FISH CREEK AND NOSE HILL PARKS--A CASE STUDY IN CONTRASTING FORMS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

by

M.R. Buckmaster and H.A. Buckmaster

ABSTRACT

1973 was an historic year for development of open space and parks in the Calgary region. On February 9, 1973 the Alberta Provincial Government announced that it was creating a 2850 acre provincial park in the valley and escarpments through which Fish Creek flows from 37th Street on the west to its confluence with the Bow River on the east. On April 16, 1973 the Calgary City Council voted to reserve approximately 4100 acres on the top and escarpments of the east end of Nose Hill as civic parkland. These decisions represented the culmination of vigorous and sustained political pressure by citizens' groups who lobbied for the creation of these two parks. The activities of these citizens' groups provides an extremely interesting and contrasting study in citizen participation. This paper examines the activities of the Fish Creek Association and the Nose Hill Council from a privileged vantage since the authors represented the Calgary Local Council of Women and the National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada respectively on both these citizen groups. No generalizations are attempted but it is hoped that an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the operational mode of each group should prove useful for future citizen action groups.

INTRODUCTION

It is a rare and historic year when a city and its region acquire some 7500 acres of parkland. In 1973 the present and future citizens of Calgary and its environs were the fortunate beneficiaries of two extremely wise decisions: one was made by the Alberta provincial government and the other by the Calgary city council. Most political decisions are made as a consequence of either or both public and private lobbying as well as from the advice of civil servants. The decision to acquire this parkland was no exception. This paper attempts to document and contrast the events and processes that preceded these decisions. A geographic and geological description of the two parks as well as a biological inventory are given in Appendices (1) and (2)[1,2,3]. The authors had the opportunity to participate in many of these events. It is hoped that their intimate perspective has not blurred their objectivity.

FISH CREEK

The valley was a favourite wintering place for nomadic Indian tribes because it provided shelter, fuel and water as well as because of the buffalo-jump sites on the sandstone cliffs in the western section. The Blackfoot Indians called the creek Sikome for the black fish (probably longnose and white suckers) that inhabited it. The first white settler was John Glenn in 1873 who is also noted for developing the first irrigation ditch in Alberta in the eastern section. He was followed in 1883 by Samuel William Shaw, his wife and nine children who built a woollen mill in 1889. It is evident that the natural beauty of the valley was appreciated by early Calgarians who came on outings. Its popularity increased with time and it is remarkable that they appear to have made no serious early attempts to create a park. Apparently they were content to have the privilege of picnicking on the land of local farmers either free or for a nominal charge. It was only when this privilege was withdrawn in the 1950's because of vandalism and rowdyism that Calgarians began to realize what they had lost. In 1962 the city annexed the village of Midnapore on its southern flank which included the valley of Fish Creek.

It took the imagination of a city planner, Michael Rogers, who came to Calgary in 1963 to recognize the potential and the need for a park in the valley. By 1966 his ideas had matured to the extent that the Calgary Planning Commission was asked on October 26, 1966 to approve in principle the concept of a park envisioned as a natural and recreational green belt extending from 37th Street S.W. to the Bow River to be developed in four stages over twenty

years and involving ultimately 1200 acres of land[4]. This proposal prompted the city to commission a comprehensive study of its parks and recreational requirements for the next twenty years. The Hamill report was available early in 1969[5]. It recommended that ten million dollars be spent over eighteen years to acquire 2000 acres of parkland with at least 800 acres in the valley of Fish Creek. Unfortunately the mayor at that time, Jack Leslie, was more concerned with keeping the mill rate as low as possible than with long term projects. City council declined, in 1969, to include $500 000 in the parks capital budget for land acquisition and in addition, slashed a further $250 000 [6,7]. At least one of those city aldermen, Roy Farran, who lived adjacent to Fish Creek valley had nurtured the idea of a park in Fish Creek for a long time. After he was elected to the provincial legislature in 1971 he had a resolution passed at the spring 1972 sittings of the legislature which affirmed the intention to create large urgan regional parks. He also began to urge that the Fish Creek area become a regional park. At least three other civic aldermen, Jack Davis, Barbara Scott and Tom Priddle were also voicing active support and the latter included it as part of his 1971 election campaign. Barbara Scott became chairman of the Calgary Recreation Board in 1971 and had managed to persuade City Council to set aside $250 000 per annum for the acquisition of parkland.

It remained for a private citizen, Mrs. Rosa Gorrill, to seize the initiative. On May 13, 1972 the Southwood and Canyon Meadows Community Associations led by Mrs. Gorrill and Darcy Yerex, took their youth groups on a clean-up of the area. All involved were so impressed by the ecology that they agreed that something should be done at the grass roots level since the politicians seemed to only talk. Mrs. Gorrill's first attempt to get the community association presidents together to discuss the issue met with failure as did her South Side Mirror article[8]. Undaunted, she arranged another meeting of the presidents on the pretext of other issues but the real issue was a park on Fish Creek. This time she met with agreement that concerned citizens representing each community association in the south end of the city would meet to form the Fish Creek Association. Fortunately a developer in an extension to Canyon Meadows helped to mobilize support for a park when workmen pushed excess soil from a leveling operation over the escarpment into the valley below[9]. On July 19, 1972 the Association was formed with the assistance of the Federation of Calgary Communities[10]. The final roster of communities and organizations represented was Acadia, Braeside, Canyon Meadows, Fairview, Haysboro, Oakridge, Palliser, Midnapore, Southwood, Willow Park-

Maple Ridge, Calgary Equestrian Society, Calgary Field Naturalists, Local Council of Women and the National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada (NPPAC). The executive group consisted of Rosa Gorrill, Gerald Heald, Jim Hartley and Darcy Yerex with Cliff Richardson as chairman. It was the avowed intention of the Association to (i) use established citizen groups to provide concerned citizens for membership in the Association to avoid large emotional meetings; (ii) use dialogue rather than confrontation to gain support for its objectives; (iii) avoid publicity for the Association and its executive members; and (iv) utilize community expertise to research all aspects of the proposal so that logic and not emotion would be used to present the case for its objectives.

By October 21, 1972 the Federation of Calgary Communities gave unanimous support for the Association's objectives which had been developed over the past four months. These were: (i) citizen involvement in land use planning within the Fish Creek area; (ii) preservation of the natural conditions of the entire valley below its escarpments from 37th Street S.W. to the confluence of Fish Creek with the Bow River; (iii) establishment of a buffer zone above the escarpments to provide ecological protection for the valley; (iv) provision of a wilderness city park for all citizens of Calgary with which people could identify; (v) establishment of a water management program for the creek as it affects the valley; (vi) prohibition of all private development along the valley until a proper land-use study on Fish Creek's future had been completed, and (vii) communication between citizens and city departments concerned through a special liaison body[11]. Only one serious problem arose from these intentions. One early member of the executive managed to antagonize the mayor and members of City Council when he represented the Association. This member appeared to have civic political aspirations and was unwilling to divorce these interests from his role as an Association representative, so he resigned from the executive.

By November 7, 1972 the group was involved in the political process. Mrs. Gorrill appeared at City Council to object to the proposal of a developer, Kelwood Corporation, to leave 60 feet above the north side of the Fish Creek escarpment for public easement, including a road. Mrs. Gorrill argued for 120 feet with no road and City Council settled for 60 feet with no road[12]. The Association received another boost for its objectives when a citizens' task force appointed by the City Parks and Recreation Board released its report on November 1, 1972 in which it identified 13 areas which should be purchased outright

immediately with Fish Creek and Nose Hill having the highest priority[13]. Reaction was very positive but Aldermen Scott and Musgrave cautioned that the acquisition of even Fish Creek would involve the city in tremendous expenditures[14]. There were hints that the province was developing a new approach to the parks and recreational needs of its citizens particularly in large urban centres when it announced on October 27, 1972 that it had acquired the two-section Diamond Ranch near Cochrane as future park. The director of Alberta parks, Mr. T. A. Drinkwater, also indicated that the Fish Creek area should have been purchased twenty years ago and despaired that it was too late now[15].

The ground swell of pressure was growing and the provincial and civil servants were assessing the situation for their political superiors. Chief Commissioner Hamilton and Parks and Recreation Director Harry Boothman were busy telling the Calgary Community Services Committee on November 6th, 1972 that the province was doing nothing to help the cities to acquire regional parkland[16]. They were attempting to pass the costs on to either the provincial or federal governments. The latter had just announced its Parks Canada Byways and Waterways programme. As part of this new programme, it was announced on October 18 that 85 acres of the Toronto waterfront along 1.2 miles of Lake Ontario would be acquired for a city park[17]. The provincial Environment Minister, Bill Yurko, tabled a report of his department in the legislature that indicated that a flood plain management approach to Fish Creek would prevent any development on 1096 acres[18] whereas the City had only 771 acres so zoned. Moreover, land adjacent to this zone would require special preparation costs which could involve provincial contributions. The pressure was on for the provincial government to develop a regional parks programme using the Metropolitan Toronto and Region Conservation Authority as the model. The regional authority approach was being promoted personally by Conservative MLA Roy Farran. Dr. Allan Warrack, Minister of Lands and Forests was indicating that he did not favour this approach particularly for parks[19].

Strong support for large natural area parks came on January 6, 1973 when the Calgary Field Naturalists Society released their report on a year-long study of five natural areas--Edworthy, Fish Creek, Glenmore, Nose Hill and Pearce Estate, in which they recommended the preservation of at least 2000 acres in the Fish Creek area[1,20]. The momentum increased as Provincial Treasurer Gordon Miniely allowed that the provincial government should look at the idea of provincial parks in urban areas and Municipal Affairs Minister Dave Russell was pointing out that Edmonton was doing a better job of utilizing

its riverbank property for recreational use[21]. January 25, 1973 was a pivotal day in the decision making process as the Fish Creek Association Executive met with Mines and Minerals Minister Bill Dickie, a local MLA, to present their brief[22] for Fish Creek Park[23,24]. His enthusiastic response, as well as Miniely's early indication that the first formal request for a provincial urban park might lead to the creation of government policy. Everything was in place except the approval of Calgary City Council. Alderman Tom Priddle, who had worked behind the scenes in supporting the Fish Creek Association since its inception, arranged that their formal presentation was made to City Council on Feburary 5, 1973 and it was followed by swift approval for its support[25]. Meanwhile Dicke had seen that their brief had been to cabinet and referred to the Department of Lands and Forests. Everyone was on the bandwagon now and the city commissioners gave their blessing on February 8th[26]. The newspapers maintained the pressure with editorials and feature articles[27,28] which suggested that it was a now-or-never situation.

A public meeting of the Calgary Operations and Development Committee to discuss the Fish Creek Report of the City of Calgary Flood Study on February 15[29] was almost an anticlimax for the same day the throne speach for the opening of the Spring Session of the provincial legislature indicated that a provincial parks policy to provide parks in urban areas would be unveiled[30]. Premier Peter Lougheed held a press conference in Calgary on February 19th announcing the creation of a 2800 acre park in Fish Creek Valley at a cost of about $15 million. The Province had already acquired 1250 acres for $6.3 million and was negotiating on 650 acres for $2.3 million, and had imposed severe development restrictions on a further 900 acres which would be acquired as it became available[31]. MLA Farran was pleased that his influence had been effective and suggested that this decision freed the city to proceed with the development of a major park on Nose Hill, and Mayor Rod Sykes concurred with this point[31]. City Council formally supported the recommendation of the Operations and Development Committee for a total ban on development in the valley[32]. A public advisory committee for Fish Creek, consisting of Margaret Southern, Nancy Peters, Gerald Heald, Harvey Olsen and chaired by Bill Milne, was established by the provincial government to determine how the park should be designed. They held a public hearing on the future design of the area on June 24th at which the Fish Creek Association reiterated its stand for a natural area park. It was supported by the Calgary Field Naturalists Society, Local Council of Women and the NPPAC as well as by many private citizens. The advisory committee also spent