

TO: Mayor Kelly and Members of Halifax Regional Council



SUBMITTED BY: _____
Mike Labrecque, Director Transportation & Public Works

DATE: September 1, 2009

SUBJECT: **Winter Season Access - Public Gardens**

INFORMATION REPORT

ORIGIN

August 4, 2009 Regional Council meeting, Item 11.3.1 - Councillor Sloane - Request for Report re: Winter Season Access - Public Gardens.

“MOVED BY Councillor Sloane, seconded by Councillor Dalrymple that Regional Council request a staff report on the potential of an earlier operating and/or winter walkway trail testing during the winter season for dedicated paths for the Public Gardens, in addition, noting staffing requirements for this initiative. MOTION PUT AND PASSED.”

BACKGROUND

The Halifax Public Gardens is one of the finest surviving examples of Victorian Gardens in North America. The Gardens began on common land by the Nova Scotia Horticulture Society in 1836. Horticulture Hall was erected in 1847 and served as the meeting room for members of the Society. A second series of gardens were begun by the City of Halifax in 1867, and in 1874 the gardens were unified into the present 16 acres which included a man-made lake known as Griffin's Pond.

The Halifax Public Gardens was recognized as a National Historic Site in 1984 where they were commemorated as a rare surviving example of a Victorian public garden. The Public Gardens is a valuable resource in the study of heritage plants and landscape design. It also houses a collection of garden features such as statues, a bandstand, and fountains which are representative of the Victorian era. The landscaped beds and features are connected and revealed through a system of Victorian era geometric paths. The walking paths are topped with a compacted crusher dust mix.

DISCUSSION

At present, the operating/open season of the Public Gardens is from early May (subject to weather conditions) to Remembrance Day. Staff estimate that the Public Gardens currently sees over one million visitors during a typical operating season. In response to a petition submitted at the March 4, 2008 Regional Council, staff conducted a trial winter opening for the 2008 - 09 winter season. The trial area was limited to the hard surface landscaped plaza to the south of Horticulture Hall and included the public washrooms. Access was through the Spring Garden Road / Horticulture Hall Gate. Details of the trial winter opening were included in a staff Information Report that was presented to Regional Council November 18, 2008. The municipality experienced a heavier than normal winter with the first major storm happening on November 24, 2008. The Public Gardens were only opened a very limited number of days over this trial period due to the winter weather conditions. In addition, one of the washrooms was significantly damaged due to a broken water pipe. A work order was set up to capture the cost of the trial winter opening of 2008 - 09. Charges against this work order totalled \$17,080.44.

To reiterate from the November 18, 2008 staff report, the greatest impact and constraint affecting the opening and closing dates of the Public Gardens is weather conditions. Staff recognize the desire of the public to expand the operating season, however, the municipality is entrusted with protecting this valuable cultural, historic and horticultural treasure and to ensure that it is enjoyed by future generations. Sustainability will only be achieved through vigilance, respect, careful maintenance that finds an acceptable balance of maintaining this resource free of threat while trying to satisfy public demand for expanded access.

The Victorian era granular walkway/pathway system of the Public Gardens is not conducive to winter snow and ice (plowing and sanding/salting) treatments that would be required to make them safe for winter time use. Staff feel strongly that attempting to provide winter maintenance to the pathway system will not only damage the pathway system itself but will also be damaging to adjacent lawns and garden beds. Therefore, staff do not recommend opening the Public Gardens for wintertime access.

In considering the option of extending the operating season by an earlier opening and later closing, staff advise that it will only be possible during favourable weather conditions. Frequent freeze/thaw cycles of late winter, plus the regions typical wet spring and fall weather often renders the walkway/pathway system unusable. The Public Gardens have a well documented drainage problem (1991 Engineering Study). That study identifies a number of maintenance concerns as a result of surface storm water run-off. It is for the above reasons that opening the Gardens to the public earlier in the spring and remaining open later in the fall would require a day-to-day assessment of conditions by staff within the Public Gardens.

Additional costs associated with extending the operating season would be for security (Commissionaires), washroom janitorial service plus litter servicing. Extending the operating season to include weekends, outside the weekend shift period permitted under the current Collective Agreement, would result in some of the additional costs at applicable overtime rates.

Staff are typically in the Public Gardens during regular hours doing spring preparatory work immediately following the end of winter works season which concludes on the second Sunday of April. Additionally, staff are in the Public Gardens during regular hours following the November 11th closing date doing fall preparatory work up to the point of onset of winter weather conditions. Other than the already mentioned litter servicing requirement including weekend overtime costs, extending the operating season of the Public Gardens by opening earlier in the spring and remaining open later into the fall is not a staff availability issue.

This report identifies that the decision would be made on a day-to-day basis by staff within the Public Gardens. That decision would be weather dependant based on protecting the Gardens from potential damage and preserving the integrity and sustainability of the Gardens, as well as protecting the public, by not permitting use of a walkway system not designed or suitable for freeze/thaw or winter weather conditions.

Based on an average weather year, staff see a realistic opportunity to extend the operating season of the Public Gardens by approximately four weeks. Again, this is weather dependant and would only be achieved if favourable weather is realized.

Given that the decision to open the Gardens would be weather dependant and made on a day-to-day basis, the estimated cost is based on a per day basis. Total cost would be based on the number of days the regular operating season is extended. The estimated extra daily cost to provide the minimal required services is \$750.00 / day. If the operating season is extended by 28 days then the extra costs would be \$750.00 / day x 28 days = \$21,000.00.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

This cost is currently unbudgeted, however, the cost of the 2008 - 2009 trial winter opening was able to be absorbed in the Operating Budget.

Given that extending the operation to an earlier opening and a later closing would replace the limited winter opening initiative, this could again be absorbed in the Operating Budget (R850).

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT POLICIES / BUSINESS PLAN

This report complies with the Municipality's Multi-Year Financial Strategy, the approved Operating, Capital and Reserve budgets, policies and procedures regarding withdrawals from the utilization of Capital and Operating reserves, as well as any relevant legislation.

ATTACHMENTS

N / A

A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/council/agendasc/cagenda.html> then choose the appropriate meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 490-4210, or Fax 490-4208.

Report Prepared by : Brian Phelan, Superintendent Parks & Open Spaces, 490 - 4867



Report Approved by: _____
Peter Verge, Manager, Municipal Operations, 490 - 4673