

Public Meeting Interpretive Centre for Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park

The Big Lake Environment Support Society (BLESS) held a public meeting on November 15th, 2006 at Sir George Simpson School in St. Albert to gather public opinion with respect to an interpretive centre for Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park (LHCPP). BLESS believes its members, as well as members of the general public, who are familiar with the natural area and have enjoyed the benefits of its many natural attractions over the years can provide valuable input into planning initiatives for the province's newest park.

The meeting opened with a brief presentation of potential location and theme options for an interpretive centre. The floor was then opened to public comments and discussion for the remainder of the evening.

It was suggested that classroom space be provided in an interpretive centre and the comment was made that interpretive centres without such space were often not well attended. An interpretive centre that would provide opportunities for scientific research was also suggested. Several people emphasized that it was critical for any interpretive centre development to have a minimal footprint and promote low-impact activities.

Some attendees wished to take the discussion beyond that of just an interpretive centre. They expressed the desire to see trails and boardwalks for natural area interpretation and appreciation, such as is found at the Clifford E. Lee natural area. Attendees felt trails and boardwalks would provide opportunities for the public to observe and learn about waterfowl, shorebirds and other wildlife of Big Lake. It was noted that such initiatives would likely be less expensive than an interpretive centre and could be developed in a staged process, possibly using a volunteer component, to provide access to a greater area of the park for more people. A small temporary interpretive or educational centre set up in a trailer or temporary building was suggested as an alternative initial development possibility.

Some at the meeting felt an established and comprehensive interpretive centre was also important in that it would act as a focal point to educate the public about the natural area and direct visitors to specific nature appreciation opportunities throughout the park. The Rocky Mountain House visitor centre was cited as a good example of a facility that emphasized trail interpretation. Most in attendance agreed the primary focus of an interpretive centre should be on the natural features of Big Lake and its wildlife, birds in particular.

A concern was raised that focusing efforts and resources on an expensive interpretive centre might delay other park improvements, such as trails, viewing platforms and towers, that would also provide significant opportunities to the public. The suggestion was made that perhaps a planning group that focused just on trails could be formed.

Land acquisition was recognized as being a key component for future development. Strategic acquisition of key areas such as the 80 acres south of and immediately adjacent to the newly acquired park land at 137 Avenue and 199 Street, the height of land overlooking the narrows and the land currently owned by the Pioneer Gun Club on the north shore were suggested as possibilities for park expansion.

When parking for visitors was raised as a possible drawback to providing public access at the Pioneer Gun Club location, the suggestion was made that a small parcel of land opposite the

site off Meadowview Drive might be acquired to solve the parking problem. The concept of providing "multiple nodal access points" by acquiring small parcels of land at different locations around Big Lake to provide access to the widest range of natural area experiences met with approval from many at the meeting. Nodes could include, for example, the BLESS platform, a tower located at the height of land at 215 Street and a wildlife viewing tower on the west bay. Canoe access to both bays might be provided so park visitors could visit "hotspots" for wildlife viewing such as the mouth of the Sturgeon River. The gun club on the north shore with its man-made canals was suggested as a good potential location for launching canoes.

Value for money spent was raised as a concern. The Chickakoo natural area was mentioned as being an example where good value was provided for what seemed to be a modest investment of resources.

Several attendees at the meeting were horse riders who expressed a desire for riding trails within the park. They specifically asked not to be excluded from the recently acquired park area at 199 Street and 137 Avenue and asked for guidance as to the areas with sensitive vegetation that should be avoided for such use. Equestrians preferred rough trails over groomed trails for riding, however the suggestion was also made that trails be designed for multiple use. Concern was expressed that riding trails be designed to prevent abrading. It was suggested that the Alberta Equestrian Federation might assist with trail development and matters of appropriate trail construction including trail "hardening" for horse use.

There was a significant amount of discussion on horse use that included compatibility issues on trails with hikers, cross-country skiers and other users. Attendees thought it should be possible to work out compatible options for trail use. The observation was made that these kind of management solutions have been developed for other area recreation sites, such as the Blackfoot Recreation Area, south of Elk Island National Park and lessons learned from those areas could be useful in developing LHCPP.

Self guided tours with audio recordings that described natural area features was suggested as a possibility for the park. Because of its size and location relative to a large population base, it was suggested that a full time provincial employee dedicated to LHCPP might be beneficial. Some questioned whether an Interpretive Centre really needed to be manned while others observed there was always a risk of vandalism around interpretive centres and related facilities.

The feasibility of commercial opportunities such as canoe or boat rentals was raised. Some attendees felt that such commercial use, and even opening an extensive trail system to the public, might encourage overuse of the natural area that would be at odds with a conservation ethic.

Long time BLESS members observed that wildlife observation towers had been considered by BLESS in the past and an ideal location for an observation tower would be the height of land on the south shore near the narrows that could be accessed via 215th Street. A waterfowl observation tower or knoll on the west shore of the west bay was also suggested with Ducks Unlimited being a possible source to be consulted regarding the best location for such a facility.

There was enthusiastic discussion and support by many in attendance in favour of installing self contained web cameras at strategic locations throughout the park. It was felt the cameras would be a good mechanism to make the public more aware of the new park and would provide low-impact access to large numbers of people via the internet. Examples of web camera

installations in other areas were cited by members in the audience as indication that it might be relatively easy to implement similar systems for LHCPP. It was suggested that such cameras could provide secondary benefits by acting as security systems to prevent vandalism and aid in enforcement efforts to reduce the use of all-terrain vehicles and snowmobiles in the park.

Some discussion revolved around historical aspects of the area in relation to an interpretive centre. Metis and native (including prehistoric) history, as well as the history of early European settlement in the area were suggested as possible themes for exhibits in an interpretive centre.

Attendees discussed whether or not oil and gas industry exhibits might be appropriate in an interpretive centre. It was noted the oil and gas industry is active in the area at present, has been in the past and will be well into the future. The group response was generally positive to the idea of such exhibits, with some discussion on the possibility of bringing industry dollars to bear on some aspects of appropriate park development. It was observed that the oil and gas industry might become diligent stewards of the area if they had a vested interest in an interpretive centre. The local oil and gas industry-citizen synergy group (STAMP) was mentioned as an example where positive results have been achieved between industry and the community.

Towards the end of the evening, there were short discussions on what the next steps might be for those interested in participating in future park development. Committees, comprised of members of the public supported by government and other experts who would sit to discuss and study the potential impacts and options of various aspects of park development, could be a useful adjunct to future planning efforts.

BLESS is receptive to working with other groups and individuals who wish to develop increased opportunities for public access to the new park while preserving sensitive and important natural areas and reducing as much as possible adverse impacts to wildlife and habitat. We feel the input obtained through the November meeting was valuable both as a public awareness and education exercise as well as a planning tool. BLESS hopes to conduct more public meetings in future and actively invites members of the public to submit ideas and comments to us on issues of park development and natural area protection and preservation. (Email BLESS at parkplan@bless.ab.ca).

This summary of discussions at the November 15th public meeting is available on the BLESS website and is being sent to the Alberta Government, Department of Community Development, Parks and Protected Areas in the hope that comments herein will be considered in current and future planning initiatives for Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park.