

NO: R095

COUNCIL DATE: June 15, 2020

REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: **Mayor & Council**

DATE: **June 11, 2020**

FROM: **General Manager, Engineering**
General Manager, Parks, Recreation & Culture

FILE: **5280-01**

SUBJECT: **Milestone Year for Youth Environmental Employment Programs**

RECOMMENDATION

The Engineering Department and the Parks, Recreation & Culture Department recommend that Council receive this report for information.

INTENT

The purpose of this report is to provide information about Surrey's tradition of long-running environmental programs providing career experience for students and youth, as 2020 marks Surrey's Natural Areas Partnership's ("SNAP") 20th year and the 25th year anniversary of the Salmon Habitat Restoration Program ("SHaRP").

BACKGROUND

Environmental stewardship has long been a priority for the City. The City championed an open channel drainage policy early in its development, resulting in the preservation of a vast network of over 1,400 km of open channels and rivers with associated riparian habitats. The City has also protected a diverse network of urban forest assets, with over 1,600 hectares of natural area parkland, and more than 106,000 shade trees along streets and in parks.

The City has also been a leader in helping to prosper this stewardship mentality within the community, creating many opportunities for residents to learn about and help care for the natural environment. Engaging local youth in environmental stewardship work has long been a top priority for the City. This has been demonstrated by the establishment of the SHaRP and SNAP teams, both of which have jointly employed nearly a thousand students since inception. SHaRP focuses on salmon habitat and watershed enhancement, and SNAP focuses on restoring and enhancing the City's urban forest. Both programs take a hands-on approach as crews remove invasive plants, plant native species, and conduct community outreach. The SNAP and SHaRP teams will be actively working throughout the community during the Summer and Fall of 2020.

DISCUSSION

Surrey's growth and development puts added importance on the enhancement and preservation of biodiversity throughout the City. Projects completed by the SNAP and SHaRP teams have never been more crucial. Their efforts include removing invasive plants, replanting trees and plants in riparian areas and parks, installing instream complexing features in waterways, and informing the public on pollution prevention techniques and park etiquette. By employing youth to complete these projects, the programs not only achieve their restoration and outreach goals, but also provide the youth with exposure to the dynamic and growing professional sector of environmental protection and management. Many SNAP and SHaRP alumni have gone on to rewarding careers within the environmental field, including several within the City.

SNAP and SHaRP not only provide youth with hands-on environmental field skills, but also personal development skills, such as leadership, teamwork, professional communication and public education, which are transferable to any future career path a student may choose.

Surrey's Natural Areas Partnership Results

SNAP was formed as an innovative partnership between the City and local non-profit organizations, including: the Green Timbers Heritage Society (which administers the program); the Sunnyside Acres Heritage Society; and the White Rock and Surrey Naturalists Society. SNAP started with a team of four students carrying out habitat restoration work in Surrey's natural areas, and has since grown to a team of 17, with an expanded scope including shade tree care and community outreach.

Each summer, SNAP employs secondary and post-secondary students and recent graduates to carry out habitat restoration projects, care for Surrey's street trees, and promote environmental stewardship within the community. The program empowers youth with practical career experience, while achieving the shared goals embraced by the partners.

SNAP has provided employment for over 215 students, reached over 185,000 residents with outreach activities, removed 3,421 m³ of invasive plants from eight hectares of parkland, and renovated 4,646 tree wells.

Salmon Habitat Restoration Program Results

In 1996, the City embarked on the innovative approach toward watershed management through the creation of a student team trained and supported by a recognized environmental consultant team that would work in streams to restore and enhance high-value salmon habitat. The inaugural year of SHaRP provided summer employment for eight youth and completed habitat restoration projects in two creek systems within the City. From these successful beginnings, the program has grown in scope, has extended works to include summer and fall seasons, and has evolved into a more integrated approach to watershed sustainability that involves field restoration work, as well as community and industrial awareness campaigns. The program annually provides 20-30 youth with technical training and career-orientated experiences to build capacity as they explore opportunities for future careers.

The SHaRP program was recently recognized as a municipal example of leadership by the 2020 Raincoast Conservation Foundation report release of "Toward a Vision for Salmon Habitat in the Lower Fraser River".

Over the program's 25-year tenure, SHaRP has provided summer employment for over 665 students, with most of these youth being Surrey residents.

The City's consistent commitment to the program objectives has resulted in revitalization efforts occurring at over 2,625 instream sites within Surrey and the delivery of over 1,000 community-based events, day camps, library programs and school presentations. Over 9,000 businesses and homeowners were contacted directly through the program to extend community awareness of the natural assets within Surrey and how to protect them from pollution. The sum of these efforts is the dedication of over 254,000 stewardship hours toward watershed sustainability and healthy salmon habitats.

2020 Plans for Surrey's Natural Areas Partnership and Salmon Habitat Restoration Program

In 2020, both the SNAP and SHaRP programs will proceed with teams of students focused on active restoration and community outreach initiatives. Restoration teams will focus on removing invasive plants and carrying out habitat restoration activities. For SNAP, this will also include maintaining shade trees in parks, and for SHaRP, the augmentation of instream gravels and rock structures in waterways for salmon habitat. The outreach teams will focus on providing informal education opportunities and conveying information across social media platforms. Many outreach campaigns will be adjusted (e.g., no door-to-door canvassing or special events) to ensure the safety of all team members and the public in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Several program management and operational adjustments have been made to further ensure the safety of this year's SNAP and SHaRP teams. Student teams will be following all current City workplace protocols related to COVID-19, including the regular cleaning of office spaces, vehicles and tools. Projects have been carefully planned to ensure team members are able to maintain appropriate physical distancing. City-branded COVID-19 signage will be posted prominently alongside the work activities of the teams.

As work schedules have been adjusted to allow programs to proceed during the extraordinary measures required during the COVID-19 pandemic, a fall SNAP team focusing on urban forest restoration work has been added for the first time. This enables a smaller team size throughout the duration of the program, supports physical distancing measures, and allows students to get experience with tree planting and other fall restoration activities. Both teams have been modified in 2020 to have a 1:1 ratio of a team leader to a crew member, which allows for a more flexible team structure to space team members across sites safely while providing a high level of training, supervision and support. The SHaRP outreach team will also represent the City's Storm Drain Marking Challenge and take over the distribution of materials to residents, as the typical repository for supply pick-up at City recreation centres is not an option at this time.

Joint Projects

To highlight the considerable legacy and history of collaboration between SNAP and SHaRP, several joint restoration projects with students from both programs are being planned. While large work parties and special events will not be possible this year, the two teams will be connected through cooperative efforts on a joint project at Hyland Creek Park, where students from both programs will contribute efforts at the same location over the summer and culminate in completion in the Fall.

SUSTAINABILITY CONSIDERATIONS

The work completed through the SNAP and SHaRP programs supports the City's Sustainability Charter 2.0. In particular, these programs support the Sustainability Charter 2.0 theme of Ecosystems. Specifically, SNAP and SHaRP support the following Desired Outcomes ("DO") and Strategic Direction ("SD"):

- Natural Areas, Biodiversity and Urban Forest DO₂: Surrey actively protects, enhances and restores its natural environments and habitats;
- Natural Areas, Biodiversity and Urban Forest DO₅: Surrey takes pride in its rich biodiversity, including fish bearing streams, marine habitat and natural areas such as forests, meadows and wetlands;
- Green Infrastructure DO₁₂: Surrey protects ecosystem services and manages natural assets in order to build resilience and adapt and thrive in a changing climate; and
- Natural Areas, Biodiversity and Urban Forest SD₃: Aggressively control or eliminate invasive species.

CONCLUSION

2020 is a milestone year for both the SNAP and SHaRP programs. The City is a model for providing proactive environmental management practices. SNAP and SHaRP are impactful programs that not only directly influence young people to pursue their environmental stewardship goals, but also actively instill civic pride and foster a stewardship mentality toward the local environment. These two environmental employment programs are iconic emblems of the City's commitment to fostering youth development.

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