

Panama Flats Updated Concept Plan Report



October 2025

Saanich Council endorsed the Updated Concept Plan for
Panama Flats on October 20, 2025.

Appendix B

Panama Flats Updated Concept Plan Report

The following provides additional details regarding Panama Flats, the process of updating the Concept Plan for Panama Flats, and the steps needed to implement it.

Panama Flats – Existing Conditions

- **Vegetation Management** - The property has remained unfarmed since its purchase in 2011. The fields are mowed and tilled on a rotational basis by the Parks Division to control invasive plants and odour, and to protect at-risk plant species.. Mowing and tilling also preventing the flats from in-filling with vegetation in the short-term. Other work is on-going to keep trails passable and to mitigate hazard trees.
- **Colquitz River** - The Colquitz was largely confined to a ditch along the west edge of the property to accommodate farming in the past, and much of its riparian areas are significantly impacted. Despite this salmon and other fish species live in this section of the river.
- **Birds** - The variety of ecosystems and seasonal habitat types that make up Panama Flats (in particular the rare shallow-water mudflats in winter), support abundant and varied bird species, including over-wintering migratory birds. Unusual birds are seen on the flats, sandhill cranes, ring-necked pheasants, loons and golden eagles are among the 228 confirmed bird species here. Today the site is widely celebrated as a world-class bird watching destination by the naturalist community.
- **Recreational Use** - A variety of visitors including walkers, joggers, dog walkers, cyclists, and bird-enthusiasts have continued to use and enjoy the Colquitz River Trail and Panama Hill Park since the flats' purchase, and skating is very popular when the flats freeze over. The purchase has expanded the public's access to the flats themselves, and bird-watching in particular has grown in popularity as the flats continue to attract an abundance of birds.
- **Trails** - The multi-use Colquitz River Trail is the only formal trail in the Panama Flats area. Winter flooding often makes a section of the trail impassible, but the balance of the trail is in good condition. This trail currently accommodates all users with little conflict, although cyclists travelling too fast is occasionally reported, despite a dedicated bike lane being available on Interurban Road. An informal trail system has developed within Panama Hill Park and the flats themselves since the flats were purchased, some taking advantage of the berms that were installed by the previous owner. Most of these trails are of relatively poor

quality, including a small, seasonally accessible trail along much of the east and south perimeter.

- Dogs – Dogs are currently permitted off-leash between 6 am and 9 am in the Colquitz River corridor, Panama Hill Park, and Panama Flats. Dogs are required to be on-leash outside of these hours. An enclosed off-leash dog park is located in Hyacinth Park and will be made permanent.
- Invasive plants – Invasive plants are a concern throughout Panama Flats. English hawthorn, thistle, blackberry, and reed canary grass are of particular concern. Thistle and blackberry make some trails impassable or difficult to use, and English hawthorn and reed canary grass are overtaking some open areas. English hawthorn is becoming dominant on Panama Hill, and other invasive plant species are also impacting its Garry Oak ecosystem.
- Agriculture- The flats have remained unfarmed since 2011. The large barn on the east side of the flats was used for root-crop storage in the past and now it, and the surrounding area, are occasionally used to support Parks Division operations. The barn would require substantial upgrades to be used regularly for any purpose.
- Stormwater – The flats continue to accommodate winter stormwater and are critical to prevent flooding in adjacent areas. Saanich Engineering maintains the drainage-related infrastructure in Panama Flats to ensure that the stormwater management function is maintained.

Planning Process

Community Group Meetings

Parks Division staff met with the following people / groups:

- Community Associations: Cary Area Residents' Association (CARA), Royal Oak Community Association, and Mount View Colquitz Community Association;
- Recreation Groups: Saanich recreational walking groups, CRD DOGG Society (including Citizen Canine), and Capital Bikes;
- Environmental Groups: Greater Victoria Naturehood, Ducks Unlimited, Victoria Natural History Society, Habitat Acquisition Trust, Peninsula Streams and Shorelines Society, Salmon in The City, Rocky Point Bird Observatory and Colquitz Coalition;
- Agriculture Groups: Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable (CR-FAIR), and Peninsula & Area Agricultural Commission;
- Saanich – Various Saanich staff working groups including Natural Areas, Urban Forestry and Engineering

Meeting Dates:

- October 30, 2024 – President of Cary Area Residents' Association (CARA)
- November 7, 2024 – Presentation to CARA
- December 9, 2024 – Habitat Acquisition Trust (HAT)
- December 10, 2024 – Ducks Unlimited
- December 12, 2024 – Colquitz Coalition
- December 12, 2024 – Victoria Natural History Society (aka Nature Victoria)
- December 12, 2024 – CARA executive
- December 19, 2024 – CRD Dog Ownership and Good Governance Society (CRD DOGG)
- December 19, 2024 – Salmon In The City
- December 19, 2024 – Saanich Recreation Walking Groups
- January 8, 2025 – Peninsula Streams and Shorelines Society
- January 16, 2025 – Presentation to Royal Oak Community Association (ROCA)
- February 5, 2025 – Reps from all environmental groups and the President of CARA
- March 7, 2025 – Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable (CR-FAIR)
- March 12, 2025 – CRD DOGG Society
- March 13, 2025 – Telephone conversation with Peninsula & Area Agricultural Commission (PAAC)
- March 26, 2025 – Reps from all environmental groups and the President of CARA
- May 14, 2025 – Saanich staff (Engineering, Planning, and Parks) site visit
- May 21, 2025 – HAT and President of CARA
- May 29, 2025 – Capital Bikes
- June 3, 2025 – Walk & Talk event with reps from all community groups, Rocky Point Bird Observatory, Songhees Nation member
- June 18 – Site visit with Natural Areas Parks & Trails Advisory Committee (NAPT)
- August 7, 2025 – Reps from environmental groups and the President of CARA
- September 4, 2025 – The W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council
- October 1, 2025 – The W̱SÁNEĆ Leadership Council

June 3, 2025 Walk & Talk Event - Details

Meeting Purpose:

To bring all interest group representatives together to engage in constructive conversations to share perspectives, identify common values, and work toward consensus on basic topics:

- What on-site physical changes are wanted?
- How can dogs be accommodated while minimizing wildlife disturbance and upholding conservation as the priority?
- How should education and enforcement be handled?
- Is anything important missing?

Meeting Structure:

First Nations Introduction - A short talk was given by Mark Albany of the Songhees Nation to provide perspective and common context for participants.

Guided Bird-Watching – Ann Nightingale of Rocky Point Bird Observatory led a walk and spoke about the remarkable bird life on the flats.

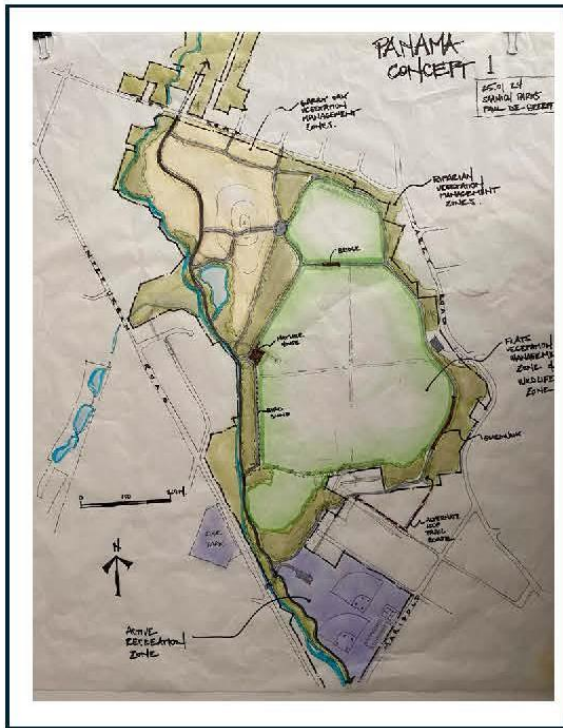
Draft Concept Overview and Guided Conversations – Staff presented the draft concept plan and a professional independent facilitator guided participants from topic to topic, and ensured that all points of view were heard. Groups reported out following each topic discussion.

Discussion Outcomes:

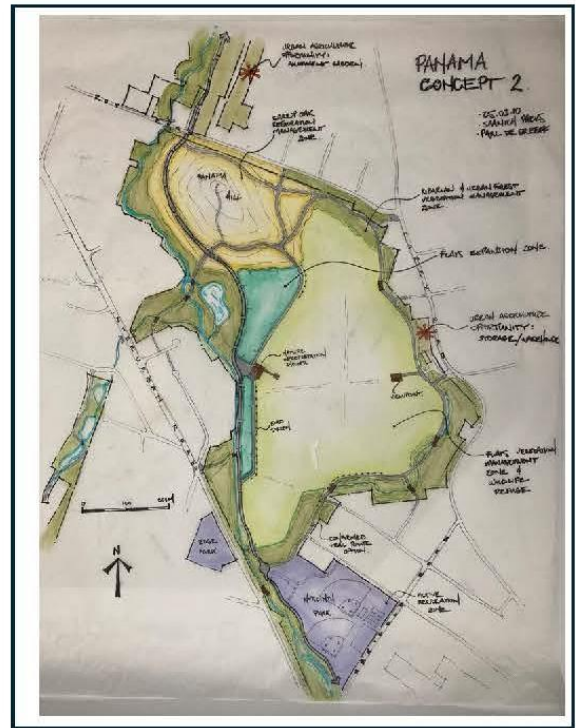
- Carefully design the trail system to control access for conservation values;
- The main trail can be successfully shared by all users;
- Manage invasive plants to preserve habitats;
- Limit dogs only as necessary but recognize that some areas need to be closed to people and dogs;
- Develop clear educational and regulatory signs to communicate and support behaviour suitable for a conservation area;
- Education first, enforcement second;
- Funding will be required to realize the plan

Concept sketches reflect the evolution of ideas discussed with groups:

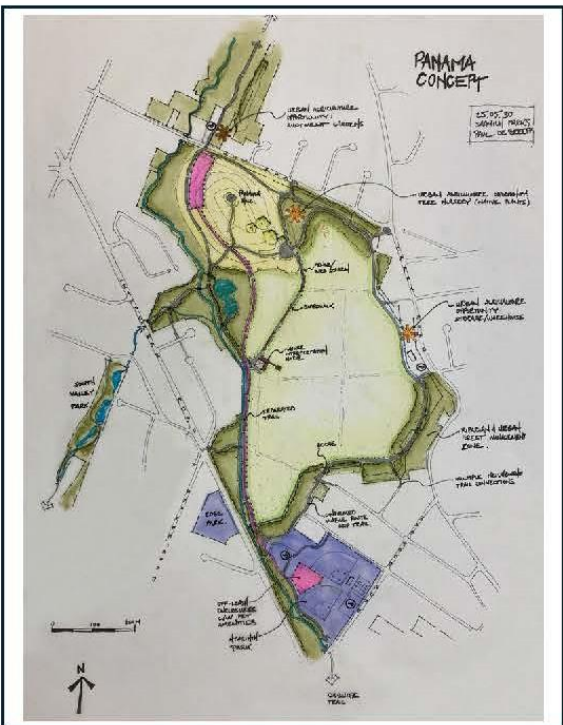
Concept Evolution



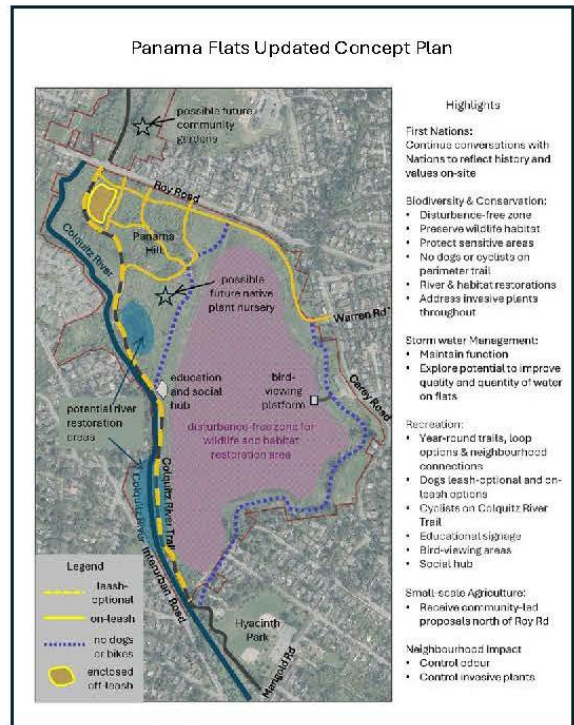
Draft Concept 1



Draft Concept 2



Draft Concept 3
(presented at Public Open House)



Final Concept Plan

Public Meeting

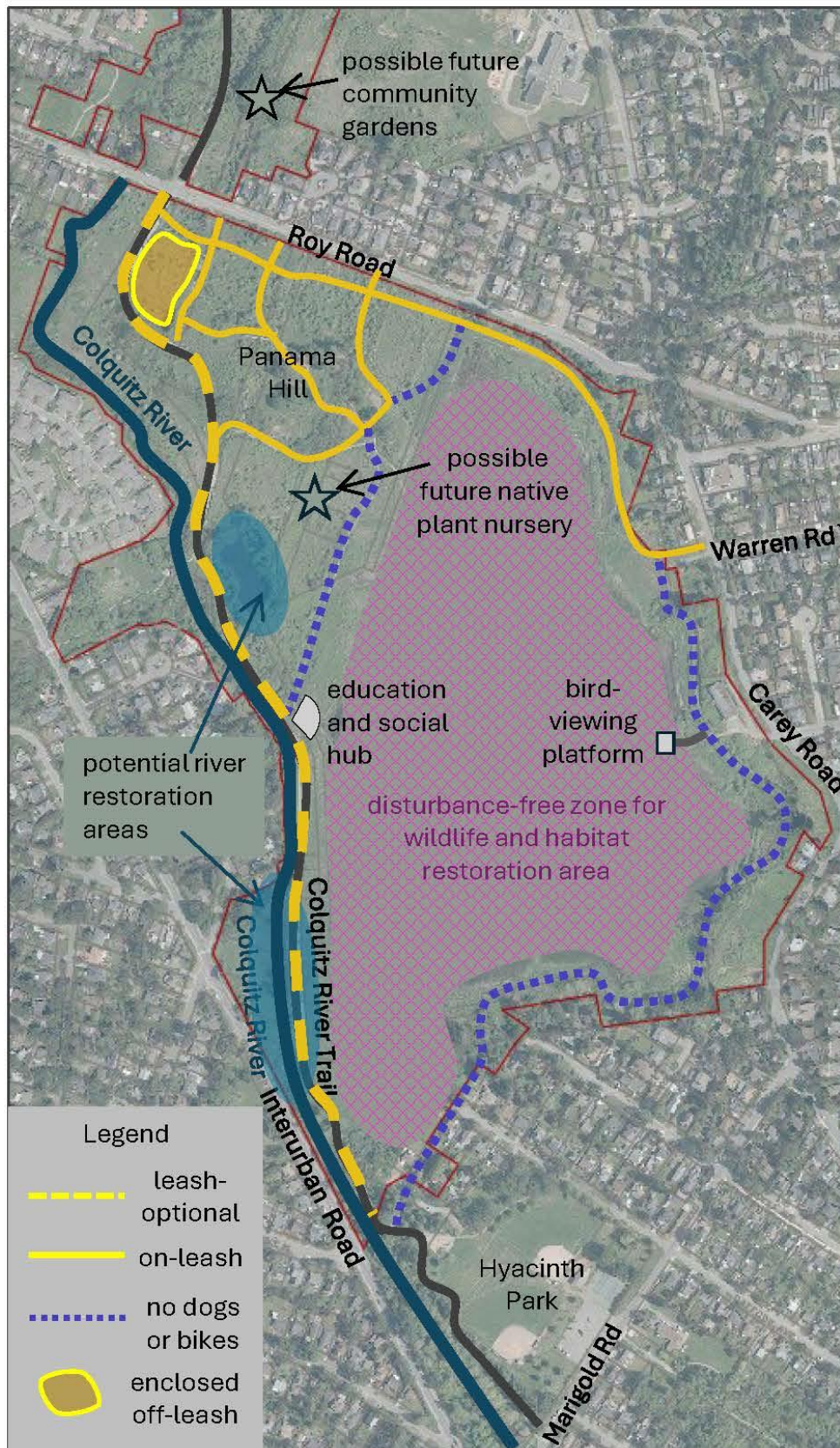
Public Open House, June 25, 2025 - Draft Updated Concept Plan

Over 100 people attended a public Open House on June 25, 2025 to view the draft Updated Concept Plan, and 298 people completed an on-line questionnaire that ran until July 16, 2025.

Dominant feedback themes were prioritizing ecological preservation (especially for birds and wetlands), careful management of dogs and cyclists, improved trail maintenance and connectivity (without overdevelopment), restoration of native habitats, and basic amenity improvements and additions.

Community feedback from all engagement activities was considered in producing the final Updated Concept Plan for Panama Flats:

Panama Flats Updated Concept Plan



Highlights

First Nations:

Continue conversations with Nations to reflect history and values on-site

Biodiversity & Conservation:

- Disturbance-free zone
- Preserve wildlife habitat
- Protect sensitive areas
- No dogs or cyclists on perimeter trail
- River & habitat restorations
- Address invasive plants throughout

Storm water Management:

- Maintain function
- Explore potential to improve quality and quantity of water on flats

Recreation:

- Year-round trails, loop options & neighbourhood connections
- Dogs leash-optional and on-leash options
- Cyclists on Colquitz River Trail
- Educational signage
- Bird-viewing areas
- Social hub

Small-scale Agriculture:

- Receive community-led proposals north of Roy Rd

Neighbourhood Impact

- Control odour
- Control invasive plants

Updated Plan Highlights:

■ First Nations

There is interest and support for identifying and acknowledging First Nations' presence and traditional uses of the area.

How to best represent First Nations' presence and use of the area will be explored directly with the Nations. Initial conversations with the WSÁNEĆ Leadership Council indicate possible interest in sharing traditional plant and animal names and uses, and making the flats available for traditional plant harvesting and other appropriate uses.

ACTIONS to Support First Nations:

- Further explore opportunities with Nations as they are able to engage and the plan is implemented.

■ Biodiversity and Conservation

Feedback indicates strong support for the protection and improvement of natural areas in general, and specifically regarding birds, the Colquitz River, and invasive plants:

□ Birds

The strong majority of feedback indicates that the site's wildlife value, specifically regarding birds and migratory birds in particular, is very important. The 'disturbance-free wildlife area' identified in the south section of the flats was strongly supported.

A number of interrelated factors must be addressed to ensure that birds continue to thrive at Panama Flats, including habitat preservation, vegetation management and controlling the movement of people and dogs. Following is a brief description of important factors:

- Shallow flooded fields - The seasonally flooded fields are particularly important to over-wintering and migratory birds, and must be kept from filling in with vegetation. Keeping water on the flats as long as possible is also important.
- Vegetated Habitat – The shrubs and trees that are used for nesting, resting and feeding must be protected. Those adjacent to the central fields are particularly important.
- Trails - Controlling the movement of people and dogs to minimize disturbance to the shallow winter lake and adjacent bird habitat is critical. 'Quiet' areas that exclude people and dogs allow birds to cease monitoring traffic for signs of potential threat, and concentrate on nesting, resting and feeding. Many birds are sensitive to dogs in particular; birds do not distinguish between a leashed and unleashed dog, and both are seen as potentially dangerous. An effective

‘disturbance-free/quiet wildlife area’ over much of the open fields area needs to be established, and informal trails that impact birds will be closed.

ACTIONS to Support Biodiversity and Conservation – Birds:

- Partner with environmental groups to complete a detailed plant and wildlife inventory and assessment of Panama Flats;
- Review informal trails and decommission those that provide access to the ‘disturbance-free/quiet wildlife area’, or are impacting sensitive areas;
- Install protective fencing to prevent dogs and people from entering sensitive habitat;
- Identify a prescription to prevent the open fields from filling in with vegetation in the long term;
- Establish an effective method to prevent dogs and cyclists from using the perimeter trail adjacent to the disturbance-free area;
- Work with the Engineering Department to investigate the possibility of improving the quality and quantity of water on the flats.

□ Colquitz River

Strong support for improvement of fish habitat and the wildlife value of the river was indicated.

The river channel and riparian areas could be improved for fish and other wildlife via large and small interventions to much of its length. Channel realignment for fish-bearing rivers is very complicated and costly, and further research is needed to identify high-benefit sections of the river to target for improvement in the short to mid-term. The southern riparian area and existing pond have been identified as possible short to mid-term project areas. Larger river restoration projects may be undertaken in the long term as resources allow.

ACTIONS to Support Biodiversity and Conservation – The Colquitz River:

- Identify high-value fish habitat and riparian areas restoration opportunities;
- Explore opportunities to partner with environmental groups on restoration projects;
- Explore grant opportunities for larger restoration projects.

□ Invasive Plants

Visitors are concerned about the encroachment of invasive plants on trails, and many are also aware of the habitat value degradation they represent. Effective management of problematic plant species is supported.

Invasive plants have a strong foothold in the flats and must be managed for both the ecological health of wildlife habitat and to ensure the ongoing recreational use of trails and bird watching areas. Basic maintenance by the Parks Division is keeping main trails accessible in the short term.

ACTIONS to Support Biodiversity and Conservation – Invasive plants:

- Develop and execute a comprehensive invasive plant management plan to identify priority areas and/or plant species, and the methods for control.

Note that Panama Flats is not only home to birds, other small animals including mink, beaver, amphibians and reptiles also live here. All will benefit from the measures that are implemented to protect bird nesting and feeding habitat, and improvements to the river. Riparian areas in particular are important to small animals, they provide food, shelter and travel corridors within the urban environment.

■ **Stormwater Management**

The public is aware and appreciative of the flat's role in storm water management. Occasional flooding over the Colquitz River Trail is problematic.

The Engineering Department maintains the drainage-related infrastructure in Panama Flats to ensure that the stormwater management function is maintained. They have identified measures which could improve the quality and quantity of water that floods the flats and enters the river by creating holding facilities at storm drain outfalls near Carey Road, and diverting rainwater from perimeter drains onto the flats. Engineering projects are underway that will help to determine the feasibility of these ideas. Parks will partner with Engineering to further explore potential improvements when foundational studies are complete.

Parks and Engineering ACTIONS for Stormwater Management:

- As part of the ongoing Integrated Stormwater Management Plan initiatives, finalize District Wide Dual Drainage Modelling and Colquitz River Floodplain Mapping (Saanich Engineering);
- Use District Wide Dual Drainage Modelling to explore the feasibility of stormwater management and enhancing external connectivity (Saanich Engineering);
- Use Colquitz River Floodplain Mapping to assess any flood impacts to flood levels within the Colquitz River (Saanich Engineering);
- Develop a hydrotechnical assessment / formal drainage plan for Panama Flats (Saanich Engineering and Parks).

■ **Recreational Opportunities**

Trail use, bird-watching, dog-walking, skating, and a social hub are supported in the Updated Concept Plan:

□ **Trails**

Strong support for minimal trail development to preserve natural habitat and wildlife (especially limiting or prohibiting off-leash dogs) was expressed.

Preventing conflicts between users (people on foot, cyclists, and dogs) through

trail design and clear rules / signage was also supported. There was little support for a separate dogs off-leash trail or trail widening to accommodate more users.

The trail system is the basis for all recreation in Panama Flats and it must accommodate people without overly impacting natural areas or wildlife habitat. A functional, minimal system of appropriate trail types will provide a variety of loop options, improve neighbourhood connections, and provide access to site features.

Trails will be improved and created in the order of their user volume, i.e. trails accommodating all users will be established before those serving a subset of users. Existing informal trails will be improved to create the formal trail system whenever possible, vs building trails in new locations. All trails will allow year-round use. Informal trails that are causing erosion and/or impacting sensitive areas will be closed.

Trail Hierarchy:

- The Colquitz River Trail is the primary trail, accommodating all users including dog-walkers and cyclists. Because it is gravel and winding, it does not lend itself to high-speed biking, and most cyclists use it without conflict with other users. Trail design and regulatory signs will continue to discourage cyclists from riding fast on the trail. A bike lane is available on Interurban Road for those to wish to travel quickly.
- Secondary trails will form loops and neighbourhood connections, many will accommodate on-leash dogs, but all will exclude cyclists;
- A perimeter trail adjacent to the disturbance-free wildlife area and other bird habitat will prohibit dogs and cyclists. This narrow section of trail will create another loop option for those on-foot and without dogs.

ACTIONS to Support Recreation – Trails:

- Identify a year-round trail system with neighbourhood connections and loops, and identify existing trails to incorporate and those to decommission;
- Eliminate seasonal flooding of the main trail;
- Establish new trails in use-priority order;
- Develop and install clear regulatory signs indicating the trail hierarchy, permitted users, and the reasons for prohibitions.

☐ **Bird-Watching**

There is very strong support to create opportunities for bird-watching.

Unobtrusive bird-blinds in strategic locations, and raised viewing platforms on the east and west sides of the flats will allow birders and the general public to enjoy and learn about the many bird species at Panama Flats. Screening methods and viewing structures found to be effective at bird sanctuaries in the region (e.g. the

George C. Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary in Delta) will be referenced. Habitat Acquisition Trust has indicated an interest in funding these structures.

ACTIONS to Support Recreation – Bird Watching

- Develop educational signage highlighting birds and other wildlife;
- Partner with environmental groups and birding experts to confirm locations and types of screenings/bird blinds for bird-watching;
- Partner with environmental groups and birding experts to confirm location and design of bird-viewing platforms and investigate possible financial contributions from environmental groups.

☐ **Dog-Walking**

A third of the people who completed the questionnaire are dog-walkers. Most agree that off-leash areas must be outside of sensitive habitat areas and/or fenced. The proposed enclosed off-leash area adjacent to Roy Road was the highest priority for 4% of questionnaire respondents.

Ultimately dogs will be leash-optional on the Colquitz River Trail at all times. Transitioning to leash-optional use in specific locations at Panama will require a phased approach. The Parks Division has learned through ongoing implementation of the People, Pets, and Parks Strategy that it is helpful to have signage and access barriers in place prior to making changes to use. In this sense, it is recommended to keep the main Colquitz River Trail as leash-optional between 6am and 9am (as per current Animal Bylaw requirements) until such time as signage and strategic fencing is installed. At that point, a transition to leash-optional use can be considered for the Colquitz River Trail through Panama Flats, along with other opportunities for dog-walking as outlined in the list of recreational plan updates provided in the checklist below.

Protective fencing will be installed to prevent dogs from entering adjacent sensitive habitat. Dogs will be permitted on-leash on most other trails, other than the perimeter trail that runs adjacent to the disturbance-free wildlife area.

ACTIONS to Support Recreation – Dog Walking

- Leash-optional on the main trail;
- Develop and install clear regulatory signs indicating the trail hierarchy, permitted users, and the reasons for prohibitions;
- Construct an enclosed off-leash area at the north end of the Colquitz River Trail adjacent to Roy Road.

☐ **Skating**

A number of attendees voiced support for skating, no opposition was heard.

The shallow winter lake occasionally freezes in the winter months and skating is a very popular tradition that will continue to be welcomed. Because skating happens when the water is frozen there are no birds in the open fields at that time. Further, skating is only rarely possible, and does not represent a significant disturbance to over-wintering birds.

ACTIONS to Support Recreation – Skating

- Continue to welcome skating and incorporate a small landing into the social hub to help people get on and off the ice.

□ Social Hub

People generally value the flats' role in bringing the community together and creating the opportunity for social interaction.

The central bird watching area / nature appreciation hub adjacent to the main trail on the west side of the flats will double as a community gathering place. This area could include seating and educational material organized to accommodate speakers and small presentations.

ACTIONS to Support Recreation – Social Hub

- Meet with community groups to discuss possible social programming;
- Design a gathering / learning hub with seating and signage.

■ Small-Scale Agriculture

Public sentiment has generally shifted to value the site's natural aspect more than its potential for food production. A few people remain interested in large-scale farming similar to that of recent decades, and some were interested in community or allotment gardens within the site or to the north of Roy Road.

The fact that most area residents live on single family lots and have the opportunity to garden on their own property may explain the limited interest. Parks remains open to the possibility of allotment / community gardens north of Roy Road, subject to sufficient interest from the public and the establishment of a community group to organize and maintain the gardens, this interest may arise as the demographics of the area evolve. The Capital Region Food And Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable (CRFAIR) expressed an interest in a food storage and distribution building on site – however this cannot be accommodated at this time.

ACTIONS to Support Recreation – Small-Scale Agriculture

- Remain receptive to community-led proposals for community gardens.

■ Neighbourhood Impact

There no longer appears to be an odour issue on the flats and little if any concern was expressed about the Flats' impact on surrounding areas. Some concern about the spread of invasive plants within the site was expressed.

Mowing and tilling will continue to prevent odour from becoming an issue. Invasive plant control will be improved to help minimize the spread of invasive plants.

Saanich Parks ACTIONS to address Neighbourhood Impact

- Continue to mow and till the flats or adopt an alternative method of odour control;
- Develop a comprehensive invasive plant management plan to identify priority areas and/or plant species, and the methods for control.

Updated Concept Plan Implementation - Priorities

The top priorities indicated by public feedback are:

- Build a trail system for walkers, runners, dog-walkers and cyclists;
- Formalize disturbance-free area for wildlife;
- Create opportunities for bird-watching (viewpoints, bird blinds) and nature appreciation.

The relative costs of implementing actions are given in the following table. Implementation will take place subject to funding and First Nations input.

Relative Implementation Costs	
Short-Term (1 – 5 years)	Estimated Costs
★ Trails (incl. disturbance-free zone)	\$\$\$
★ Fencing (incl. disturbance-free zone)	\$\$
★ Vegetation management – trails, fields, invasives (ongoing)	\$\$
★ Bird viewing structure(s)	\$ (in partnership)
★ Educational signage	\$
★ Regulatory signage	½ \$
Mid-Term (6 – 8 years)	Estimated Costs
• Bird blinds	\$ (in partnership)
• Enclosed leash-optional area	\$\$
• Stormwater improvements	\$\$
Long-Term (8+ years)	Estimated Costs
• Social Hub	\$\$
• River restoration(s)	\$\$\$\$
• Wetland restoration(s)	\$\$\$\$

Recommended actions will be implemented subject to funding and First Nations' input. Maintenance funding will be sought separately.

★ indicates priority items.