

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

**COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Tuesday, June 28, 2022

Committees Room

Nova Scotia Park System

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**NATURAL RESOURCES AND
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE**

Tom Taggart (Chair)
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Kent Smith
Trevor Boudreau
Chris Palmer
Ronnie LeBlanc
Carman Kerr
Claudia Chender
Lisa Lachance

[Tom Taggart was replaced by Melissa Sheehy-Richard.]

[Lisa Lachance was replaced by Gary Burrill.]

In Attendance:

Judy Kavanagh
Legislative Committee Clerk

Karen Kinley
Legislative Counsel

WITNESSES

Department of Natural Resources and Renewables

Karen Gatien
Deputy Minister

Peter Geddes
Executive Director

Matt Parker
Executive Director, Forestry and Wildlife



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JUNE 28, 2022

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON
NATURAL RESOURCES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

1:00 P.M.

CHAIR
Tom Taggart

VICE CHAIR
Dave Ritcey

THE CHAIR: Order. This is the Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Economic Development. I'm Dave Ritcey, I'm the MLA for Truro-Bible Hill-Millbrook-Salmon River and Vice Chair of this committee. I'll be chairing for MLA Tom Taggart today.

Today we will hear from presenters regarding the Nova Scotia park system. I ask you to please turn off your phones and put them on silent. I will now ask the committee members to introduce themselves for the record by stating their name and constituency, beginning with the members on my immediate left.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I would also like to note the presence of Karen Kinley from Legislative Counsel to my right, and from the Committees Office, we have Tamer Nusseibeh who is our new committee clerk. (Applause)

I'm going to welcome the witnesses at this point and ask them to introduce themselves, and if you have any opening remarks, starting with Deputy Minister Karen Gatién.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I'll turn it now back to Deputy Minister Gatién for opening remarks.

KAREN GATIÉN: Thank you for inviting us to talk about our provincial parks. As has already been mentioned, I'm joined today by Peter Geddes, our Executive Director of Regional Services, and Matt Parker who up until last week was our Director of Parks and Outreach. Even though he's moved into a new role, we've asked him to come with us today just to help us out in terms of answering your questions. I'll give a few opening remarks and then turn it over to Matt for a presentation with some more details.

Provincial parks give Nova Scotians opportunities to get outside and enjoy the physical and mental health benefits of being in nature. They're also an important part of our tourism industry, attracting visitors to explore our beautiful province and contribute to our economy. Our parks operate with facilities and services between May and October, which is the height of demand. The department hires more than 220 seasonal workers across the province for the season.

I'm pleased to share that last year was a record year for park attendance. We welcomed more than one million visitors to our day-use parks and beaches. This year is also looking promising, with demand for campsites very high as soon as we started taking reservations in April. We believe that Nova Scotians have been staying closer to home because of the pandemic. They are rediscovering their province, including the provincial parks. However, now that people are starting to travel more, we have an opportunity to welcome more visitors to Nova Scotia and share all we have to offer.

Everyone should be able to enjoy these natural treasures. That's why the department continues to make infrastructure upgrades to provincial parks, beaches, and campgrounds to make them more accessible and inclusive for more people. In the past year, this work included roll-out beach mats and adaptive equipment, as well as upgrades to facilities such as comfort stations, washrooms, picnic shelters, and more. We also made washrooms gender neutral at numerous parks across the province.

This year, we plan to invest \$1 million in capital funding for a range of projects such as continued accessibility work, upgrades to lifeguard facilities, water system improvements, and other projects that help our parks run smoothly. We're also advancing the multi-year redevelopment at Lawrencetown and plan to replace the main building this year.

We're continuing our work toward our goal of protecting 20 per cent of the province's land and water by 2030. Earlier this month, we designated Owls Head to become Nova Scotia's newest provincial park, and we're working on more.

Now I'd like to hand it over to Matt to give you some more details about our provincial park system, and then we'll be happy to take your questions.

THE CHAIR: Before we move into the presentation format, I just want to remind everyone to wait for their name to be acknowledged so we can recognize you on Legislative TV and know when to turn on which microphone. Also, we'll maintain a speaker's list to remind the members if they'd like to ask a question, just to raise your hand and make eye contact with me, and we'll take it from there.

I'll now pass it over to Mr. Parker.

MATT PARKER: Today, I'll be providing you with more detail on some of the remarks that the deputy minister provided, specifically around what we're mandated to do under the Provincial Parks Act. It's a bit of insight into our visitor trends, overview of some of our recent capital upgrades, and the work we've been doing to make our parks more accessible.

The Provincial Parks Act was first established in 1959. Park properties designated under the Act contributed to Nova Scotia's provincial parks and protected areas system as representative examples of our landscapes and ecosystems, as well as safeguarding the outstanding natural features and cultural values. We provide quality opportunities for outdoor recreation, education, and tourism for Nova Scotians and visitors to the province.

Our parks system is just a part of the continuum of parks and a critical piece - whether it's a municipal park, provincial park, or even a federal park. Within the park system, we have 205 park properties. Of those, we have 130 operational parks: 20 being campgrounds, and 110 of them for day use. Our system has almost 33,000 hectares, or 81,000 acres. We also have 75 non-operational parks. These are parks where we don't have infrastructure or have set aside for protection or future use. Examples would be Owls Head or Lake Charlotte Provincial Park.

As the deputy mentioned, we welcomed over 1 million visitors last year, and in order to accommodate these visitors, we have over \$100 million in infrastructure assets. We have 222 seasonal operational staff during our peak season, and eight full-time equivalent program staff. With just over 26,000 hectares designated under the Provincial Parks Act, we still have some work to do to get all of them designated.

Of the 26,000 designated, we have approximately 19,000 hectares that do count towards protected area targets - that's about 0.35 per cent of the province. It's important to note that not all of our parks will count towards protected area targets. We count them

based off size, what the development footprint is, what ecological values are there, or what outdoor recreational opportunities are there.

Diving into some visitor trends, we have both day use and camping parks. One way that we like to measure our visitor stats is with our day use. Day use is a little bit more challenging than camping in that you're not required to pay to use day use, so we have a bit of a challenge in getting stats. However we do utilize trail and vehicle counters along with our lifeguard service that counts the number of folks who use the beaches.

Since 2015, in Cape Split, we've seen a 40 per cent increase in the number of visitors who hike Cape Split on an annual basis. In 2021, our 24 lifeguarded beaches saw over 308,000 visitors, just in the months of July and August. Further, with discussion with our staff, they're also noticing an increased volume in all of our parks, with demand on having to clean toilets more frequently and garbage more often.

With our camper nights, we have a lot better data with that. This is a graph that shows all our camper night stats from 1994 to 2021. In 1994 we saw just under 38,000 camper nights, up to last year, which was our record year of 91,262 camper nights. This is a 142 per cent increase in our camper nights since 1994.

Giving a little bit more detail from 2015 to 2021, we've seen a 48-per-cent increase. What we're trying to show here is that COVID-19 did have a positive impact on our parks system and our visitors. The trend was happening before COVID-19. This trend has been happening not just in Nova Scotia but across North America.

We did have a few years - we got challenged with Hurricane Dorian in 2019 where we had to close our campgrounds for a couple of weeks and a couple had to stay closed for the rest of the year because of some significant damage. In 2020, due to Public Health restrictions, we were delayed opening, but we still saw a good number. Even last year, with 91,000, we were delayed - we missed our May long weekend, so we would have had an even higher number.

The interesting stat with those last two years is that over 90 per cent of our camping visitors are from the Province of Nova Scotia. So far this year, we anticipate another good year - another 2021 year. On opening day, our camper night reservations were the same as we had the previous year. The total number of reservations were down a bit, but our camper nights were the same, so what's happening is folks are just booking for longer stays, but they're still booking.

Over that same time, we've seen an increase in our campsite revenue. The only place that our system does generate revenue is through camping and our campsite fees. Since 2015, we've seen a 67-per-cent increase in our campsite revenue. This increase is due in part to camper nights, but also our investment in serviced sites. An un-serviced site

within the system costs about \$27, where a serviced site cost just under \$36. By investing in more serviced sites, we ended up with more revenue.

Just for folks' information, our operating costs for our campgrounds is about \$4.2 million in a year, with about \$3 million in salaries and \$1.2 million in expenses.

Along with the tourism that these parks generate, we also have other important benefits of the system. One is the protection of ecological and cultural values. Whether it's a species at risk or Mi'kmaw artifacts or the forts out at McNabs Island, our system has a lot of unique features and a lot of values that we're protecting there.

Also, our parks contribute to the Nova Scotia visitor experience with tourism, with three-quarters of pleasure visitors to the province participating in outdoor activities. Parks help enhance visitors' outdoor ventures. Some estimates done nationally are that the economic impact that camping visitors' spend - so not our money, but what they spend in the rural economy of Nova Scotia - is in the tens of millions of dollars. That doesn't include day-use parks - that's just our camping parks.

Physical and mental health benefits: in recent years, parks received attention as a possible environmental factor that could encourage physical activity, prevent obesity, and reduce instances of chronic conditions. In addition, it has been shown that time spent in parks can help individuals fight against mental health issues like depression, anxiety, and stress.

These benefits have led a movement where doctors have started to prescribe time in nature as a method of treatment. This program was recently launched officially in the Maritimes on Earth Day this year. This program allows health professionals to formally prescribe nature to their patients as part of their health care plans. Further, the importance of our parks from a health and mental perspective was reaffirmed during COVID-19 lockdowns, as folks can remember.

Now I'll move into some of our infrastructure and our capital spending. This year we have a budget of \$1 million for our capital spend and we have \$360,000 for our infrastructure spend. The difference is that our capital is for our bigger projects, which are \$250,000 or more, and the infrastructure spend is for our smaller projects, such as vault toilets or repairing some boardwalks or whatnot.

We go through a pretty significant process with 130 operating parks to review all of the projects. We get our local staff to send in projects, send in requests for repairs, and we actually have a committee of staff that will review and rank those projects based off of nice-to-do versus a critical for a health and safety or visitor experience. Out of that, we provide a plan forward for discussion and review.

[1:15 p.m.]

We've been fortunate enough to be investing almost a little over a million dollars a year in our park system since 2013 on a capital basis. For infrastructure, we've averaged just under \$400,000 since 2016.

This year, we're planning to do capital projects at: Clam Harbour with the construction of a lifeguard building; Blomidon Provincial Park, we're going to construct a woodshed; Lawrencetown Beach, we're working on a redevelopment with the demo and construction of the main building and construction of the platform and washroom facilities; and we're doing water system upgrades at Blomidon, Dollar Lake, and Laurie Park. There's also a long list of other, smaller infrastructure projects.

Next, I'll show you some pictures of some of our recent upgrades. This one here is an example of some of the water services that we've put in. On the left of the screen is the inside of the building, in the middle of the screen is the actual building. These are critical projects - they're not the ones that people get excited about, but if you want potable water at a campground, we need to do this.

To the right and the picture below are just showing some of the service sites that we've been investing in. Water services building over the last number of years - we've done Graves Island, Valleyview, Ellenwood Lake, Five Islands, Caribou-Munroes Island and Mira Park. We've added service sites to Battery, Caribou-Munroes Island, Amherst Shore, Five Islands, Valleyview, and Ellenwood Lake.

Next are pictures of our two new comfort stations that we've built. On the left is one at Dollar Lake that just got opened. It was just opened for this season. To the right is Valleyview. These are new designs first. Traditionally, we would have a male and a female side. We've moved away from that where now we're doing individual water closets, like the picture below so that these are gender neutral washrooms. We've incorporated two fully accessible units in each of these comfort stations.

From a visitor experience, it's a lot more enjoyable to be able to go in and have your own washroom, and you're not waiting in line for the male or the female side. Our staff are also enjoying them more. It's a lot easier for them to clean, operate, and maintain.

This is a picture of our recently completed Blomidon entry building. Again, we incorporated accessible designs into this one, so the washroom is on the outside. It's gender neutral and it's accessible. Even the visitor experience area where the folks come to check in is accessible too. We did complete the paving here so that the curb is roll on, roll off to meet accessible requirements.

Next is just a snapshot of Lawrencetown. On the left is Phase 1 where we did work to the western end of the park. This was new infrastructure at that end. That end is very

popular for surfers, which has been a growing industry in our province. These are pictures of change houses and a vault toilet at that end. The two pictures at right show the current comfort station, or core building, that we'll be demolishing and replacing with a platform with flush toilets on top of it. We went to a raised platform here because the dune system is very close to the building - right beside it. Having it raised will allow the dunes to move in and out through the system.

Last Summer at Cape Split, we completed and opened a 14-kilometre new loop trail. We worked in partnership with Tourism Nova Scotia to come up with the capital funding for this. This was part of the management plan that we did over 10 years ago to have a loop trail. Not only did we do the new trail, but we enhanced some of the experiences on the original trail.

On the top left, you can just barely make out the new platform that we did at the start of the trail. I would recommend everybody go out and at least see that. You can see all the way down the split. Then, just some new signage and whatnot. During our planning for this, to go back to our mandate around protection of ecological and cultural values, we found two new Mi'kmaw archaeological sites as we were doing the planning, so we needed to adjust our trail there to make sure that we incorporated a buffer around those.

Moving into some recent work that we've done in accessibility, in 2019, we completed accessibility audits on our built environment of our 20 camping parks and nine of our day-use parks. We use an audit tool that was created based on Rick Hansen Foundation guidelines. These audits were focused on seven main sections to provide an overall accessibility score of the park. Examples of that would have been parking, exterior approach, exterior ramps.

With the findings from these audits, we were able to educate our staff on items that they had direct control over, whether it's keeping pathways clear or where we hang our paper towel and soap dispensers. Also, it allowed us to learn from what we had designed previously on our upcoming designs. Now, when we do new designs or new comfort stations, any of our new infrastructure has accessibility elements built into them, and we use the Canadian Standards Association as a standard for accessibility.

Also, we've recently updated our website to better describe what accessibility features we have in our parks, and we've done a number of accessibility projects. In these pictures on the left, you'll see an accessible fishing dock that we worked with a sport fishing organization up in Cape Breton, where we did the fishing dock and the accessible picnic table. On the right is where we renovated the island's comfort station to make it accessible and gender neutral.

Also, we've been focusing on beach access. Here on the left, you'll see a picture of Melmerby Beach, where we have a Hippocampe beach chair and have a removable boardwalk that staff had built. On the right is Pomquet Beach, where we have a parking

pad that connects to the accessible boardwalk and Mobi-Mat. We did that in partnership with the municipality. In addition, we've also added Mobi-Mats at Rissers Beach, Clam Harbour, Heather Beach, and Ellenwood. On top of that, there are also some municipalities that have done their own accessibility too for beaches.

Lastly, one of our bigger challenges, especially with our coastal parks is climate change. In this picture I have here, this is Queensland Beach after a winter storm, so not even a hurricane, in 2018. To the left, that was a road that was passable by car. To the left of it is the beach. Our coastal parks are not immune to sea level rise and climate change, and as we move forward, these are two important considerations that we take into account whenever we look at doing work at our coastal parks. For example, the work at Lawrencetown where we're actually raising the infrastructure to allow the dunes to move and shift.

That's all I have for a presentation.

THE CHAIR: Before we move forward, I'll just remind the members that if they'd like to ask a question, please indicate by raising your hand and making eye contact with the Chair. I'll maintain a questions list and we'll go from there. We're going to wrap up questioning at approximately 2:45 p.m., and at that time we'll have some committee business that we'll have to address and ask the witnesses to leave.

We'll start with the question period and start with MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: The reason I jumped to try to be the front of the line is because of Owls Head. I didn't want anyone else asking a question about Owls Head in my constituency.

Thank you for the designation making it a provincial park. I've been getting questions about what we can expect to see in Owls Head in the future. I'm wondering if any of you can share what the overall plan is for the future for Owls Head.

KAREN GATIEN: I can begin, and if others want to add. We still have a bit of administrative pieces, we'll finalize surveying, et cetera. Just standard process, but in terms of the future, this is a natural environment park, so you won't see infrastructure as you would see at Lawrencetown or Dollar Lake or anything like that. It's meant to be in its natural environment for people to go for hikes and enjoy it as it is presently.

KENT SMITH: I'm glad to hear that there will be some opportunities to explore the area. How do we ensure that it continues to be protected when folks have the ability to hike on it and use it in that manner?

KAREN GATIEN: It's protected under our park system, so certainly it would be subject to conservation officers if there was any report from a community member that

there is any damage done or people misusing the area. We would certainly have our enforcement officers go out and take a look and review it. It's part of the regular process of other parks in the province, that we would continue to monitor and make sure things are being kept the way they should be.

If there are species at risk there, of course it's subject to legislation as well. I don't know if Peter or Matt want to add anything.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Geddes.

PETER GEDDES: If I could just add to the deputy minister's comments, it has statutory protection. We have the conservation enforcement component back with our department now, which is a key part of making sure that all of our Crown lands are managed appropriately.

Even beyond that, we have quite an extensive network of regional offices around the province - 25 regional offices that do local Crown land management work anyway and can respond to issues with those sites. As the deputy minister said, we continuously monitor those assets around the province.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: Thank you all for coming. You mentioned in your opening comments how important to mental health and economic development and tourism our parks are. Currently - and I'm sure you've heard it before - we have a park in Annapolis, Valleyview. It opens in June, but it's not open in May. There is certainly an appetite from constituents, businessowners and staff to have that opened on the May long weekend and even extend into October, when you're up amongst the Fall foliage and you're shut two weeks into October.

I guess the question being, are there any plans or any appetite to open Valleyview and other parks onto the shoulder seasons and longer into the year?

KAREN GATIEN: I'll give perhaps a general answer, and then I would ask Matt. He may have more specifics about that park in particular.

Generally, in terms of the shoulder seasons, we're kind of looking at what we can manage in terms of staffing and any fiscal limitations, and also looking at the community may want it open, but we also have to compare it to the visitation. Are we seeing a demand there as well? We are always looking at those options and would bring them forward to government if we felt there was an argument to be made to extend it.

MATT PARKER: Valleyview is open until Thanksgiving weekend now, but you're asking for . . .

[1:30 p.m.]

CARMAN KERR: Why it isn't open on the May 24th weekend - I heard this before I was an MLA. I think the data and the visits would suggest that there is enough support there. A number of businesses and staff included are asking why couldn't we be aligned with other parks that open that third week of May.

The other point made - not to monopolize the time - is that it would be great for Annapolis or all areas to have consistency on that opening date. I think people now assume that that park isn't open until later into the Spring and Summer, so they may not visit right away.

MATT PARKER: Yes, just like the deputy minister mentioned, we are always looking at ways to do things differently. We are looking at ways - how we can get more season out of certain parks.

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: This is a really great explanation, thanks. I wanted to go back to your introductory comments, Ms. Gatién, about the 20 by 30. I think people naturally look at the hundreds of thousands of hectares that we're needing to protect between where we are to get where we are by 2030 and see just the fraction of that that we have added in the last 12 months or so. I think it's fair for people to think, maybe that's just an aspirational target. Maybe that's not real.

In our party, we have put forward the idea that it would really help public buy-in to this great goal if there were interim goals and benchmarks. We proposed a particular one, but there could be many. A 2025 goal of somewhere between where we are and where we want to be, say 17, I think, was the number.

What is the case for not having interim goals and benchmarks by which the government can report to the public on the progress that we're making toward this important goal instead of just having 2030 out there with its gigantic number that needs to be attached to it?

KAREN GATIEN: I don't know that it is the case per se. I will say that we're working very closely with our colleagues at Environment and Climate Change to first address the Parks and Protected Areas Plan to get those completed first. We're still doing some planning on the 20 per cent and we'll have a plan for that by 2023. I think that was the date that we're required to have that plan.

Once we get the remaining areas in that 2013 plan completed and approved, we'll be at about 14 per cent protection, and then we will continue our work on the 20 per cent as quickly as possible. We're doing some planning now, but we really feel it's important.

Let's address what's already outstanding - you know, full force on the remaining - before we begin on the new 20 per cent. It's in the minister's mandate letter. I certainly consider it part of my mandate to deliver on it. It's not a - I wouldn't see it as an empty target or an empty goal, and certainly we're working diligently with our colleagues.

GARY BURRILL: To the point about the mandate letter and the 2013 list, as I understand, it says in the mandate letter to get that into protection by Order in Council. That's what's to happen. So this hasn't happened. When in the department's world are we anticipating that being accomplished?

KAREN GATIEN: We're working on that now. We call them batches. We're sort of working with two colleague departments, bringing forward in batches areas of land. It won't surprise you that perhaps the most complicated ones are the ones that are remaining, but we're hoping as quickly as we can get them through to certainly move that forward, especially as we have to have a plan for the next piece, the 20 per cent by 2023.

THE CHAIR: MLA LeBlanc.

RONNIE LEBLANC: My question is around the smaller day parks. I'm going to obviously use one in my riding for an example, but Mavillette Beach Park needs a lot of work. It's a very popular beach. It's not currently accessible and needs a lot of infrastructure upgrades. The washrooms need to be upgraded as well. Seeing as how Clare/Argyle is going to get the World Acadian Congress in 2024, there are a lot of residents and groups looking at and making calls about getting those upgrades done.

I know you talked about it in the opening, but how do you determine how a small park gets from, say, infrastructure to a capital project? How do you determine that, and is there a role for groups to play in that decision? Like, the World Acadian Congress has a committee that's tasked to make sure that the infrastructure is in place. Can you elaborate on that, please?

MATT PARKER: I'll try to address the infrastructure capital list, and then we'll talk about the community part second. We're bound by finance rules with infrastructure capital, so our capital needs to be a minimum of a \$250,000 spend before it's considered a capital program. Typically our day use parks don't fall under that threshold, because it takes a lot of vault toilets and boardwalk to get to that number.

Second, in terms of community groups, yes, we do partner with community groups throughout the province. Specific to Mavillette, we have been in discussions with the municipality on some work that they've done. Those discussions are ongoing, because they have an interest in that area for the World Acadian Congress.

RONNIE LEBLANC: As you're aware, the municipality did do a public spaces improvement project. They looked at all municipal parks and provincial parks within the

riding and came up with a detailed plan. The way the municipality is looking at it, they're quite prepared to invest a lot of capital money in the provincial parks, but they've been quite frustrated, to be honest, by the speed or the communication with parks to get those things going.

What's your vision of a provincial-municipal partnership when it comes to parks? What does it look like in terms of once all that work is done - maintenance and all that going forward? Can you give me your view on that?

KAREN GATIEN: First of all, I don't know if I could describe it as a vision. I will say that I would welcome an opportunity to have a conversation, and talk to them to see how we might work together. I know we have community groups who have reached out to us in terms of different areas, where they helped us support it. It's too important for us to not take whatever help is offered, for sure, so I would be happy to chat with whomever, if you want to send them my way. That'd be great.

THE CHAIR: MLA Palmer.

CHRIS PALMER: Very informative here so far in our meeting - a great topic. I know I don't have any overnight parks in my constituency, but we have communities like Lake George Provincial Park, which a lot of people from all over the area come and enjoy. I'm really interested in the economic impact you mentioned in your opening statements in regard to those opportunities for businesses and communities around those parks to basically have the opportunity to be supported.

Could you drill down? You mentioned maybe tens of millions of dollars in economic activity. Could you drill down a bit more and explain how those parks support our tourism industry and the economy of the surrounding rural communities? I guess that can go to Mr. Parker.

MATT PARKER: We're challenged to figure out the day-use component of it just because of the lack of information of users, but in terms of how we get to our camping economic studies, we are a member of what's called the Canadian Parks Council. It's a federal-provincial group and on a regular basis, we actually do studies to determine what the economic benefit of parks is, along with the other values that parks come into.

The other thing we do on an annual basis, to help support local business, is we put out a non-food and food concession call for applications. We have that fairly open for any park, so if a local business operator feels that there's enough business in a park to have a food concession, then we would welcome that. For example, a new one this year is Cape Split. A local business is going to run a sausage cart up there for some of the Summer. We're pretty flexible on how they do that.

CHRIS PALMER: That's great information. How would a local business or a local food establishment reach out? You said you send something out to them, or do they reach out to your department somehow? How is that connection made?

MATT PARKER: On an annual basis, we put out a call. We utilize our Facebook page, and we post the application on our website. We do a social media blast with that, and they come to us with the application.

THE CHAIR: MLA Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Thanks for coming, everyone. When we were first elected, one of the first meetings I actually had was with the local park staff and some of the staff in the department. Richmond County's got quite a few day parks and beaches. Probably our hidden gem is really Battery Provincial Park, which is a phenomenal overnight campground park. There's been a lot of investment in that park over the last number of years, and I'm very pleased to see that.

It was also really nice to hear that they're getting some improvements in the comfort stations this year. Maybe you could elaborate a little bit on what those upgrades are and what it will mean to the visitors who are utilizing Battery Park.

MATT PARKER: I apologize, I'm not specific on the details of that project. We'll have to get back to you on that.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I've done a little bit of research and I do believe it has to do with the comfort stations in terms of not just accessibility, but also the washroom facilities becoming more to what you were describing in your presentation. I did a tour last year and it is a relatively new comfort station that is up there on the top of the hill. It was very impressive in terms of the accessibility for people, that sort of thing. I think it's a welcome upgrade.

When you talked a little bit about accessibility, one of our beaches, Point Michaud Beach - I think you had some discussions with the municipality and some of the community groups about that. Can you tell us a little bit about how some of those accessibility upgrades happened? Whether it's on a beach or the infrastructure that you're utilizing, how do you evaluate where those go and how those groups can help - as my colleague was talking about - support the provincial parks system with getting those things happening?

MATT PARKER: For beaches, we look at a number of criteria. It's one thing to put in a Mobi-mat but it's the experience up until the Mobi-mat. Is there an accessible washroom, is there accessible parking, is there accessible access to the Mobi-mat?

The other thing is that we want - what if something happens? For beaches, we like to target lifeguarded beaches, so we have a really good relationship with the lifeguard

service, who want to help us with that. With Point Michaud, I believe there's a meeting this week with staff from the municipality and from our department on that project to see where we can take it. That's why when you look at targeting Rissers, Clam Harbour, Mira - we have our department staff there. That's where we try to focus our beach parks, is where we know we have staff there. That means there's also higher usage.

[1:45 p.m.]

From the camping park perspective, we're slowly trying to get accessibility into all of our camping parks. There are 20 of them. That will be a little bit of a slower process, but again, we're targeting where we know we need to do improvements, so we incorporate accessibility there. It's the same as the day use perspective on the other parks: If we're putting in a new ball toilet, we want to make it accessible.

THE CHAIR: Okay. We'll work our way into Round 2. We have MLA LeBlanc and then MLA Sheehy-Richard.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Like you mentioned earlier, I think you have over 100 day parks and a limited amount of funds. I can certainly appreciate that as a former municipal councillor. If a municipality was interested in taking over one of those day parks, is there a mechanism to start a divestiture process where it could be passed on to the municipality?

KAREN GATIEN: I'll go first, and my colleagues, if they have a more intelligent - I don't think there's a process per se that we've used recently, but we could certainly look at that if that was a possibility. I say that because if there is a process, I want them to tell me that.

PETER GEDDES: I feel bad that the former director of parks is answering a lot of questions today.

There are lots of different types of partnerships we use for our parks system. I think the notion of divestiture is not something that we typically think about as one of those partnerships. It's not usually a tool that we've used. I'm not aware that that's ever happened. I'm not saying it couldn't, but we look for ways to work with - we have lots of examples of parks where community groups operate those parks, where municipalities are heavily involved in management of those parks, or other associations. That works great for us because it's a way for us to do more. We don't always have the boots on the ground to be able to manage those things.

We're always open to those kinds of partnerships, and there's no model for it. There are all different types of partnerships that exist out there, and we're always open to talking about those.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I think that answers my question.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I love this topic and was happy to fill in today on this committee. I've hiked a fair amount of the parks in the province - Cape Split being one of them. I want to get back and see the loop I have not done.

When we talk about that, I want to go into how we can market our parks to be more attractive to visitors, especially parks that are in the more rural areas of Nova Scotia. I'm not sure who to direct that to.

KAREN GATIEN: I can begin, and then if the others want to add. We would do what you would imagine: certainly social media, the visitor guides - we have a partnership with our Tourism colleagues.

I will say, further to your questions earlier, that we are actively having conversations with our Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage colleagues - department names always throw me a bit - on how we can work more closely together and what are really the benefits. We have these beautiful parks, so what are the benefits and how do we get the word out?

Which brings me to my last point, word of mouth from previous visitors. That's how we probably attract the most visitors. People talk about it - people like yourself who have hiked or visited our parks, and talk about them. They're in most of our tourism ads, the pictures, and that kind of brings people to the province. But we are always looking at new ways and trying to get the word out as much as possible.

I don't know if my colleagues have anything else they want to add.

PETER GEDDES: Clearly there are a few parks in the province that get less use than the majority of others. A good example would be that we've got two camping parks down in Guysborough County. They have a much lower user count than other - they're fantastic parks. They're hidden gems, in fact. A lot of people don't know about them. We're constantly looking at ways to get people to use those parks, to promote those parks.

I think overall, promotion of parks hasn't really been an issue for us for the last couple of years. The growth has been exponential, as Matt's presentation showed earlier. We're really seeing even some of those parks seeing a lot more users, so we're going in the right direction.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: Just curious about Tor Bay - is that the provincial park in Guysborough?

PETER GEDDES: No, I was referring to - Boylston is one. The other is Salsman.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I'm excited, can you tell? I love this topic. Could you speak a little about the role that parks play when new Nova Scotians are coming here and in attracting them to our province? How might these hidden gems be used as an asset to attracting people to live in the rural communities of Nova Scotia?

PETER GEDDES: I will start, and then maybe lean on Mr. Parker to help out a little bit with this one. We have had some programs in the past. We had a Learn 2 Camp program, there was quite a bit of uptake with newcomers to the province with that program. I think anecdotally, we certainly see a lot more gathering of diverse communities in the parks than we had in the past. COVID-19, to some degree, drove that - a lot of park use.

One of the other things we've tried to do as well is diversify our park staff. Traditionally, in some of our rural areas, there hasn't been quite the diversity in the park staff that we would like to see, so we've been working on some programs to try to improve that. One example would be that we're working with the Black Youth Mentorship program. We've got, I believe, five staff this year who are working in our provincial students who are working in our parks this year to make sure that Nova Scotians increasingly see themselves represented in the people who work in the parks.

Those are a few of the things that we've been up to.

MATT PARKER: I think of the ads that were run by the government to get folks to move to Nova Scotia during COVID-19 - they also did feature our natural environment, whether it was a provincial park or a federal park. It's not just provincial parks, but it's our outdoor spaces that bring people to Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: I was just wondering if we could go back to the question of the 20 by 30. I understand what you explained before, that the work is ongoing. Simply because we don't have a volume of designations doesn't mean that there's a dormancy. That's clear.

What I was wanting to ask was something more specific. Why not actually have a system of interim reporting and interim targets by which this space from 2022 to 2030 could acquire definition and the project acquire definition, particularly in the public mind? Why not do that?

KAREN GATIEN: I'm not saying that we couldn't look at - certainly, as we go through the 20 per cent with our colleagues, as I said, we will be setting targets for ourselves, for sure, and reporting. It will be the decision of government in terms of how they publicly report that, but we will continue to certainly set ourselves some benchmarks and targets and how we can move forward, as you would with any project plan, but it's not necessarily a public report document. If that's what you're looking for, that's not what we have.

GARY BURRILL: This is precisely what I'm asking. So everyone understands, effective project management of this scope requires that kind of internal reporting, as you say. I can only see benefits, no downsides, to that being a public reporting system. Many people are curious why the department doesn't look to these upcoming eight years with that kind of a reporting public mechanism, since you have to do it for your own effective project management yourselves anyway. Why not make it public?

KAREN GATIEN: As I mentioned, what we're doing at this point is the 2013, and then the plan for the 20 per cent will be completed by 2023. The government might make that decision. Right now, our task is to get a plan together for how we're going to address this 20 per cent, which is incredibly complicated.

Really, there isn't a lot of Crown land in Nova Scotia that's even available. It's going to take all of our efforts just to figure out how we are going to address this, what might this look like. Working with colleagues, you certainly - land that's with the Nature Trust is included presently, so it's how might we really achieve that target and present it to government and have them make a decision.

The plan will look at how we're going to address this 20 per cent, what needs to be in place. Reporting will likely be a part of that, but at this point, it's not 2023 yet, so we haven't completed it. But I take your point.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: Before I get into my question, I just want to say that I sit on a lot of committees, and not ever - once - in the past of me sitting on a committee have we referenced the Eastern Shore or asked what's on the Eastern Shore as many - as much as we are today. (Laughter)

I just wanted to make sure that after we talk about Owls Head and Lawrencetown and Clam Harbour - all those wonderful assets - that we don't forget about Taylor Head and Martinique and Porters Lake Provincial Park. Just wanted to make sure that everyone knows that those are on the Eastern Shore as well.

Mr. Parker, your slide about the current park system - the last two bullets there, I have a question about those. Where it says the 107 designated - and that's 26,000 hectares - does that relate to the Parks and Protected Areas Plan from 2013? (Interruption) Okay, so 107 are designated. How many more are we planning on designating, and how much more is that going to add to our overall percentage protected?

MATT PARKER: The plan is to designate all 205 properties in the plan. The amount of area will be determined. We use a national framework for deciding what properties will count and which ones will not count toward protected areas, so that number is to be determined. It's not going to be a percentage - it's not going to be 2 per cent.

Right now, we're at 0.35 per cent of parks that count toward our current number. There will be some more area that counts toward protected areas, but it's not going to be the silver bullet to get us to 20 per cent.

KENT SMITH: Without going into the lower details here, why would some aspects of it count toward designation and some not count toward designation?

MATT PARKER: Because we have a variety of parks. In the system, an example would be Blomidon Lookoff, which is about 0.5, 0.3 hectares. It gives a beautiful view of the Valley and the Bay of Fundy, but there are no ecological values that we're protecting there. We're protecting the view and the landscape, so it wouldn't count toward that. Blomidon and Cape Split are providing outdoor recreation, but firstly they're protecting ecological values and cultural values, so those count toward protected area targets.

PETER GEDDES: If I could just add one more point of clarification, and this may be understood by the committee: If you look at the Parks and Protected Areas Plan from 2013, the amount that parks will contribute to the 13 per cent goal or the 20 per cent goal is miniscule. It's well under 1 per cent. The majority of that land base that will make up a future 20 per cent protection target will be in wilderness areas, which are much larger, and both the Wilderness Areas program and nature reserves are managed under Nova Scotia Environment.

Most of them come from Crown lands, so we work together with them on it, but parks will be a very small fraction of a per cent of the overall number that we're working toward.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: Does the department currently offer learn-to-camp programming for our students within the education system? If so, could you provide some detail, and if not, is that something we could not entertain, at least at a pilot level or a local level?

MATT PARKER: Our Learn 2 Camp program is pretty broad. We've had to pause it for the last couple of years because of COVID-19, but no. We don't do that. We haven't done it in schools. Not saying that we won't at some time, it's just a matter of priorities for outreach within the department. I do know our colleagues at Parks Canada do have a significantly bigger learn-to-camp program and we have partnered with them on different things in the past and going forward.

THE CHAIR: MLA Palmer.

CHRIS PALMER: It's very encouraging to hear how the parks are thriving here in Nova Scotia and so much great work is being done. I'm really interested in the employment

opportunities that have been referenced so far here and efforts made to diversify the opportunities in working for the parks in our province - in particular, maybe students. Maybe you could talk about any particular special programs to recruit students or how they get to know about the opportunities that might be available through the parks.

[2:00 p.m.]

PETER GEDDES: I would say that the whole student employment program has been a huge success for the department. Our students do amazing work, and I think if you ask most of the students who work in the parks, they would say it's the best Summer job ever. They really enjoy the work that they get to do.

We hired, I believe, around 60 students across the park system and 220 seasonal employees this year. That's a good fraction, a good ratio there, so that's quite a few students. We're continually looking for opportunities to grow student employment. I think on the program side, Matt, as well, there's always at least one student who works in the program side as well as in the parks.

I mentioned earlier at least one program that we worked on, which is the Black Youth Mentorship program, where we've brought some students on working with partners. I believe it's five students. We also have work-partnered with Ready, Willing and Able, which is a program that supports folks who are looking for opportunities, maybe who have challenges with interaction or development. We work with them as well. We've got at least, I believe, three employees who are working through that program as well too.

I can't say enough good things, and our regional directors can't say enough good things about the students. They do fantastic work. They seem to really enjoy their job when you go out and see them in the parks, and it's been a real success. They work hard and it's been a real success story for us.

CHRIS PALMER: Just a statement to say, like you say, who wouldn't want to work outside in the parks in that environment for their Summer job? It would be a great job. I'm not looking, but that would be a good job.

THE CHAIR: MLA Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: Just one of the comments that my colleague, Ms. Sheehy-Richard, was talking about, in getting different people - it's been fascinating. I moved home 15 years ago. I love being outdoors and hiking, but what really got us to a lot of the provincial parks in the province was actually we've taken international students over the last 10 or 12 years. We've had 23 international students, so we started making it a priority to try to get around and show different parts of the province. This has been useful for me to be able to see all the different parks and different hiking trails and that sort of thing.

It's been interesting, because some of our students have come back with their families, to come back and actually do the hiking and go around provincial parks and some of the national parks, of course, in Cape Breton. There's such an opportunity here. I think when people get to see the beauty that we have, word of mouth is key, and once people from different areas of the world get here, they tend to spread it around for us.

I'm talking about that, but I want to get back into almost budget-type stuff. We've talked about \$1 million for capital, almost \$400,000 for infrastructure. What kind of things do you typically cover with the bigger projects? It sounds like water systems and that sort of thing. You talked about whether it's new bathrooms for day parks or beaches and the sort for the smaller. How do you prioritize, and how do you look at it?

You must have more projects than money, I would suggest, based on some of the conversations that I've had. How do you juggle those priorities? We've got all of these great facilities and great parks, and we want to make sure they're all doing well.

MATT PARKER: It is a challenge, but a fun one too at the same time, because we get to see and visit the parks. There's always the nice-to-do projects, but we really focus our budget first and foremost on critical infrastructure. To your point, water systems for camping parks, that's probably one of the most critical things we have. Then we look at items that are going to be health and safety to our visitors.

Unfortunately, that means that some projects that we would like to do, we have to press pause on. It doesn't mean that they're never going to happen, but we put them further down the list. We focus on critical infrastructure, the health and safety of our visitors, and then we kind of rank what's - sometimes looking at opportunity costs. If we're in doing another project, does it make sense to maybe do that project because we have the contractors there and basically doing a little add-on, versus having to bring that contractor back.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: You know, I think that makes sense. We've got parks all over the province, so I would suspect, looking at geography too and trying to figure out, okay, how do we make sure we capture areas for everybody. It would be a challenge, but like you said, maybe there's opportunity and seeing synergies - how you can create that accessibility side while also looking at the safety and the support for visitors. I'll leave it at that.

THE CHAIR: MLA LeBlanc.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I want to follow up on the question MLA Palmer asked about permits. For some strange reason, I've had a lot of questions as a new MLA around permits at provincial parks.

Some of the questions I've had are like what constitutes a commercial activity in a provincial park versus somebody who just goes in as part of their business for one day? How do you determine what activity needs a permit and what activity doesn't? It's a bit in the weeds.

PETER GEDDES: I can let Mr. Parker comment a bit more about the process we go through for accepting proposals to do work in parks and how we make the decisions over who gets the contract, et cetera.

I think the answer to your question is that there is always kind of a fine line there. We want to encourage use and want to maximize visitor experience to the parks, but if someone's conducting a full business and commerce in a park, we need to make sure that it's done in a way that aligns with the park's values and that we can have some level of control over where you're going to park the truck that's selling French fries or ice cream or whatever it is, what your hours are going to be.

Those would be the kinds of things that would get looked at through the contracting process. There are some minor things that happen from time to time. I wouldn't say that we would want to turn a blind eye to them, but we have to be balanced in our approach and not be heavy-handed with some of that stuff.

Maybe Mr. Parker can comment a bit more about the contract process.

MATT PARKER: Just to maybe add to that, it's not only the business that's operating in the park. It's also the Nova Scotians and their visitors who are going to use the park for the other assets, not just for what the business is operating. The business is a value-added service in the park.

We do an open call for proposals. I was surprised again this year, as I get surprised every year, with the amount of interest that we get, which is a good problem to have. Specifically in your area, we did have a few new entrants into the business.

In terms of whether you're operating a business in a park, you need to have a permit. It's that simple. The challenge is that not every park is the same and not every landscape is the same. I would love to be able to put 10 businesses in one park, but the parking lot might only be 20 cars big and now we can't have any other visitors there. It's trying to find that fine line, that fine balance.

When we get our applications, we have a scoring grid that we evaluate every application on. This year we had four or five staff who did that. They aggregate the score to get a final score. Sometimes we do have multiple bids for the same process, so we're trying to keep it open and fair for folks.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I appreciate that. I'm asking the question because I get questions, and they're very difficult to answer or to find the answer to.

The other aspect of the permitting process is in four-year blocks, once you get the permit. Once the deadline has passed, from my understanding, if nobody applies for a permit for a specific use, then one year later you reopen the process for permits. I might be in error, but in that one year you might have somebody waiting for a full year but a business idea, I am not sure if they can wait that long or reapply. I might be mistaken on that but can you elaborate a little bit?

MATT PARKER: So if they missed the deadline and if they're ready to operate, we'll give them a one-year letter of authority to operate for that season, but with the knowledge that they have to apply the next year to get the four years, just so that we're open and fair in the process.

THE CHAIR: I have MLA Sheehy-Richard and then MLA Burrill.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I just want to talk a little bit about coastal erosion. Slide No. 18 is a good indication of that - Queensland Beach - because when we were kids and little, there was all kinds of beach basin. Even though it's a very popular beach and more people are going to it, it's still not hard to say that you cannot tell there is less beach. It's not just more people on the beach, there is absolutely less beach. I'm curious as to what you are doing to protect parks like this from the effects of climate change, or coastal erosion I should say, too.

MATT PARKER: We're working with our colleagues at Environment and Climate Change - actually part of the kelp program. We're developing a strategy for our coastal parks. Specifically what we do is that prior to any development, we'll actually bring in coastal engineers to help us better understand the coastal forces on that specific area, both now and with sea level rise at half a metre, a metre, a metre and a half, so we can try to predict - we can't always predict the coastal processes - what is going to happen into the future.

That's so as we invest, we are investing wisely, or we may choose that we just can't afford to invest to keep up with natural processes and we have to let the beach or let nature take its course.

THE CHAIR: MLA Sheehy-Richard with a follow-up?

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: It's not really a follow-up but I have another question, if I could - or no? (Laughter)

I guess it's a follow-up: What are you also doing to minimize the park's impact on the environment. Also, I'm excited to know if you are considering putting in any EV stations soon, as an example?

PETER GEDDES: I'll start since we're all looking at each other. I guess a couple of things: One is that we have been slowly phasing in the use of electric vehicles in parks. I'm not talking about cars. I'm talking about the sides-by-sides, as we call them. A lot of the older ones would be diesel or gasoline and we've been slowly shifting them over to almost like an electric golf cart-type unit, so we've been doing that. It's more expensive but we have charging stations in some parks for those units.

We have heard requests for EV charging stations. We know there's interest in that. I know anecdotally from my own time going to parks that I see more and more hybrid vehicles coming through the park system.

One benefit of our new combined department with the former Department of Energy is that the folks who support the development of that infrastructure in that province are in the same department with us so we have been having conversations on how we might be able to implement some infrastructure in parks, but we're at very early stages. Obviously, we'd want to get to a certain level where we know the demand is there before we start investing significantly in that but we're looking at that right now.

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: You were speaking earlier, Ms. Gatién, about proceeding with - I think the word you used was "batches" - well, parcels of pieces, as we moved toward the protection goal. I'm thinking about that batch that was announced in April 2021, the 60 or 61 pieces that were announced for protection but which have not yet been designated.

Can you give us some sense of what is between us, where we are now, and the designation of that batch? What remains to be done?

KAREN GATIEN: I wasn't with the department then, so I'm actually going to let Mr. Geddes answer this one.

PETER GEDDES: I believe I know the parcels that you're speaking of. First of all, I should point out that a good portion of that in terms of land area - almost all of it would be under the administration of the Department of Environment and Climate Change, on the wilderness area piece. On the parks pieces, we are continuing to advance those parcels. I would call them close in the sense that we have to do finalizing surveys and some of the boundary adjustments, but they're still being advanced at this point.

GARY BURRILL: I'd like to go back to the point you were making earlier, Ms. Gatién, about how, in fact, you have that legislated strategy that's got to be in place by the

end of 2023 - about where we are on this, and the importance of that and ensure that is important. We don't at this stage know much about what the consultation toward that is going to look like - to whom the department and the government are going to be looking for consultation and so on.

[2:15 p.m.]

In the consultation strategy world, 18 months is about three weeks, as you know. So I wonder what you could tell us about where we are in the development of what's going to be needed for consultation to be able to put forward that strategy by the end of 2023.

KAREN GATIEN: I agree, it's not a lot of time. Really, all I can say is it's really at the early stages. Our focus has primarily been on the 2013, getting those completed. We really don't have that fleshed out at this point.

THE CHAIR: MLA Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: In the presentation, you talked about - and this is just more for my information. In terms of camping nights, in 2015 we were talking about 61,000; in 2021, it was 91,000. What would a full slate look like? How many camping nights would there be? When do you start thinking about more sites? How do we make sure that we're meeting the desires and the needs of the people who are utilizing our parks?

MATT PARKER: I don't have the number of total camper nights off the top of my head, but I would say it's probably around 180,000, 190,000. In terms of when we start looking at more sites or more campgrounds, I think right now there's still a lot of opportunity in some of our camping parks that are under-utilized. We probably have three or four right now where if you look at them in August, they're 90-per-cent-plus occupied in August, but coming into September and October or June, they're not. There are still opportunities there.

It's about finding the right balance. If we had all 20 campgrounds at 90 per cent occupied in July and August, we'd be, okay, we need more campsites. But we still have opportunities for folks to go explore other parts of the province, other than those three or four that are really very popular. I think, for us the message is that there's always a campsite - you just may have to go somewhere new to find it and explore our province.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: From my perspective, I think that's the opportunity that I see. If you're seeing a significant increase like that, it's how do we get people - I think it comes back to the marketing side of it and how we promote some of the ones that maybe aren't utilized as well, but still are those hidden gems. I think there are a lot of them around. I've stayed at a couple where it feels like you're on your own sometimes. It's nice when you're trying to just relax, but from the perspective of the opportunity to grow this, I think there is opportunity and a desire. I'll leave it at that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: I've heard from a number of people that they can't find a rental car. I'm sure a number of MLAs have heard the same. Is that an issue? Is the department hearing that? Are the numbers reflecting that - those same visitors may not be visiting our parks - or are we still on the upward trend and we haven't heard much of that? Dozens and dozens of people have mentioned it to me.

KAREN GATIEN: I'll let Mr. Parker speak about the park, but we've certainly heard that you can't get a rental car. What I have heard actually is that you can get it outside of HRM a little easier, so that may help us. Maybe not in your area but I've had staff who had to rent a car that they've been able to in their home community but not in the city, closer to work. Whether we've heard anything impacting our bookings, I don't know.

MATT PARKER: We haven't heard it from a camping perspective. No doubt from a day use, there will be some impacts, but we're lucky with camping that folks can fly in, and I'm sure there are RV rental spots where you can actually rent an RV that will pick you up at the airport, and you're on your way. There's still a little bit of an opportunity for other folks like that, but I'm sure there's going to be an impact on our day use.

CARMAN KERR: You talked about partnerships with Tourism Nova Scotia. My background is in tourism. Are there partnerships with tourism operators where they're able to work with parks or come onto park sites to offer certain things beyond the food offerings to offer their experiences or a bit of a white-glove exclusive experience that you may not be able to get anywhere else? Are there any partnerships there with operators throughout the province?

MATT PARKER: Yes. I spoke to it before. We do put out a non-food concession application each year. We have 10 or 11 operators of non-food concessions. About half of them are surf vendors this year, and they do a lot of work with Tourism Nova Scotia. Then we also have some other folks, whether it's bike rentals or canoe, kayak, stand-up paddle boards in Dollar Lake. We do have that experience, and I know we've worked with Tourism Nova Scotia in the past to help get some ideas or get some thoughts out there from - please operate in our parks.

THE CHAIR: We're going to start the next round. We'll start with MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: I'm going to follow up a little bit on a question that I believe MLA Kerr asked a while ago about the length of the season, starting in May and ending in October. I've had constituents come to me and say, why can't we have it open? Why can't we use it? It would be great for our mental health, great for exercise, all of those things that we talked about in the presentation.

I know there are examples of letters of authority that are issued to community groups, and they take on the responsibility of maintenance and garbage removal and looking after certain parks. We have it on trails in the Musquodoboit Harbour area. I'm wondering what the department's thoughts are on these letters of authority, and if there's an appetite to expand that and allow organized community groups to take on some of the responsibility where we have some human capital challenges within the department?

KAREN GATIEN: I'll start just with a couple of comments, and then I'll ask Mr. Geddes and Mr. Parker to add to it. Just to say, first of all, our parks are open. People can use the park, but to your point, they're not necessarily maintained. Just to underscore that the infrastructure isn't necessarily built - in fact, in most cases it isn't built for Winter use. Even if we wanted to keep it open, it wouldn't be appropriate to do so because it's not built for built to be used at that time of year.

We do welcome partnerships, certainly, as Mr. Geddes said earlier, with municipalities, community members as well.

PETER GEDDES: I would add that any community group that is interested in a proposal like that, we're happy to talk to them. We're always interested in partnerships like that, something that can help us go a little bit further in terms of our service offerings. There are lots of good examples of those partnerships already around the province.

With the seasonality of parks, as the deputy minister said, people are welcome to come in and use them, but when you get into opening gates and snow and liability issues and not salting and all of that, it starts to create a bit more of a challenge for us. Even for community groups, I think once you get into the middle of Winter, it's going to be much more challenging. But those shoulder seasons, maybe there are opportunities like that we could explore.

KENT SMITH: I don't really have a follow-up, other than the Eastern Shore Seaside Park System was brought to my attention a couple of times in meetings with folks surrounding Owls Head. I had never heard of this document before. I'm just curious if anyone at the department is familiar with it and if you can comment on it. It's okay if you haven't. It's about a 40-year-old document.

MATT PARKER: I know about the document. I know the components of it - Taylor Head, Clam Harbour, Owls Head, Lake Charlotte Provincial Park - they're all part of that bigger plan. I believe it was the federal government that had the plan for the Eastern Shore, with some parks and wilderness areas intermixed. That's about as much as I know.

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: Just following up on Mr. Smith's first point about expanded use of parks. We hear from Hike Nova Scotia how they've been in contact with the department

about the possibility of having the season expanded. Particularly coming out of COVID-19, there's an exponential increase in the number of people hooked up with Hike Nova Scotia.

[2:30 p.m.]

Looking at what we might be able to do with parks providing a venue for that, where do we stand on that? Is this an active file for the department?

KAREN GATIEN: Just so I understand, is there an active file with Hike Nova Scotia in particular, or just looking at how we might be able to expand?

GARY BURRILL: Hike Nova Scotia in particular, but in general, in this post-COVID-19 new universe of parks awareness, the expansion of the season to meet this nascent market.

KAREN GATIEN: Certainly, we're always looking at what we can do to improve access and service beyond the sort of May to October period. At this point, there just wouldn't be the funding, and frankly, in many places the demand is not necessarily present to expand it. But, as we've all said, we would always be open to conversations to see if there are partnerships that we could develop to maybe do things a little differently or consider things in certain communities in particular, perhaps, that aren't open May to October. But at this point, it's not something that we're doing.

GARY BURRILL: I want to go back to the question about staffing that you were raising earlier. It wasn't very many years ago when friends of Nova Scotia Parks were set back pretty seriously by that Spring budget of the previous government that brought about the 38 or 40 - somewhere in there - layoffs in parks staff. The present government at the time was very strong in their condemnation of how this was negative to rural Nova Scotia. Our party was strong about that.

That's now six years in the past. Is the department recovering that ground that was lost with those 38 or 40 positions? Or are we still just in the place, with that hole - particularly Cape Breton, as I remember - that hole in the staffing world?

PETER GEDDES: I think we've kind of mitigated that impact in a couple of ways. One is that we increased significantly the number of students we use in our parks over the last number of years. We get great value for that, and it's a great opportunity for students, as you can imagine, to have that chance to work in the park system.

The other thing is that a number of parks have shifted over to self registration - parks that were less busy - so if you go to some camping parks in the province, you will have a sort of a gatehouse with somebody that's working in the office. In other parks you

self-register, so the service level is slightly different but that's very much tied to the busyness of the park. Perhaps Mr. Parker might have a bit more to add on that topic.

MATT PARKER: I would just say that there's still staff at those self-registration parks that are there every day, and to Mr. Geddes' point, we did supplement it with students during the busy time.

THE CHAIR: MLA Palmer.

CHRIS PALMER: I'd like to just ask a quick question about technology and how the department might use upgrading and technology. I don't think it's any coincidence to see the demand and the usage of the overnight parks, with the ability for electronic reservation systems and those types of things making it easier for people to have access to them.

Can you tell us a bit more about the use of technology and how you see it moving forward, and how that can help be more of a help to the development of the parks going forward?

MATT PARKER: We're always looking to do things better, and so from a staff perspective, we asked staff to fill out a lot of inspection forms, and our infrastructure list used to be on a piece of paper and they'd fax it or send it by mail, but now we're even utilizing hand-held devices to do our inspections and to do our infrastructure lists, so we'll have a real-time piece from that.

From a visitor perspective, we have wi-fi available at most of our camping parks. The challenge is that some of them are in rural Nova Scotia where cell service and reliable internet is not great, so we need to use satellites to run our systems. We're always looking to improve that, we just need to make sure we have the value proposition correctly.

PETER GEDDES: I guess maybe one of the biggest technological advancements has been the online campground registration program where folks can now go online and book their campsite. We've had that for a number of years now; it's been extremely successful. You can see a photo of the campsite, you can get the information about the level of service that's provided at the campsite, you can see a map of the campground, you can book multiple nights. That's been a great technological asset for campsite booking.

THE CHAIR: MLA Smith.

KENT SMITH: Just a quick one - I don't think I'll have a follow-up on this one. Through work on another file near Lawrencetown Beach, the Department of Public Works advised me that they were applying for money from the federal government through the climate change mitigation fund. Are you folks and your department familiar with that fund,

and would that be something that you folks could apply to, as well, or is that only applied to through Public Works?

KAREN GATIEN: I will say that Public Works tends to be the lead on that, but they're really great for reaching out to all of us to say, do you have any projects that might fit? Here are the parameters. If there was ever an opportunity, we'd certainly tap into it. We have a very good working relationship with them in that regard.

PETER GEDDES: I'll just add that we have actually identified some specific projects that would be potentially appropriate. Of course, it all depends on the federal government's acceptance of the proposal. One example would be at Graves Island Provincial Park. There's a causeway that connects the mainland and the island with the campground which is somewhat susceptible to storm, extreme storm events and climate change. That's one that longer term, if we could get some federal investment to help us with that, we'd be all for that. Any opportunities like that, we try to stay on top of them.

THE CHAIR: I have MLA Boudreau, MLA Leblanc, then MLA Burrill.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: This is a bit of an infrastructure question, but it's more like access as well. My family and I were hiking Salt Mountain which is part of the Whycomagh Provincial Park just two weeks ago. Beautiful trail, challenging trail. We're trying to train our kids to do Polletts Cove and Cape Chignecto in the next year, so good luck to us.

On the way out, coming out of the trail head, there were the yurts that are set up, and my kids were very interested, asking if we could stay in one. We're campers with our own tents and stuff, but is there a lot of uptake on that kind of infrastructure? How many of those would we have in our campgrounds? Do we have a large number of those types of opportunities for people?

MATT PARKER: Whycomagh is the only one with yurts, but in Cape Chignecto we do have cabins available there too for folks hiking the trail who may not want to bring a tent around. Might be good for your family to try to book a cabin. Again, we're always trying to find the right opportunity for those types of investments. We've seen through Parks Canada and our colleagues in New Brunswick that they are a popular option, it's just trying to find the balance from critical infrastructure versus nice to use.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I will inquire maybe about some of those cabins. We've done some of that back-country hiking where we take our own tents, and it can be a bit of a struggle, but I think my kids are up to the challenge. Those yurts, I think if anybody is looking for a place to go, it's a fantastic view of the Bras d'Or Lake, which again I'm promoting.

I think you're right, it's not looking at those opportunities, but my kids walking out of there asking: what are those, how do we get one? I do think they're attractive to bringing new people into getting into our parks.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr, then MLA Burrill.

CARMAN KERR: Just more of a comment on promoting our parks. Again, in tourism I was running adventure companies, and we were using the parks constantly, daily and weekly. That hike that MLA Boudreau said was one of the best hikes in Cape Breton according to surveyed guests, that's comparative to all Highland hikes.

I think the park has an opportunity we're missing a little bit on social media. I think any MLA would crave the kind of exposure or the amount of likes on your page. There are 12,000 followers on the page, but I noticed that there are four and five weeks at times of gaps without a post. I've heard that a number of times, and I just had to double check if that was something I had heard.

Just more of a comment. There's an appetite there, there are 12,000 followers, again there are these large gaps of a month or so where there's nothing posted, at least on Facebook and I think Instagram. Maybe just something for the new Mr. Parker that could trickle down. (Laughter)

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: Just switching gears a bit in the couple minutes we have left. Thinking also along the lines of conservation lands and thinking about the component of the Lahey triad of conservation lands. One of the difficulties is that we've never had, and Lahey himself has pointed this out in the evaluation - we've never known what that percentage was. Were we talking about a third, a quarter, a fifth?

That evaluation recommended that that percentage be clarified and made public. It seems like a good idea. Is the department thinking that it is a good idea and that percentage, that number, would be brought forward?

KAREN GATIEN: At this time, we've not identified a percentage. Certainly it's an important part of the triad, I would agree, and I would say the smallest will be the high production, but we've not identified a number to it at this point.

GARY BURRIILL: I knew that, thanks. What I was wondering was the department's thinking about the wisdom in the future of providing - I think there's quite a widespread misconception that the number is one-third, which it clearly isn't. There always has been general rough talk about a third, a third, and a third. But those thirds aren't 33 per cent - they're percentages of course.

I think there is a public interest in knowing what the percentage parameters are in this world where land conservation is such a big topic, what the percentage parameters are of the conservation leg of the triad. Would it not be a constructive thing for the department to be able to get that figure before the public?

KAREN GATIEN: Peter's just reminded me that it's really the 20 per cent of the province that would be for conservation. That would be the number that we would be using at this point. I might be missing your question. I'm sorry. I'm just going to get Mr. Geddes to answer.

PETER GEDDES: Right, so the 20 per cent - or, sorry, the triad model ecological forestry - three legs. That one is the conservation leg, one the high production leg, and one matrix forest which is a blend of low-impact forestry. You're well aware of that. The vast majority of the conservation leg is presumed to be the protected areas commitment for the province, which now sits at 20 per cent.

Now there are other lands that are conserved in addition to that: core habitat for species at risk, old growth forests. There will be other pieces, as well, but the bulk and the majority of that conservation leg would be made up from parks and from the protected areas system.

THE CHAIR: I hear that there are no other questions, so I'll ask the witnesses if they have any closing remarks prior to us going into committee business.

KAREN GATIEN: Just a quick thank you for your questions. We're as excited as you are to talk about our parks system, and, you know, there is certainly lots of work ahead in the protected areas file as well. I hope you all get out for a hike or camping if you can get a spot - it's quite competitive - and enjoy our beautiful parks this Summer.

THE CHAIR: Thank you to the witnesses for coming today and providing us exciting and valuable information. MLA Boudreau.

TREVOR BOUDREAU: I was just thinking maybe we could take a three- or four-minute break and then do committee business after that?

THE CHAIR: Okay. We'll take a pause for three minutes.

[2:43 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[2:47 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. Now we'll bring the meeting back to the agenda, and falling under committee business, we have agenda setting.

There is one topic left on the current list of topics for today, which is rural economic recovery after COVID-19. The committee will have to hold an agenda-setting meeting to close its next set of topics. If the witnesses for rural economic recovery can appear in September, the agenda-setting can be held during the last portion of the meeting, or we can have a separate meeting in October.

We'll have to have a consensus from the group of what they wish to do. Would you like to, if we can get hold of the witnesses in September, do the agenda-setting at that time, in the last portion of that meeting, or can we move it to October?

The committee has agreed to do that in September. Prior to that agenda-setting, the clerk will email members and researchers the timeline for submitting their proposed list of topics and witnesses.

Can I ask if there is any further business? Hearing none, the next meeting will be held Tuesday, September 27, 2022, from 1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. if we have the witnesses scheduled. If it is only an agenda-setting meeting, the meeting will be held from 1:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. Meeting adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 2:49 p.m.]