fish habitat, runs along the western edge of the Flats. The area provides critical storm water storage when the Colquitz regularly overflows its banks during the wet fall and winter months. The well used public trail which runs beside the river is an important link in the Colquitz River trail system.

The acquisition of the Flats was based on the desire to: secure the site for flood plain management purposes to reduce the risk of flooding; optimize environmental values along the Colquitz River; protect long established farm land and enhance food security; and general park/trail interest including a formalized perimeter trail creating a looped system for community use.

It was anticipated that following a planning process to refine the details around the enhancements to the property, a significant portion of the lands would be added to the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR).

Policy:

The easterly 8.5 ha adjacent to Carey Road was part of the original ALR as designated by the Province in July, 1994. At that time, the balance of Panama Flats was subdivided into small lots as part of a speculative subdivision undertaken in the early 1900s. The plan consolidation completed in 1993 made possible a future application to the Agricultural Land Commission (ALC) to include these lands in the ALR.

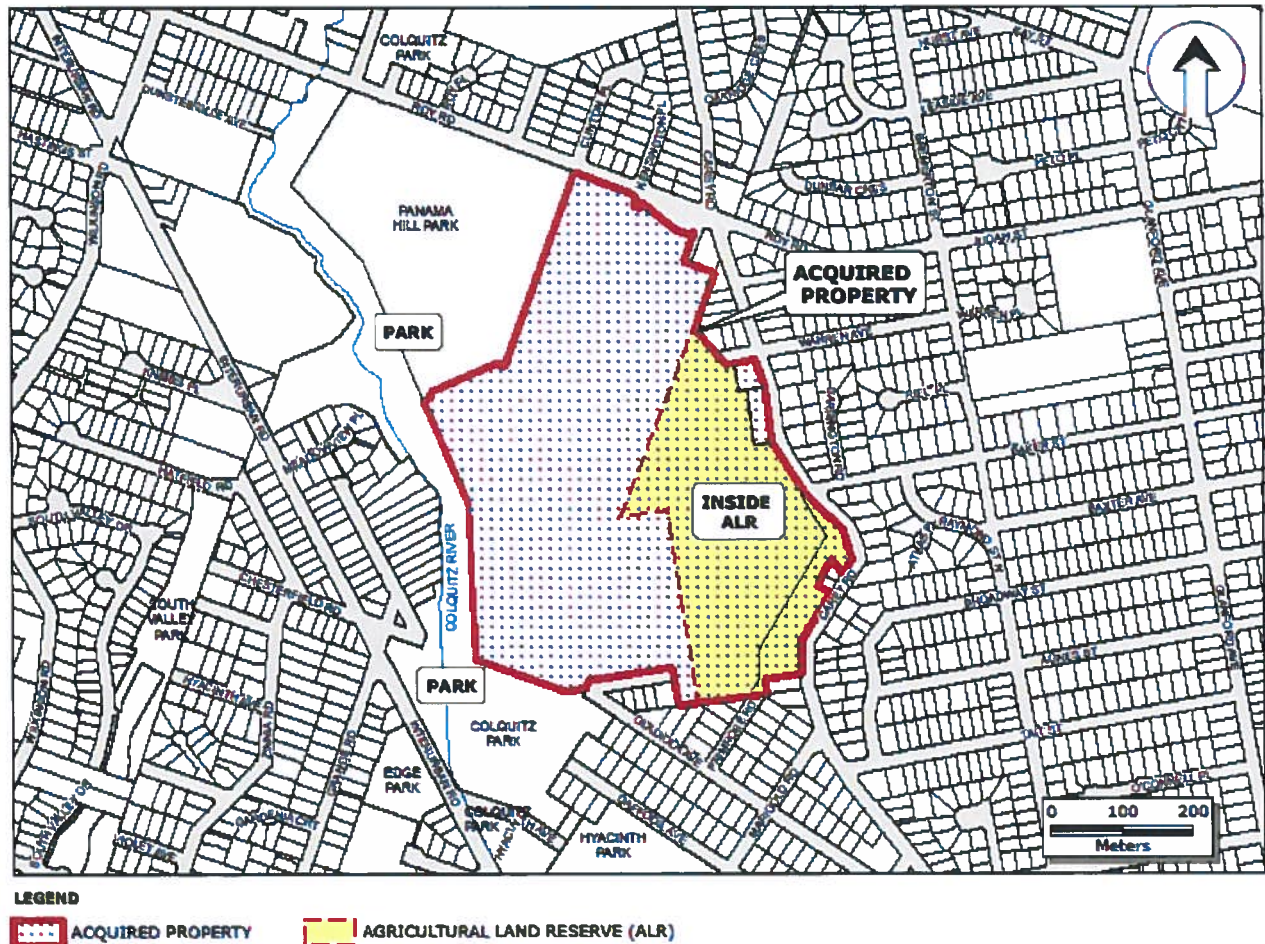


Figure 1: Context Map

Saanich Councils have long recognised the agricultural, environmental and flood plain management importance of Panama Flats. In 1981, the Urban Containment Boundary was amended to exclude the lands from the future urban area in order to protect them from urban development. Adjacent lands along Colquitz River have gradually been acquired and zoned for park use as part of the Colquitz Linear Park system. Official Community Plan 2008 policies support retention of the lands for agriculture, environmental protection, flood plain management and public open space. Carey Local Area Plan 1999, policy 7.3 supports an application to the Agricultural Land Commission to designate the farmland within Panama Flats as Agricultural Land Reserve. The Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan 2013 contains objectives and initiatives to promote urban agriculture, natural areas, invasive species management, ecosystem restoration, recreational trails and open space.

Planning and Community Engagement Process:

Working with a multi-disciplinary team of consultants led by LADR Landscape Architects, staff began to gather background information in the fall of 2012 and start the community engagement and planning process.

On March 18th, 2013, Council further stressed the importance of ensuring long term food security when it endorsed the following motion. This motion also helped guide the Planning and Community Engagement Process outlined below.

“That Council: 1. Support the inclusion of the land generally defined in Figure 2 into the Agricultural Land Reserve as outlined in the March 8, 2013 report of the Director of Planning; and 2. Task staff and the consulting agrologist with refining the exact boundaries of the area to be included into the Agricultural Land Reserve based on the following principles: protecting the maximum amount of quality farm land; ensuring the protection/enhancement of key environmentally significant areas on the site; ensuring flood management is not compromised; and addressing general park/trail interest including a formalized perimeter trail creating a looped system for community use.”



Figure 2: Potential Area for Inclusion into the ALR
 (Map from Council Report considered at March 18th, 2013 meeting)

Stakeholder Consultation and Public Participation

Community Associations

Initial consultations were held with the Royal Oak Community Association and the Residents' Association of Strawberry Vale, Marigold and Glanford in September 2012 to provide an overview of the concept planning process and to identify any front end concerns. Additional meetings took place in June 2013 and January 2014.

Council Advisory Committees

In May 2013, presentations were made to the Bicycle and Pedestrian, Environment and Natural Areas, and Parks, Trails and Recreation Advisory Committees in order to provide an overview and obtain preliminary comments. In November 2013, following the open house and survey, a second round of presentations was made to the three Committees, including an overview of the process and presentation of the Concept Plan. All three Committees endorsed the Concept Plan.

Peninsula Agricultural Commission

The Peninsula Agricultural Commission was consulted to ensure that comments and concerns from the agriculture and farming community were considered.

Provincial Stakeholders

Meetings and consultation took place throughout the process with representatives of various Ministries, including Forest, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, Environment, and Agriculture. These interactions assisted in clarifying a variety of issues associated with the site, including drainage, invasive species and agricultural practices. Discussion with the ALC included an exploration of how the non-agricultural functions on the site (storm water management, natural areas and recreation) could be incorporated given the desire to consider inclusion of a large portion of the site in the ALR.

Recognizing Bird Habitat and Wetland Stakeholders

The consultant met with representatives of the Rocky Point Bird Observatory to gather information on the bird habitat aspects of the site. This information proved helpful in identifying an area within the Concept Plan that would provide habitat once the larger area was used for agriculture. A wetland specialist provided information pertaining to the area's role as a wetland and how this could be reflected in the Concept Plan.

Signage and Information Letters

Four information signs were installed in the Flats area informing users of the planning process and indicating an open house would be held in the fall of 2013. Approximately 1000 letters were distributed to residents surrounding the Flats with regard to the planning process.

Open House

An open house was held at Northridge Elementary School in October 2013. A draft Concept Plan was presented and the public was invited to ask questions and provide comments. Staff from Parks, Engineering and Environmental Services were in attendance along with the lead consultant. The open house was publicized through the distribution of 4000 flyers delivered to surrounding properties, signs posted within the Flats, newspaper and Saanich website notices, community association e-mail and media releases including social media. Over 300 people attended the open house.

Paper and Online Survey

A survey was available at the open house and for the two week period following. Over 225 responses were received.

Key Feedback from the Planning and Community Engagement Process:

Feedback received through the community engagement process pointed to the complexity of the site and the varied interests that exist. General understanding and support was found for the four principles associated with the acquisition of the site:

- Protecting the maximum amount of quality farm land.
- Ensuring the protection and enhancement of key environmentally significant areas.
- Ensuring flood management is not compromised; and
- Addressing general park/trail interest including a formalized perimeter trail creating a looped system for community use.

The Residents' Association of Strawberry Vale, Marigold and Glanford expressed written concerns to Council. The Association stated: "While there are a number of positive aspects to the plan, RASVMG does have some concerns and comments about both the process and the plan...". In general, the Association letter expressed the strong desire for the Flats to be preserved as a wildlife sanctuary and that the four principles associated with acquisition of the site did not allow for a full exploration of other options. Members of the planning team subsequently met with Association representatives to better understand their concerns, relay survey results, and clarify the planning process and the proposed Concept Plan. A follow up letter summarizing the meeting was sent to the Association reinforcing the need to balance the various interests for the site. Staff believes that a better understanding was achieved by both parties and a commitment was made to continue to inform and consult with the Association as the project moves through the planning process and into implementation.

The Council Advisory Committees, Bicycle and Pedestrian, Environment and Natural Areas, and Parks, Trails and Recreation, have all provided their support for the Concept Plan and the comments received generally recognized the need to balance the various interests and uses of the Flats. Feedback from the Peninsula Agricultural Commission included support for farming and agriculture uses while noting the challenges of farming this site and the potential for conflict with surrounding uses.

Preliminary feedback from the ALC identified some specific issues including establishing appropriate setbacks and separation from adjacent land uses, the establishment of buffers/barriers, and public access which they feel might preclude or dissuade agriculture. The issue of public access included concerns such as the possibility of litter, contamination, biosecurity, and public perception about the rights of access during active farming. Some of these issues such as setbacks and separation can be dealt with directly at the municipal level while others such as recreational access and barriers will require further review and comment as part of a formal application to add land to the ALR.

Results from the public survey indicate that almost two thirds of respondents visit Panama Flats at least once per week. The main reason for visiting is to walk the trails and enjoy nature. In general, respondents indicated their main interest lies with the natural environment, followed by recreation, flood plain management and farming in that order. While farming forms the foundation for the Concept Plan, respondents indicated the highest level of support for invasive species management, Colquitz River enhancements, expansion and improvements to the trail system and Garry Oak site restoration.

The results of the paper and online survey that was available at and following the open house are included as Attachment 3. Key results include:

Most common reason for visiting Panama Flats:

| | |
|----------------------|-------|
| Walking the trails | 66.5% |
| Enjoy nature | 64.7% |
| Bird watching | 42.5% |
| Walking your dog | 34.4% |
| Recreational cycling | 19.0% |

Main interests regarding Panama Flats:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-------|
| Natural environment | 87.4% |
| Recreation | 57.7% |
| Storm water & flood plain management | 45.5% |
| Farming | 34.7% |

Uses & initiatives in addition to farming:

| | |
|---|-------|
| Invasive species management | 69.7% |
| Expansion, improvements to the trail system | 65.1% |
| Colquitz River enhancements | 64.2% |
| Restoration of disturbed sites | 57.8% |
| More site amenities (benches, picnic tables, bike racks) | 28.0% |
| New interpretive & directional signs | 25.7% |
| Creation of small parking area on Roy Road | 24.3% |

An open ended question was included in the survey, to which 182 responses were received: "Are there any other suggestions or improvements you would like to see included in the Concept Plan?" The responses covered the four original acquisition principles and beyond and again highlighted the complexity of the site and the need to balance the uses. Comments included preferences about various types of farming, the desire for wetland and bird habitat and preservation of the environment generally, concerns about drainage and flood management, and ideas about the trail system and community use.

- "Keep it simple: Farmland Walking trails look after wildlife Habitats and Natural Environment
- "I am happy about farming being able to continue with the addition to the ALR. Would like to see one large farm (not community gardens)... "
- "I like the idea of small farming, selling produce on the side and benefiting locally from this land."
- "This is a perfect area to create community gardens."
- "Value of wetlands is so huge-migratory birds, vegetation a managed natural environment is what I envision."
- "My main interest is having the flats be a good bird habitat."
- "Return the bog to the way it was with proper drainage."
- "The area is a flood Plain. Let it be."
- "Improve trails and dyke system to make trails accessible year round (flood abatement, better drainage)."
- "When the trails are "Improved", please do not use asphalt – use gravel as it is much more environmentally friendly and better regarding soaking in rainwater..."

- “Would be nice if main north-south connecting trail was asphalt for bike commuters. Perimeter trails can stay gravel.”
- “Improved foot bridges and vegetation management (brushing out trails) placement of garbage cans.”

The survey was an important piece of the community engagement process and the results helped to confirm that the draft Concept Plan strikes a reasonable balance among the varied and often competing interests. The information provided will continue to inform staff through the next steps in the overall process.

Concept Plan:

Based on the direction from Council, significant background information and community engagement, a draft Concept Plan has been developed (see Attachment 1). The plan strives to respond to as many different interests as possible by striking a balance between preserving the maximum amount of farm land and still providing opportunities to achieve other important principles and values.

For the purpose of continuity and cohesiveness, the two municipal parks bordering the Flats, Panama Hill Park (8.9 ha.) and Colquitz River Park (11.7 ha.) have been included in the project planning area. Together with the 26.53 ha of the Flats, the total planning area covers 47.2 ha.

Key elements of the Concept Plan include:

- Proposing the addition of a significant amount of the Flats into the ALR (adding 14.5 ha to the existing 8.5 ha – see Attachment 2);
- Drainage improvements, including the removal of some of the internal berms to enable viable agricultural use of the Flats;
- Creation of a managed field to provide seasonal habitat for migratory birds, waterfowl and a rare plant – the Vancouver Island Beggarticks;
- New trails including a perimeter loop trail on top of an existing berm;
- Realignment and restoration of certain sections of the Colquitz River to enhance fish habitat;
- Restoration and enhancements to Garry Oak ecosystems; and
- Retention of flood plain.

Other key issues that were considered as part of the planning process are outlined below.

Agricultural Land Protection & Improvement

The Concept Plan provides a balanced approach to addressing the long term protection of valuable farm land along with other key community values and interests.

Through the use of the of sustainable farming techniques and best management farming practices, the 14.5 hectares of protected agricultural land would be a significant community asset and further support local food production.

An Agricultural Capability Assessment based on detailed site analysis has determined that the soils are generally Class 3 and 4. With major drainage improvements both classes could be improved to a Class 2 agricultural rating. Farm land in this class is considered to have only minor limitations that require good ongoing management practices or slight restrictions to a wide range of crops.

Returning this area to farming will assist with continued reduction of the odour concerns that were raised by area residents in the fall/winter of 2012/2013. In September 2013, a significant portion of the site was mowed and ploughed in an attempt to reduce the amount of organic matter. This has led to a significant reduction in odour over the past few months and efforts will continue to mitigate this issue.

Farming in an urban environment presents challenges that will need to be recognized moving forward. Assuming the Concept Plan is adopted, crop compatibility, suitable farming practices within a residential area, and ensuring a proper agricultural model are proposed to be addressed through an Expression of Interest as a Sustainable Saanich initiative. The Expression of Interest process would include parameters to address issues relating to compatible farming practices in an urban environment, including site preparation, storm water management, adjacent recreational trail use, preservation of adjacent natural environment, bird and waterfowl habitat, and adjacent residential areas.

Environmental Protection, Remediation & Enhancement

Environmental considerations have been another key aspect of the planning process. The Flats provide important waterfowl and migratory bird habitat and attract a large diversity of bird species. A local blue listed plant known as the Vancouver Island Beggarticks exists in the vicinity and has established a large population on the seasonally flooded fields.

Enhancements to the Colquitz River to improve fish habitat have also been carefully reviewed and accounted for in the Concept Plan through proposed meandering of the water course. The draft Concept Plan identifies a managed drainage field that will support storm water management, migratory bird populations and the Beggarticks presence in the Flats allowing for the mix of agriculture, storm water management, and natural area preservation and protection.

Invasive species control will be enhanced with a return to agriculture, as a large portion of the site will be managed through the year preventing the establishment and spread of invasives.

Another significant aspect of the site is the Garry Oak ecosystem located in the Panama Hill area of the plan. The ecosystem is connected to a unique Garry Oak transition area as the land slopes to the east into the Flats. Adoption of an overall Concept Plan will bring added focus to maintaining and enhancing these areas.

Recreational Use

Walking the trails and enjoying nature was identified as the main reason for users to visit the Flats. The draft Concept Plan proposes improvements to the perimeter trails which are used for recreation and alternative transportation. The location of trails recognizes the importance of ensuring that they do not impinge on the agricultural use of the site. Bird watching, connections to the outdoor environment and healthy lifestyles will all be enhanced over time as the plan's components are implemented.

Operating and Capital

Capital improvements would need to be phased over several years and within the constraints of available funding through the annual financial plan process.

Operating and maintenance costs for the site, not including the agricultural areas, is projected to range from \$25,000 - \$50,000 per year.

Next Steps:

Based on approval of the Concept Plan, the following actions would be undertaken:

- An application to include the proposed lands in the ALR would be prepared and brought forward for Council consideration at a future Public Hearing in accordance with the requirements of the ALC. Should Council pass an authorizing resolution, the application would be forwarded to the ALC for decision.
- Interest in farming the defined lands would be solicited as a Sustainable Saanich initiative through an Expression of Interest (EOI). The EOI would have defined parameters to address issues relating to compatible farming practices in an urban environment.
- Detailed design work necessary for agricultural use, storm water management, environmental considerations, and trail improvement and development would be undertaken.
- Consideration of plan implementation in a phased manner through the annual financial plan process.

Staff would continue to manage the site for invasive species and odour control as required.

Summary:

In 2011, Saanich acquired the 25.26 ha Panama Flats. The acquisition of the Flats was based on the desire to: secure the site for flood plain management purposes; optimize environmental values along the Colquitz River; protect long established farm land and enhance food security; and general park/trail interests including a formalized perimeter trail creating a looped system for community use. It was anticipated that following a planning process to refine the details around the enhancements to the property, a significant portion of the lands would be added to the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR).

An extensive planning and community engagement process, as outlined in this report, began in the fall of 2012 and confirmed the significant interest in the future of Panama Flats. Feedback received through the community engagement process pointed to the complexity of the site and the varied interests that exist. General understanding and support was found for the four main principles defined by Council in March 2013:

- Protecting the maximum amount of quality farm land.
- Ensuring the protection and enhancement of key environmentally significant areas.
- Ensuring flood management is not compromised; and
- Addressing general park/trail interest including a formalized perimeter trail creating a looped system for community use.

While the environmental aspects of the site were raised as a common theme, an understanding of and support for the role that can be played by reintroducing agriculture was evident. The draft Concept Plan strives to find a balance that achieves the long term environmental aspirations of the community while returning agricultural use to the site.

The key elements of the Concept Plan include:

- Proposing the addition of a significant amount of the Flats into the ALR (adding 14.5 ha to the existing 8.5 ha – see Attachment 2);
- Drainage improvements, including the removal of some of the internal berms to enable viable agricultural use of the Flats;
- Creation of a managed field to provide seasonal habitat for migratory birds, waterfowl and a rare plant – the Vancouver Island Beggarticks;
- New trails including a perimeter loop trail on top of an existing berm;
- Realignment and restoration of certain sections of the Colquitz River to enhance fish habitat;
- Restoration and enhancements to Garry Oak ecosystems; and
- Retention of flood plain.

Should Council approve the Concept Plan there will be a need to undertake some primary initiatives to ensure the land is put back into agricultural production as well as addressing the other key priorities. Environmental enhancements that benefit wildlife habitat and the Colquitz River will be undertaken over the next several years. Public access appropriate for the area will need to be developed and the critical storm water management function that the Flats provide will need to be maintained. The capital improvements will need to be phased over several years and considered through the annual financial plan process.

Immediate next steps would include the preparation of an application to the ALC for Council consideration and soliciting interest in farming the defined lands through an Expression of Interest as a Sustainable Saanich initiative.

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council:

1. Endorse the Panama Flats Concept Plan prepared by LADR Landscape Architects and dated October 23, 2013.
2. Consider at a future Public Hearing, an application to the Agricultural Land Commission to include the proposed portion of Panama Flats in the Agricultural Land Reserve.
3. Subject to the proposed portion of Panama Flats being included in the Agricultural Land Reserve, an Expression of Interest be issued for farming these lands, the results of which would be considered by Council at a future meeting.

Report prepared by



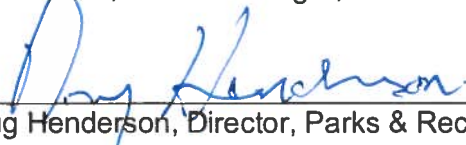
Gary Darrah, Manager, Parks Planning & Design

Report reviewed by:



Rae S. Roer, Senior Manager, Parks

Report approved by:



Doug Henderson, Director, Parks & Recreation

- Attachment 1: Draft Concept Plan
- Attachment 2: Proposed Agricultural Lands
- Attachment 3: Survey Results

ADMINISTRATOR'S COMMENTS:

I endorse the recommendation of the Director of Parks & Recreation


Paul Murray, Administrator