



SUBJECT: Lowville Park summary and recommendations
TO: Community Planning, Regulation & Mobility Cttee.
FROM: Transportation Services Department

Report Number: TS-02-23

Wards Affected: 3

File Numbers: 745-03

Date to Committee: January 10, 2023

Date to Council: January 24, 2023

Recommendation:

Direct the Director of Transportation Services to discontinue the Parking Ambassador program at Lowville Park, effective 2023, revert to the pre-pandemic operational model, and report back in Q1 2023 on alternative uses for the gate system; and

Direct the Director of Transportation Services to report back in Q1 2023 on the feasibility of implementing paid parking at Lowville Park inclusive of cost to implement and projected revenues.

PURPOSE:

Vision to Focus Alignment:

- Support sustainable infrastructure and a resilient environment
- Building more citizen engagement, community health and culture
- Deliver customer centric services with a focus on efficiency and technology transformation

Background and Discussion:

Since the pandemic, visitors to Lowville Park have been required to make an online reservation prior to visiting the park from May to mid-October (Thanksgiving Weekend). Reservations were permitted up to one week in advance and were valid for a three-hour visit to the park. The requirement for advanced reservation was displayed on signs

located on both Old Lowville Road and Guelph Line in addition to being communicated through the City of Burlington website. Vehicles parked in excess of the three-hour limit were subject to enforcement and/or removal. The three-hour limit was implemented in order to allow users enough time to enjoy the park during the pandemic and regulate duration of stay. The online reservation system provided an essential recreation opportunity by encouraging vehicle turnover at a time when options were limited during the height of pandemic restrictions. If visitors did not have a reservation upon arrival, they could seek assistance from a Parking Ambassador who was stationed at the front gate and could assist with completing a reservation.

With the program continuing through the 2022 season, the reservation system has been relatively well adopted by park visitors. However, it has been noted by staff that some guests had become increasingly reliant on the presence of the ambassadors to book reservations on the guests' behalf, which runs counter to the intention of having an automated system in place to permit access. A contributing factor to this is the topography of the area which limits mobile cellular reception and impedes ability to complete reservations on-site at time of arrival. In its current state, the reservation system requires Parking Ambassadors to fulfill the reservation function on behalf of guests if an advanced reservation was not secured.

As confirmed through the reservation system, during the peak period (July 2022) the majority of park visitors were coming from Milton. Appendix A contains a heat map which graphically illustrates residency of park visitors.

Statistics and Figures

Table 1: Lowville Park Reservation Statistics (May – October 2022)

	May	June	July	August	September	October*	TOTAL
Number of Visitors	3,573	9,744	13,668	9,312	6,591	4,504	47,392
Number of Groups	1,155	3,101	3,946	2,872	2,151	1,448	14,673
Average Per Group	3.1	3.1	3.5	3.2	3.1	3.1	3.2

*October figures are from the first of the month until Thanksgiving Monday (1 October – 10 October 2022)

Strategy/process

Review of the program and anecdotal evidence supported through the experience of staff indicates that the continued reliance on Parking Ambassadors is no longer supported and should be discontinued for the 2023 season.

The primary factor for discontinuing the program is the lifting of pandemic measures and lockdowns. As noted earlier, the key reason for implementing the Parking Ambassador and reservation system at Lowville Park was to manage park demands and regulate access during a time when travel was restricted and recreational opportunities were scarce. Given that the provincial pandemic response is no longer in place, the requirement to reserve and limit park visits to three-hours is of limited value to the overall operation of the park.

Another factor that supports discontinuation of the program is the desire of park visitors to stay longer than three-hours. Staff interactions with park visitors reveals that visitors are overwhelmingly in favour of eliminating the limitation on length of stay. Eliminating the three-hour time limit would enable park programming to resume. Examples include resumption of picnic permits as managed through Recreation, Community and Culture; as well as other community-based initiatives such as those organized by Field and Stream Rescue who currently lease the Lowville Schoolhouse. The reservation system and associated time limit hampered the ability of these programs to run in 2022.

Options Considered

Cost Mitigation Focused - Discontinue the Parking Ambassador program at Lowville Park, revert to the pre-pandemic operational model and report back in Q1 2023 on alternative uses for the gate system.

This option restores Lowville Park to its pre-pandemic state by eliminating the requirement for advanced reservations to visit the park, eliminates the three-hour time restriction and discontinues the Parking Ambassador program. Parking Services will revert back to core operations, focusing on enforcement and education in the area when required.

The need to revert back to pre-pandemic operations is not only essential for the park users that have expressed interest in longer stays, but also for the continuation of recreational programming that previously took place at the park. This option provides much needed opportunity for the community to use the space in a manner consistent with the rest of the city and allows Parking Services to focus on core operations.

Customer-Service Focused - Extend the Parking Ambassador program in its current state including three-hour time limit and advanced reservations.

This option continues both the Parking Ambassador and on-line reservation program in its current state while maintaining the requirement for advanced reservation and continuation of the three-hour time limited stay. This option restricts the use of the park and will not accommodate picnic permits or programming through community partners. Additional resources will be required for this option as continuation of the program was not anticipated through the 2023 budget.

Cost-Recovery Focused - Cease the parking ambassador program, report back in Q1 2023 with new operational model to include paid parking to regulate access, encourage turnover and include options on alternative use for the gate system.

This option strikes a balance between the need for longer-term visits in the park while regulating parking supply through the introduction of paid parking. This fee for paid parking structure is aligned with other regional parks within the rural area and is appropriate given the regional demand for park use. This option will require additional resources, namely technology and connectivity resources (i.e., parking pay machine installation, network connectivity, etc.). Preliminary discussions are underway with other city departments and will continue prior to reporting back to Council with a recommendation on paid parking and reuse of the existing gate system.

Financial Matters:

In early 2022, in partnership with the City Auditor, Parking Services followed up on a 2017 audit and finalized its position as a cost recovery service. The engagement of Parking Services in what largely amounts to park operations at Lowville Park does not currently provide any method of cost recovery for the service. As a result, extensive staff and budget resources are required in order to provide the high level of customer experience at Lowville Park, which is predominantly used by residents of neighbouring municipalities (refer back to Appendix A).

Total financial impact of operating the program is substantial and to-date, there is no revenue generated through the program and no cost recovery to Parking Services. Two Parking Ambassadors are on-site 7 days per week. In total, this amounts to 64.0 staff hours per week with an additional 24.0 staff hours required during holiday long weekends. In addition, full-time staff resources are required to be dedicated throughout the duration of the program to support daily operation which has negatively impacted

the ability to deliver on critical initiatives to overall parking service delivery and strategic workplan items.

Total Financial Impact

In terms of total financial impact, the Parking Ambassador and FT Staff Overtime values, as presented below, were also reported in TS-01-23 and represent the total Parking Ambassador staff costs for both Lowville and Beachway operations. The only additional expense associated with Lowville Park is a fee for Annual Gate Maintenance in the amount of **\$5,100**.

Table 2: 2022 Financial Impact

*Total Program figures previously reported in TS-01-23

	2022
Parking Ambassadors	\$47,547*
FT Staff Overtime	\$7,645*
Annual Gate Maintenance	\$5,100
Total	\$60,292

Source of Funding

The Parking Ambassador program in 2021 was funded through a combination of Canada Student Grants and the Parking Services Operating budget which received limited Safe Restart funding. In 2022, the Parking Ambassador program was funded entirely from the Parking Services Operating Budget through part-time salaries and wages. The 2023 budget does not include a provision for this position.

Other Resource Impacts

Ambassador Staffing

Staffing the part-time Parking Ambassador position continued to present challenges through the 2022 season. Some candidates were trained and deployed to the park in early May, only to leave the corporation shortly after commencement of employment. Limited retention of returning staff, with high levels of turnover, presented operational difficulties throughout the duration of the program which resulted in the need to approve significant over-time expenses and deploy full-time Parking Services staff to Lowville Park to fulfill the duties of Parking Ambassadors. Additionally, support that was previously offered from other departments has since ceased with return to near-normal corporate operations, thereby reducing access to staff resources in order to sustain the program.

Fine Revenue

Fine revenue is difficult to estimate given the varying costs of each offence. Additional administrative fees are applied when tickets lapse, and it often takes months to recover costs as a result of the ticket screening, hearing, or plate denial processes. For the purpose of this report, in consideration of the goal for Parking Services to achieve cost-recovery and compliance, fine revenue has not been a contributing factor in determining staff's recommendation.

Mobile or Wireless Signal

The reliance on both wireless and mobile signals is demonstrable at Lowville Park. Currently, visitors need either WIFI access or a mobile signal in the event that reservations were not completed prior to arrival. If the option for paid parking is selected, this will be a requirement to facilitate mobile payment in the area. ITS is currently exploring options to provide wireless service to the parking lot as a preliminary exercise to gauge the cost of implementation.

Gate Operations

Generally speaking, the gate system operates as required, but a high level of guidance is often required for park visitors to gain access. Additional signage was installed in 2022 to better facilitate vehicle placement for plate verification. Difficulties with the system arise when the underlying support systems fail. The most significant of these impediments was the network outage in July 2022. Loss of network connectivity to the gate system removes ability for staff to check vehicles into the park, as well as remotely control the entrance arms. As a result, the gate becomes an impediment to traffic that is only remedied by a manual override key. Given the short distance between the park entrance and Guelph Line, queuing can quickly become a significant safety and traffic operations concern. A similar situation occurs during power outages. The failsafe program on the system allows vehicles to exit the parking lot in the event of a power outage but results in vehicles entering and exiting through the outbound lane, thereby resulting in safety concerns and queuing. While the gate was piloted as a potential solution to manage vehicle flows into and out of the park, the resulting impact to safety and traffic operations is such that staff recommend the removal of the gates prior to the 2023 season.

Engagement Matters:

Lowville Advocacy Council is actively engaged on many aspects of park operations, including parking, and will continue to be informed on new initiatives that may impact the user experience. Additionally, the Lowville schoolhouse now has a tenant with an interest for increased accessibility to the park and will be consulted on any proposed changes that may impact their operations and programming.

Conclusion:

Based on the experiences of the 2022 season and in consideration of future operational changes of Parking Services, staff recommend the cessation of the Parking Ambassador program at Lowville Park, the return of normal unrestricted visiting hours and introduction of paid parking for the 2023 season, with a commitment to report in Q1 2023 on alternative uses for the gate system.

Respectfully submitted,

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Appendices:

A. Lowville Heat Map

Report Approval:

All reports are reviewed and/or approved by Department Director, the Chief Financial Officer, and the Executive Director of Legal Services & Corporation Counsel.