

District of Saanich

Outdoor Sports Field Strategy

Round 1

What We Heard Report

Prepared for:



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Round 1 Engagement Summary

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	INTRODUCTION	4
1.1	OUTREACH AND PARTICIPATION	5
1.2	ENGAGEMENT TOOLS	5
1.2.1	<i>Internal Stakeholder Interview</i>	5
1.2.2	<i>Adjacent Municipality Interview</i>	5
1.2.3	<i>School District Interviews</i>	5
1.2.4	<i>Sports User Group Workshops</i>	6
1.2.5	<i>Organization Questionnaire</i>	6
2	ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES	7
2.1	CITY OF VICTORIA INTERVIEW	7
2.2	SCHOOL DISTRICT INTERVIEWS	8
2.3	USER GROUP INTERVIEWS	9
2.4	USER GROUPS SURVEY SUMMARY	12
2.5	BREAKDOWN OF USER GROUPS	15
3	CONCLUSION	17

1 INTRODUCTION

The District of Saanich is developing an Outdoor Sports Field Strategy to guide the future development and management of sports fields and lacrosse boxes in Saanich. The planning process includes a current inventory of Saanich’s supply of rectangular playing fields, ball diamonds, and lacrosse boxes, a review of the District’s current management practices and allocation policy, and engagement with sports fields and lacrosse box user groups, staff from other Capital Regional District (CRD) municipalities, and school representatives. This “What We Heard” Report summarizes the feedback received during the first round of engagement completed in November 2024 (see the overall planning process in Figure 1).

The purpose of the first round of engagement was to gain a better understanding of how organizations utilize sports fields and lacrosse boxes, identify gaps and opportunities in Saanich’s supply of outdoor sports facilities, discover opportunities for collaboration, and learn about what’s working and what’s not with regards to Saanich’s current allocation and management practices. These initial engagement results will inform the vision, goals, and recommendations in the Draft Outdoor Sports Fields Strategy.



Figure 1: Outdoor Sports Fields Strategy Process

1.1 OUTREACH AND PARTICIPATION

Sports user groups, adjacent municipalities, for-profit sports organizations, and school representatives were invited to participate in interviews, complete user group surveys, and share booking data two weeks before and during the engagement activities. User group representatives were contacted via email.

Information about the project was made available to the public via a page on Saanich’s website.

1.2 ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

Round 1 engagement included an internal interview with Saanich Parks staff, an interview with representatives from schools and neighbouring municipalities, workshops with Home User Groups (HUGs) and other sports organizations, a user group questionnaire, and an organization data request. The details of these activities are described below, and the results are summarized in this report.

1.2.1 INTERNAL STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW

In addition to ongoing meetings with parks staff throughout the project, an interview was held with the District of Saanich’s Park Use Coordinator to discuss the District’s current allocation framework, to gain an understanding of the District’s relationship with sports user groups, and to discuss challenges and opportunities in managing Saanich’s supply of outdoor sports fields and lacrosse boxes.

1.2.2 ADJACENT MUNICIPALITY INTERVIEW

An interview was held with the Supervisor - Sports Services from the City of Victoria to better understand field and lacrosse box use trends across the CRD, compare sports field allocation practices, and discuss opportunities for collaboration.

1.2.3 SCHOOL DISTRICT INTERVIEWS

Interviews were held with representatives from School District 61 (Victoria) and School District 63 (Saanich), as well as the Athletic Director from Claremont Secondary, to better understand how schools use Saanich sports fields and lacrosse boxes and to discuss opportunities for collaboration.

Engagement by the Numbers

1 interview with representatives from other CRD municipalities

3 interviews with school representatives

14 sports organizations engaged through workshops

24 participants in the sports user group questionnaire

1.2.4 SPORTS USER GROUP WORKSHOPS

Interviews were conducted with Home User Groups (HUGs) and non-Home User sports organizations to help identify current trends in facility use and discuss what's working and what needs improvement regarding Saanich's supply of sports fields and lacrosse boxes and its allocation policy. Invitations were extended to 54 organizations including Home User groups, non-Home User groups, sports academies, and commercial users.

Organizations that participated in workshops included:

- Saanich Lacrosse Association
- Greater Victoria Minor Football Association
- Victoria Ultimate Players Society
- Gordon Head at Lambrick Park Baseball Association
- Victoria Eagles Baseball Club
- Cordova Bay Softball Club
- Victoria Saanich Women's Softball Association
- Victoria Women's Fastball League
- Gorge Soccer Association
- Saanich Fusion Football Club
- Lakehill Soccer Association
- Prospect Lake Soccer Club
- Lakehill Baseball and Softball Association
- Forestry Softball League

1.2.5 ORGANIZATION QUESTIONNAIRE

Organizations were requested to complete an online questionnaire. The questionnaire provided an opportunity for groups to share key data about their organizations, provide feedback on the current state of sports fields and lacrosse boxes in Saanich, and offer recommendations to inform the Strategy.

2 ENGAGEMENT OUTCOMES

2.1 CITY OF VICTORIA INTERVIEW

The following are the key themes from a discussion with the City of Victoria's Supervisor - Sports Services.

Victoria Booking Model and Allocation Policy

The City of Victoria's booking model differs from the District of Saanich's Home User Group model and is summarized below.

- The majority of field users pay booking fees;
- Historic bookings are given priority to re-book fields annually;
- The City has no allocation policy for remaining bookings but has a set of guiding principles for the allocation of their artificial field;
- New sports groups seeking field permits are considered based on merit;
- There are two booking seasons; spring/summer and fall/winter;
- Field configuration changes seasonally and sometimes throughout the week to optimize field use, and
- For some user groups that have made field improvements, the City has negotiated rates for fixed terms.

Field and Lacrosse Box Use Trends

The City has noticed a shift in soccer user group demand from grass to artificial turf fields. The City is also receiving more frequent requests from emerging sports like ultimate frisbee, padel, and cyclocross.

The City has noticed an increased presence of people experiencing homelessness in its fields.

Regional Collaboration

The City noted an opportunity for more regional collaboration in sports field and lacrosse box service delivery. The City expressed willingness to participate in collaboration initiatives like regular meetings of municipal sports field allocators and developing a regional sports field strategy.

2.2 SCHOOL DISTRICT INTERVIEWS

The following are the key themes that emerged from discussions with school district representatives and the Athletic Director of Claremont School.

School Fields in Saanich

The School Districts reported that heavy school use, particularly during the winter, was leading to poor field conditions. Limited resources, including insufficient staff and a lack of specialized turf grass maintenance equipment, hinder the District's ability to maintain the fields optimally. Public use after school hours, especially by dog owners, causes further field maintenance issues. Representatives observed that their fields are not in high demand from sports groups, likely due to their poor condition.

The Athletic Director of Claremont Secondary noted that their sports academy regularly travels to Lochside Park to use the artificial turf fields, as their school fields are not in playable condition.

Artificial Turf Fields

School representatives expressed interest in installing artificial turf fields at some schools but acknowledged a lack of funding for these projects. They viewed collaboration with Saanich as a potential opportunity to build and maintain artificial turf fields. SD 61 cited working with the City of Victoria on an artificial turf field project at Victoria High School as an example of a recent successful collaboration effort.

Representatives also noted instances of co-funding agreements with sports user groups to build artificial turf fields, acknowledging that this sometimes resulted in exclusive use of the field by the sports user group.

SD 61 acknowledged that some community members have reservations about artificial turf fields, potentially influenced by a recent challenging project in Oak Bay.

Collaboration with School Districts

School representatives were open to collaboration with Saanich but emphasized new partnerships should be equitable.

2.3 USER GROUP INTERVIEWS

The following are the key themes that emerged from discussions with sports user groups.

Participation Trends

Soccer user groups reported steady growth in participation, with some attributing the growth to nationwide trends like the recent success of Canada's national teams and the rising participation cost of other team sports like hockey. Some user groups had waitlists and noted that field space, especially artificial turf field space, is limiting their capacity to take on new participants. Some soccer groups have seen growing interest in summer soccer programming, but noted that programming is difficult to offer as their use agreements for grass fields don't extend into the summer months.

Some user groups noted the trend of more youth specializing in one sport instead of participating in multiple sports throughout the year. This shift is leading to an increased demand for high-level youth sports programs.

A few of the user groups noted that growing sports like ultimate frisbee and cricket are requesting time on artificial turf fields.

Organizational Capacity and Volunteers

Several user groups noted a decline in the number of volunteers in their organizations, with some groups noting that volunteers have been slow to return since the COVID-19 pandemic. A few user groups noted operational struggles after the departure of key figures in their organizations. Several user groups noted they did not have enough coaches to offer programming to more participants. A few Home User Groups noted that new requirements from governing sports organizations were increasing the workloads for their volunteers.

Allocation and Fees

Some non-HUGs advocated for more equitable access to fields. One non-HUG noted that field use fees are underpriced, and their groups would be willing to pay more for bookings. Some non-HUGs believe that the Home User Group Model is unfair and does not provide equitable, transparent, and fair access to fields and that they would like to see the model reformed.

Capital Investments

Many HUGs noted they had worked with the District of Saanich to install major field improvements like lighting, fencing, and artificial turf fields. Some HUGs noted they received interest-free loans from the District of Saanich to help fund improvements. Some soccer HUGs noted having the desire and funding to build more artificial turf fields, but have not received approval from the District.

Year-round play, Artificial Turf Fields, and Lighting

User Groups noted that weather was a limiting factor during fall, winter, and spring in Saanich and that games and practices on grass fields were regularly cancelled due to closures.

Soccer user groups noted that artificial turf fields are preferred during wet weather, but artificial turf fields are in high demand across Saanich and the region. Non-HUGs noted difficulty securing bookings on artificial turf fields throughout the year. Many of the user groups identified developing additional artificial turf fields in Saanich as an opportunity to improve field capacity.

Many user groups noted the importance of field lighting to accommodate evening play, especially over the winter. User groups noted that light allowed maximized use of high-quality amenities like Type-A ball diamonds and artificial turf fields. HUGs that programmed grass fields with lighting noted that these fields were in poor condition.

Amenities and Maintenance

Some HUGs saw sharing maintenance costs/responsibilities with Saanich as an opportunity. Several user groups reported a lack of clarity regarding their maintenance responsibilities. One non-HUG noted they had been delegated maintenance duties from the HUG whose home field they had booked.

Some baseball user groups commented that several diamonds had outdated dugouts and lacked adequate backstops and baseline fencing to protect those outside the field. A few user groups noted that some fields lack basic park amenities like garbage cans. A few baseball user groups felt that their outfields were uneven, leading to falls and injuries.

Several baseball user groups noted that field complexes like Lambrick Park and Rosedale Park had excessive washroom facilities, which require a lot of resources to maintain. HUGs noted that maintaining washrooms was resource-intensive, especially for smaller HUGs. A few HUGs voiced concern over instances of people experiencing homelessness staying in washroom facilities.

A few HUGs expressed the desire to hang sponsor and organization banners, but have not received permission from Saanich. HUGs at Lochside Park identified the expansion of the parking lot and adding a drop-off/pick-up zone as an opportunity.

Some HUGs that operate fieldhouses described the buildings as critical to operations, using them for heated gear storage. Many HUGs noted that their fieldhouses were maintenance-intensive and needed significant repairs or renovations. A few HUGs reported recently performing major renovations to these buildings at their expense. One HUG noted that their field house is regularly rented out to generate funding for their organization.

Concession

HUGs that operate concession stands reported mixed success, with some seeing concession operations as a burden and some relying on it as a source of income. A few representatives noted that management of their organization's concession was allocated to a third party that operated separately from their

organization. A couple of HUGS noted that their concession stands acted as local gathering spaces, attracting residents from beyond the sporting community.

Box Lacrosse HUGs and Lacrosse Boxes

The Saanich Lacrosse Association noted that Saanich's uncovered boxes were not suitable for use during rainy weather. The group expressed frustration in having to navigate two different District of Saanich booking systems; separate systems for dry-floor spaces and outdoor courts. The group wanted to see a covered lacrosse box with lighting in Saanich. The user group noted that both of Saanich's boxes were in acceptable condition but the Braefoot Park box had poor drainage and the Lambrick Park box had issues with garbage and people experiencing homelessness.

Dogs

Some user groups noted that dogs regularly cause field damage, which poses safety risks to sports users. Some user groups attributed dog use of sports fields to a lack of permanent, dedicated dog parks in Saanich. One HUG expressed frustration that a field they had paid to upgrade with fencing has become a popular destination for dogs.

Tournaments and Events

Some user groups viewed Saanich as not being supportive of large tournaments and that Saanich lacked complexes with enough quality fields to host tournaments.

School Partnerships

Many HUGs noted that schools are regularly allocated field time, including artificial turf fields, during school hours. Some HUGs saw these arrangements as opportunities to build and maintain community connections. Soccer HUGs noted municipal collaboration with schools as a major opportunity. A few soccer HUGs noted recent co-funding agreements between their organizations and schools to build artificial turf fields.

A few user groups noted having field use agreements with schools. Some of these agreements involved allocating maintenance duties such as mowing to the user group. User groups noted that school fields are often in poor condition.

Working with Saanich

Larger user groups expressed the desire to have a more collaborative relationship with the District of Saanich. Some HUGs expressed that they felt undervalued by the District and were not adequately recognized for their role in providing community recreation programming. Some HUGs saw Saanich as overly demanding in their requests to promptly address maintenance issues such as graffiti.

A few user groups noted that Saanich's field booking system was difficult to navigate. Many user groups noted having positive relationships with Saanich's Park Use Coordinator. One HUG noted they are currently negotiating a partnership agreement with Saanich.

Guiding Vision

Sports user groups shared key goals that guided their program delivery, these included:

- Promoting youth sport
- Providing opportunities for player development
- Provide ‘a ladder’ to reach the next level of competitive play
- Building life skills and teaching teamwork
- Making better citizens
- Building community
- Creating a welcoming sports environment
- Making sports accessible
- Keeping sports fun

2.4 USER GROUPS SURVEY SUMMARY

The following is a summary of responses to the user group survey.

Who Responded?

The survey received 24 responses. Survey participants were a mix of Home User Groups (6), non-Home User Groups (14), schools and sports academies (2), one commercial user, and one tournament organizer. Most respondents represented ball diamond user groups (14) while only two soccer associations completed the survey. Respondent’s organizations varied in size, from 90 to 2,300 participants. User groups surveyed were diverse catering to different ages, genders, and levels of competitive play. Most user groups surveyed were accountable to larger governing bodies (16).

Trends in Participation

Most respondents (16) noted their organizations were stable, some reported growth (7), and one group reported declining numbers. All respondents save one reported that a portion of their organization’s participants were from outside of Saanich, accounting for roughly one-fifth of participants on average.

When asked if their organization could meet demand, 13 respondents stated they could, while 11 said they could not and had waitlists. Common barriers faced by survey respondents are summarized in Figure 2.

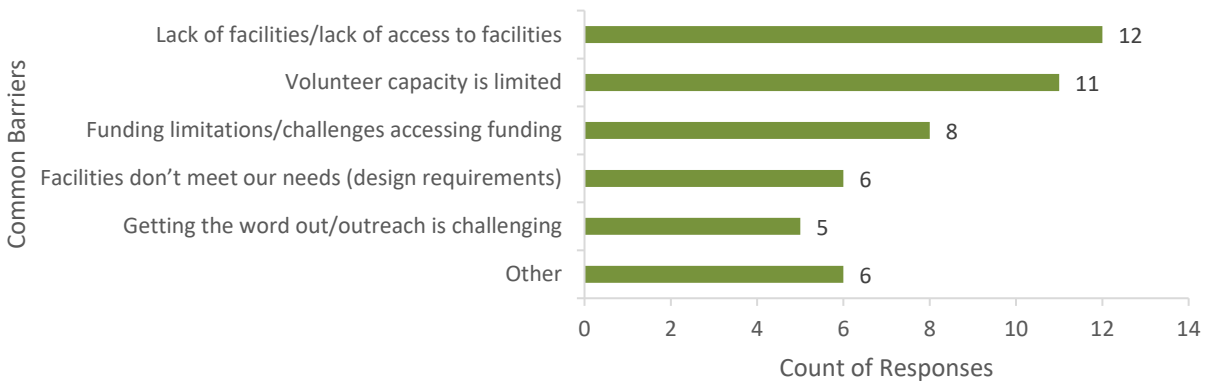


Figure 2 Common barriers to offering more/better recreation programs or services reported by survey respondents. Comments from respondents who answered 'Other' included further comments about a lack of facilities and a lack of facilities that meet their needs.

Field and Lacrosse Box Use

Two-thirds of respondents reported that their organization use fields in other communities. Nearly one-third use school district fields. One-quarter of respondents reported using Saanich fields exclusively.

Two-thirds of respondents reported their organization contributes to maintenance or capital investment for Saanich fields. Maintenance and investment activities ranged from basic maintenance like mowing grass and raking baselines to major investments like artificial turf field conversions. All respondents representing HUGs with artificial turf fields reported regular maintenance of artificial turf fields.

All HUGs that reported figures for field allocation (4) said they used their fields for 100% of the bookable time.

Service Level Satisfaction

When asked how Saanich fields compared to those offered by school districts and other communities in the region, opinions were split with 33% of respondents giving a score of one or two out of five, 55% giving a score of four or five, and three giving a score of three. Responses can be found summarized in Figure 3.

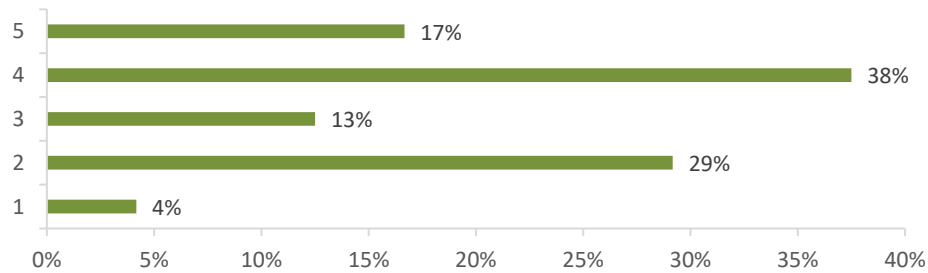


Figure 3 Respondent ratings (on a 1-5 scale) of Saanich sports field quality relative to other fields in the region.

Opportunities to Improve Sports Field and Lacrosse Box Delivery

Respondents were asked what opportunities they saw for working with Saanich to better serve the community. Ideas included:

- Collaborating with school districts to improve school fields
- Upgrading existing fields and field amenities
- Saanich taking on more HUG maintenance duties
- Creating more booking availability for non-HUGs
- Assisting user groups to secure funding for operations
- Building quality sports fields to support high-level play
- Focusing on high-quality sports field complexes over dispersed neighbourhood sports fields
- Creating permanent, dedicated dog parks near sports fields
- Leaving more fields unbookable to encourage unorganized play
- Building an indoor artificial turf facility
- Building a cricket pitch

Some respondents expressed satisfaction in working with Saanich and the overall quality of Saanich sports fields. A few respondents expressed frustration in dealing with Saanich, stating that HUG maintenance duties and upkeep of capital investments (artificial turf fields, lights, etc.) were a major

drain of organization resources and hindered their organizations' ability to offer community sports programming.

2.5 BREAKDOWN OF USER GROUPS

The first round of engagement demonstrated that the groups that use Saanich sports fields and lacrosse boxes have diverse guiding principles, histories, needs, and means. Despite these differences, several organizations showed common characteristics, especially in their membership and organizational capacity.

The following outlines the categories of user groups currently utilizing Saanich sports fields and lacrosse boxes. Moving forward, developing a strategy with these categories in mind can help ensure all user groups have equitable access to playing fields and lacrosse boxes.

Thriving Home User Groups

Thriving Home User Groups are characterized by a large number of participants (500+) and intensive field use, as well as their status as HUGs. These user groups generally have a high organizational capacity complemented by a strong volunteer base and do not have issues performing facility maintenance related to their Home User agreements. Many Thriving Home User Groups have made significant investments in field and facility improvements. Examples: Cordova Bay Fastball, Gorge Soccer Association.

Legacy Home User Groups

Legacy Home User Groups are characterized by a medium to small number of participants and less intensive field use, as well as their status as HUGs. These user groups often have lower organizational capacities and are often restricted by their small volunteer base or funding. These groups often face difficulties concerning maintenance related to their Home User agreements. Example: Strawberry Vale Fastball.

Emerging User Groups

Emerging User Groups are characterized by a medium to large number of participants and intensive field use but are not Home User Groups. These user groups generally have strong organizational capacities. These user groups often also use facilities in other CRD communities and school fields in some cases. Examples: Victoria Ultimate Players Society, Victoria and District Cricket Association.

Community User Groups

Community User Groups are non-HUG organizations characterized by a small to medium number of participants and steady participation. These groups have organizational capacities suitable for the needs of their organizations. These user groups often also use facilities in other CRD communities and school fields in some cases. Examples: Forestry Softball, Victoria All Fun Mixed Slo-Pitch.

Performance Sports Groups

Performance Sports Groups are characterized by their focus on athletic development and a small number of participants. These Groups have high organizational capacity and are often backed by larger institutions like schools or universities. Performance Sports Groups generally have a strong preference for high-quality facilities like Type-A ball diamonds and artificial turf fields. These user groups tend to use Saanich fields in addition to facilities in other CRD communities and school fields in some cases. Examples: Victoria Eagles, Claremont Lacrosse Academy.

Commercial User Groups

These groups operate primarily to generate revenue and are run by paid staff. These groups vary in their number of participants but tend to have strong organizational capacities. Example: Richardson Sport Inc.

3 CONCLUSION

Based on the input received from user groups, sports fields and lacrosse boxes are valued and provide an important role in Saanich. The District's sports organizations have distinct objectives and needs, but all aim to contribute to building a vibrant sporting community. However, the Home User group model is problematic for Saanich. It creates a strong sense of ownership by the sports groups over the facilities, which is challenging for the municipality to manage and is misaligned with the allocation policies of other CRD communities. Collaborating with the sports user groups, school districts, and other CRD municipalities presents an opportunity to create a more efficient, robust, and equitable system for managing, allocating and planning Saanich's sports fields and lacrosse boxes.