

GORGE PARK WORKSHOP

JANUARY 22, 2011



Photo by Kitty Lloyd

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Background

The Gorge Tillicum Community Association (GTCA) takes an active interest in the stewardship of the major parks located within our neighbourhood and has worked closely with Saanich Parks staff over the years on a variety of projects. For example, the GTCA is currently working with Saanich Parks on the development of a Master Plan for Cuthbert Holmes Park, and has recently helped with the removal of invasive species and planting of native shrubs and trees in Gorge Park.

Since 2003, the GTCA has organized biannual work parties in Gorge Park aimed at park cleanup and the removal of invasive species. In addition, the GTCA coordinated and helped fund, along with Saanich Parks, the planting of maple trees at the entrance opposite Fairways as a Saanich Centennial project in 2006.

However the GTCA felt it timely to initiate a community consultation on the future of Gorge Park. There have been numerous issues identified with this park in recent years, such as safety and security, invasive species proliferation, community access concerns and adequate pathways.

Workshop Outline

The workshop took place on Saturday, January 22nd 2011 in the Community Room at the Cedar Shores Apartments on Gorge Rd W. It was advertised to the GTCA membership and to other interested parties. There were approximately 25 people in attendance including GTCA members, Councilor Paul Gerrard, Saanich staff from Parks, Engineering and Police, Cedar Shores residents, members of the Victoria Canoe and Kayak Club, and representatives from the Gorge Waterway Initiative.



Photo by Kitty Lloyd

Agenda

9:00-9:30 Coffee and registration.

9:30-9:45 Opening remarks.

9:45-10:15 Dennis Minaker, local historian gave slideshow on history of park property.

10:15-11:45 Small group walks in Gorge Park led by GTCA board members.

11:45-1:00 Open forum responses from groups, lunch and closing remarks.



Location and Significance

Gorge Park is bounded by Gorge Road West and the Gorge Waterway shoreline for several hundred meters from the Gorge Bridge and Tillicum Rd, east to the Cedar Shores apartments and Aaron Point. As such, it is a Saanich ‘gateway’ property, located at our southern entrance from Esquimalt via the Gorge Bridge. It is bordered on the northwest side by a very busy intersection at Gorge and Tillicum Roads. The park is one of the largest in the Gorge Tillicum neighbourhood and a natural complement to the Gorge Waterway Park west of Tillicum.

The Gorge Park shoreline and waterway has long been an important place for local inhabitants. This tidal inlet was a rich source of food for local Coast Salish people as evidenced by the middens found in the immediate area. With European settlement it became a well known recreational area for Victorians with regattas and swimming competitions held annually in these waters. For further information on this rich historical legacy please refer to ‘The Gorge of Summers Past’ by local historian Dennis Minaker.





Workshop Report

1. Park Assets

Before focusing on the issues surrounding the park and ideas for the future, here are some significant Gorge Park assets.

Location—Gorge Park stretches along almost 400 m of tidal inlet shoreline, in most places backed by almost 60 m of mixed woods, shrub and parkland and in the midst of suburban Saanich. The Gorge Narrows/ Gorge Bridge is a well-known and recognizable area landmark.

Habitat—the waterway is home to spawning herring and salmon, beds of eelgrass, clams, oysters and mussels, river otters and seals, swans, geese, herons, wintering migratory ducks and many shore birds.

History—the Gorge holds a rich historical legacy both for Coast Salish people and European immigrants (see above)

Recreation—Gorge Park offers very pleasant and popular pathways for walkers, runners and dog owners as well as a large green play space for local families with children. Canoes, kayaks, and harbour ferries are common sights off Gorge Park, and the occasional swimmer pops up in the warm weather.

Caring Community—there is significant local interest in this park. Neighbours have shown up in numbers to help out at clean up events in the park. There is fairly high density housing surrounding the park and a major shopping centre close by, making Gorge Park a popular and well-known destination.



Photo by Harry Lewis

2. Park Issues

PARK INFRASTRUCTURE

Paths

While most paths are in good repair, those closer to the water and towards the Gorge Bridge, are in places muddy and steep. In particular, the access path to the dock is narrow and uneven.

The pathway that enters the park at the bus stop opposite Fairways Market does not follow the 'natural' line taken by people coming from Tillicum Rd. Realignment, or a separate path should be considered.

The path into the park from Gorge at Millgrove is set at a very dangerous crossing point on the main road. In addition it is beset by a large blackberry patch.

Benches and picnic tables

More secluded benches tend to attract lots of garbage.

Some benches are not on a par with newer furniture found in Waterway Park.

Tables and benches attract graffiti.

Tables close to shopping centre tend to attract drinkers.

Location and design of future bench and tables installation should be coordinated with park users group.



Signage

While a new interpretive sign has been added recently thanks to GWI, there is no such Saanich Parks signage. In a park with such rich heritage and habitat features, interpretive signage should be considered.

PARK ACCESS

Gorge Road West

The speed and volume of traffic on this road represent a major obstacle to local residents safely accessing the park. For example, current access paths at Millgrove and opposite the shopping centre are set at dangerous crossing points from the immediate neighbourhood.

The pedestrian environment along both sides of Gorge Rd W is unfriendly due to volume and speed of vehicles. There are no bike paths along this stretch of Gorge Rd, making it the missing link between such paths in Victoria and west of Tillicum Rd.

The trees that line Gorge Rd W along the park border only serve as a barrier to sight lines and make the park less open and accessible.

Gorge/Tillicum Intersection

This very public corner does not present a welcoming entrance to this side of the park.

The entrance to Saanich from the Gorge Bridge is rather unattractive and unkempt. As a Saanich 'gateway' it should be a feature corner.

Traffic here is heavy and the pedestrian environment is unfriendly.

There is poor linkage between Gorge Park and the neighbouring Waterway Park.

PARK HABITAT

There continues to be lots of work to cut back the invasive species, however a more concerted and organized effort is needed to ensure that volunteer time is used more effectively.

The natural shoreline needs continued protection as marine foreshore habitat, in contrast to the manufactured shoreline in other parts of the waterway.

PARK SECURITY

There is a sense of unease voiced by the elderly and/or mothers with small children about their safety and security in the park.

Many parts of the park are secluded, which is both a positive and a negative feature depending on who is being talked to.

There is still evidence of camping in the park by the homeless. In particular the high point of land above the Gorge Bridge is a secluded spot for homeless and/or drinkers. So too is the rock ledge under the bridge. Picnic table and park bench areas also bear evidence of garbage and graffiti.



3. Park Improvements

PARK INFRASTRUCTURE

Upgrade paths particularly in the areas close to the water and leading across the gully, to the dock area by Gorge bridge.

Consider future extension of park paths under Gorge bridge to Waterway Park and further east along shoreline to bottom of Harriet Rd.

Create a new path leading from the corner of Gorge/Tillicum Rds into the park.

New interpretive signage highlighting heritage and natural habitat be installed in the park (eg. at Aaron Point, at the Narrows).

PARK ACCESS

Traffic calming measures should be planned and implemented on Gorge Rd W from Harriet to Tillicum to provide safer access for local residents. These measures should include improved pedestrian and cycling facilities.

The 'Millgrove' entrance should be cleaned up, made safer and more attractive.

Gorge Park and Gorge Waterway Park should be linked as attractively and clearly as possible in spite of Tillicum Rd separating the two. Gorge Park (and Gorge Waterway Park) is a 'gateway' to Saanich and should be planned and landscaped accordingly.

The trees along Gorge Rd W should be considered for thinning in order to 'open up' the park and make it more appealing and welcoming.

PARK HABITAT

Community cleanups should continue, on a more regular basis (monthly?) and with a more focused and informed approach to invasive species removal.

PARK SECURITY

Saanich Parks and community work groups need to continue to focus on opening up clear sight lines into the park in order to improve the sense of security.

Saanich Police to continue working in cooperation with Saanich Parks and community members to ensure the park is being used for legitimate purposes.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS

Provide a boat access point in Gorge Park canoes and kayaks.

Consider a community garden area.

Host a Saanich 'Music in the Park' event.

Children's Water Park.

Extend the Gorge Canada Day Picnic to Gorge Park.

Install washrooms.

Bring back regattas to waters off Gorge Park.



Photo by Kitty Lloyd



We hope that this report on the Gorge Park community workshop will provide a foundation upon which to build further cooperation with Saanich Parks and other partners on the future of this landmark property in the Gorge Tillicum neighbourhood.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all those who participated in the Gorge Park workshop. The proposal for a community workshop was supported by a Saanich Community Matching grant and we gratefully acknowledge this support. We also acknowledge the cooperation of the Cedar Shores Strata Council in supporting our grant application and for assisting us in hosting the workshop in the Community Room at the complex.



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