

# **GORGE SWIM FEST**

**—CLEANEST—WARMEST—CLOSEST—**



# **COLLABORATIVE TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE GORGE WATERWAY**

**OCTOBER 31, 2019  
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## COLLABORATIVE TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE GORGE WATERWAY

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## COLLABORATIVE TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE GORGE WATERWAY

### DRAFT REPORT

#### 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report is the culmination of a collaborative process involving Victoria, Saanich and Esquimalt municipal staff, community associations, environmental groups and recreational users of the Gorge Waterway. The intention is to present this report to the various municipalities as an indication of public interest in improving access to the Gorge Waterway through the projects described in the report. It is hoped this will lead to them being considered in the Parks planning process.

This collaboration was funded and enabled through a “My Great Neighbourhood Grant” from the City of Victoria

The collaborative looked at 21 publicly owned access points and parks along the Gorge Waterway and short listed the following five, high priority sites as sites most appropriate for improved access to the Gorge Waterway (see details in Appendix 3).

- Banfield Park Beach (Victoria) – The vision is of a beach with all ages and abilities access that also provides habitat for forage fish.
- Banfield Park Dock (Victoria) – The vision is for a new, larger dock in order to deal with the serious over crowding on the existing dock.
- Burleith Park (Victoria) – The vision is for a naturalized setting that provides an access point for viewing flora and fauna.
- Esquimalt Gorge Park (Esquimalt) - The vision is enhancement of the excellent naturalized stream and beach areas.
- Curtis Point (Saanich) - The vision is have minimal changes that enable easier access to the water and preserve the existing natural ecosystems.

During the draft report stage two additional ideas/proposals were submitted that can be found in Appendix 4. The are for:

- Arbutus Park Beach (Victoria)
- Arm Street Park Dock (Victoria/Esquimalt)

#### 2. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT OF THE GORGE WATERWAY:

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the entire length of the Gorge was dotted with settlements, cemeteries, sacred sites, and camas-lily farms of the Lekwungen-speaking First Nations now known as Songhees and Esquimalt. Kosapsom Park, where Admiral’s Road crosses the Gorge waterway, was the site of an important Lekwungen settlement. The Gorge itself was a source of food, a boat thoroughfare, and the dwelling place of sacred beings, such as Camosung (“Camosun”) beneath the current Tillicum Bridge. Victorian and Edwardian settlers gradually appropriated the lower and then the upper reaches of the Gorge, first for recreational activities such as swimming and boating, and then for commercial bird-hunting and industrial uses – eventually pushing out both First Nations and recreational users. After its heyday as a famous swimming resort area in the 1910s and 1920s, the Gorge went downhill due to sewage and industrial pollution draining into it from all sides. The Veins of Life

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Society, spear-headed by activist John Roe, ‘turned the tide’ on the Gorge in the late 1990s by starting a massive rehabilitation effort that continues to this day. Since then, the Gorge has been recovering from decades of pollution and encroachment. The Gorge Swim Fests and the Gorge Waterway Initiative grew out of those beginnings. Since its founding in 2012, the need for water-focused stewardship has become clear to the members of the Gorge Swim Fest Society, a recreational and social group that organizes monthly group swims and our annual Swim Fest, and sponsored the Gorge Waterway Collaborative—an attempt to bring together recreational and stewardship issues in recognition of their mutual interdependence.

Photo from BC Archives of swimming in the Gorge Waterway:



### **3. BACKGROUND OF THE COLLABORATIVE:**

As noted in the Executive Summary the Collaborative was funded by a City of Victoria “My Great Neighbourhood Grant (MGNG)” that had as a purpose “To protect the health of the Gorge Waterway through citizen stewardship enabled by improved recreational access. For more details of the MGNG and the Collaborative process see Appendix 1.

### **4. COLLABORATIVE MEETING OUTCOMES:**

The Collaborative met three times in the spring of 2019. The detailed outcomes of those meetings can be found in Appendix 2.

The final outcomes from the meetings are on the following pages in Section 5, organized by site.

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## 5. RECOMMENDED ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS BY SITE:

### 5.1. BANFIELD PARK BEACH (VICTORIA)

The vision is for a beach with all ages and abilities access that also provides habitat for forage fish. Design should include/consider the following:

1. Test the bottom for contamination and clean up if needed.
2. Evaluate the storm drains for contamination and deal with as appropriate.
3. Remove the rock debris close to the edge of the water.
4. Create a designated forage fish spawning area (as per presentation by Peninsula Streams).
5. Decrease the slope of the bank behind the western portion of the beach
6. Improve access to water at the shore for people of all ages and abilities.
7. Evaluate access for dogs relative to creating a beach for forage fish.
8. Landscape to integrate with other park elements, including playground, paths, plants, bike racks, picnic area, toilet, etc.
9. Install bike racks visible from the beach.
10. Install toilet and change facilities.
11. Install a water park in Banfield Park that could double as a rinse off shower.
12. Include signage to encourage stewardship.
13. Include safety signage noting any hazards such as rocks.

Photos from Transfer Beach in Ladysmith that inspired this working group.



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## 5.1.1.1. Concept sketch of proposed beach



Forage Fish Gravel Photo (with pen for scale)



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## 5.2. BANFIELD PARK DOCK (VICTORIA)

The vision is for a new, larger dock in order to deal with the serious over crowding on the existing dock from various recreational users that include swimmers of all sorts, paddlers and rowers both recreational and competitive and “dockers” (sunbathers, families hanging out). Design should include/consider the following recommendations:

1. Install a completely new structure that would increase the size of the dock from approximately 500 sq. ft. to 1600 sq.ft. (see brainstormed concept design in image 2 below).
2. Ensure the design provides all abilities and all ages access (perhaps with a pool type stair access).
3. Ensure the design meets the needs of various groups noted above.
4. Reuse the existing dock at another site or as a float to house a water slide that has already been donated by the town of View Royal to the Gorge Swim Fest Society.
5. Provide facility for short-term storage of personal items.
6. Include signage to encourage stewardship.
7. Include safety signage noting any hazards such as rocks.
8. Install bike racks visible from the dock.
9. Install toilet and change facilities (perhaps an alternative would be to negotiate with the Vic West Community Association (VWCA) to allow longer hours of access to the facilities in their Centre).
10. Install a small water park in Banfield Park that could double as a rinse off shower.
11. Provide straighter access path to dock. At the moment it is difficult to maneuver kayaks down path.
12. Consider installing benches for sitting, a small plexi-glass viewing area for looking under water, space for life jackets.
13. Concept drawing below is from the dock working group as one possible approach plus a photo showing magnitude of over-crowding (even with additional temporary dock).



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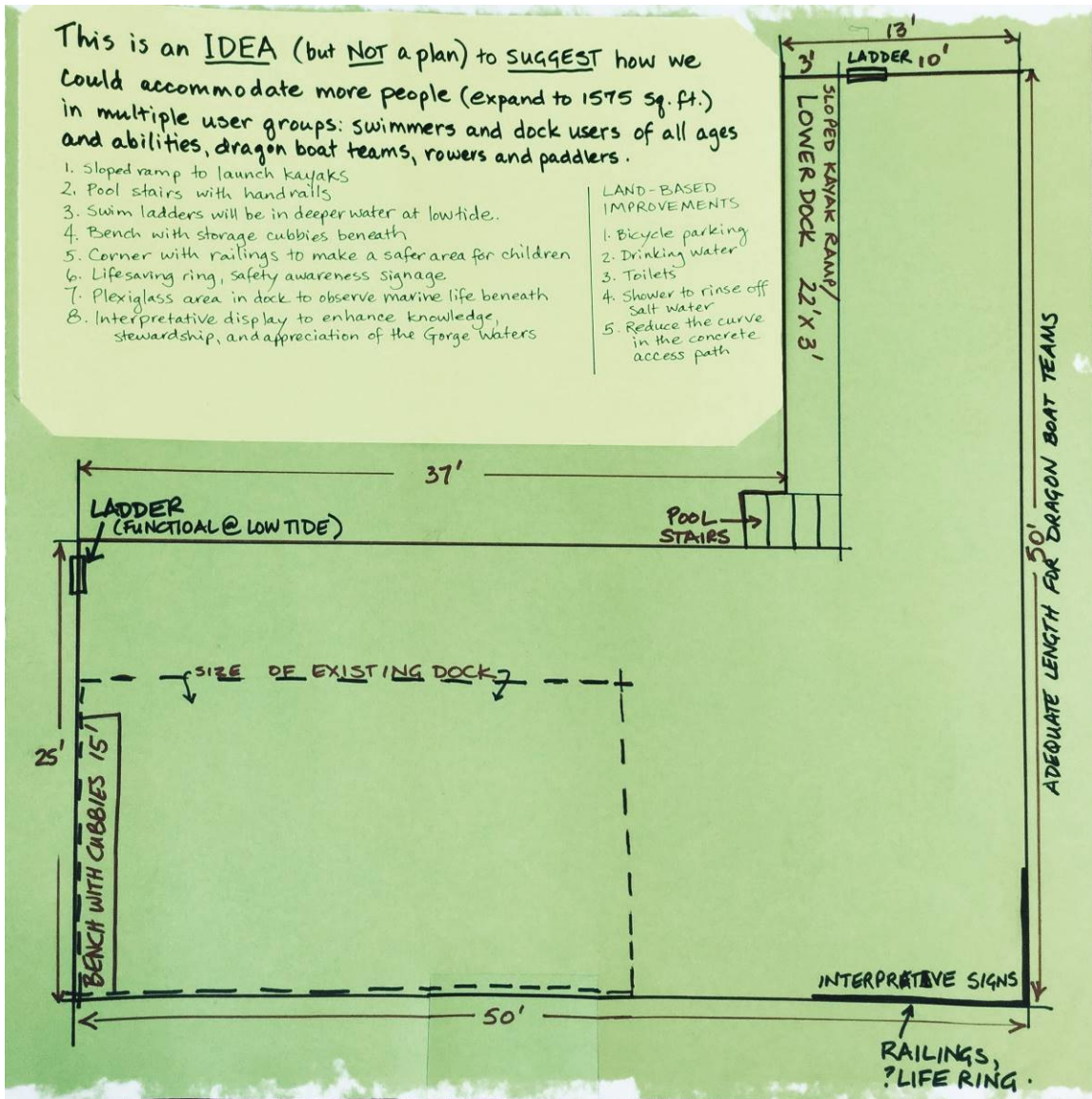


This is an IDEA (but NOT a plan) to SUGGEST how we could accommodate more people (expand to 1575 sq. ft.) in multiple user groups: swimmers and dock users of all ages and abilities, dragon boat teams, rowers and paddlers.

1. Sloped ramp to launch kayaks
2. Pool stairs with handrails
3. Swim ladders will be in deeper water at low tide.
4. Bench with storage cubbies beneath
5. Corner with railings to make a safer area for children
6. Lifesaving ring, safety awareness signage
7. Plexiglass area in dock to observe marine life beneath
8. Interpretative display to enhance knowledge, stewardship, and appreciation of the Gorge Waters

#### LAND-BASED IMPROVEMENTS

1. Bicycle parking
2. Drinking water
3. Toilets
4. Shower to rinse off salt water
5. Reduce the curve in the concrete access path





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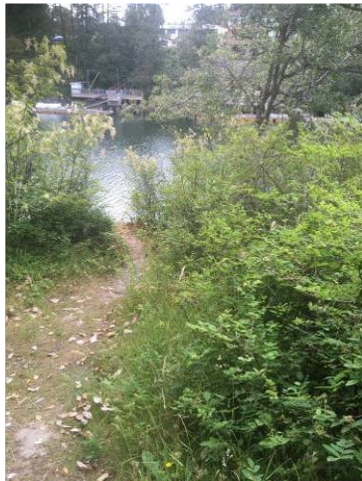


## 5.3. BURLEITH PARK (VICTORIA)

The vision is for a naturalized setting that provides an access point for viewing flora and fauna. Design should include/consider the following recommendations:

1. Clear some trees to enhance bird watching
2. Create a mini beach for forage fish
3. Re-naturalize with indigenous plants
4. Provide public art by first nations artists
5. Didactic panel highlighting indigenous uses & names of natural habitat
6. Plant trees (Douglas Fir) for roosting/nesting birds and providing shade for intertidal zone
7. Include signage to encourage stewardship.
8. Include safety signage noting any hazards such as rocks.

Photos of current state of Burleith Park



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## 5.4. ESQUIMALT GORGE PARK (ESQUIMALT)

The vision is to enhance the excellent naturalized stream and beach areas. Design should include/consider the following recommendations:

1. Provide additional plantings in the riparian area along the creek.
2. Improve the Gorge Stream structure for habitat (complexity) e.g. rain gardens.
3. Install a paddleboat floating dock.
4. Reconstruct the beach to provide habitat for forage fish and to improve the wading/swimming experience.
5. Include signage to encourage stewardship.



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## 5.5. CURTIS (AARON) POINT (SAANICH)

The vision is for minimal change to this natural setting. Design should include/consider the following recommendations:

1. Install a set of stairs/steps off a platform to access the water.
2. Provide solutions to avoid the current situation whereby soil erosion is happening that is threatening the Gary Oak meadow.
3. Install toilets
4. Install bike racks
5. Install cautionary buoys with signs regarding going slow, avoiding wakes, caution swimmers and no anchoring.
6. Include signage to encourage stewardship.
7. Include safety signage noting any hazards such as rocks.

Photos of Curtis Point

**From the water**



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Showing temporary stairs anchored to the old diving platform and dock for the 2012 Gorge Swim Fest



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## 6. SUMMARY:

The Gorge is many things, including an important part of the traditional territory of the Lekwungen-speaking (Songhees and Esquimalt) peoples, part of a Migratory Bird Sanctuary founded in 1923 that was once teeming with fish and other marine food sources, a current route for Coho and Chum salmon runs to/from Colquitz Creek, the largest 'green lung' in the midst of the most urbanized area in southern Vancouver Island, a recreational oasis for the well over ten thousand people who live within easy walking distance of it, and a natural site still needing clean-up, rehabilitation, and protection. Some of the cleanest, warmest, and most sheltered swimming in the CRD is to be had in the Gorge. With increasing recreational use not merely by swimmers but also by boaters of all kinds, the Gorge needs stewardship that sees and works with the synergy between reasonable and respectful recreational uses on the one hand, and environmental protection on the other. Given its location and the many calls on it, the only way for the Gorge to continue to recover from over a century of harm is via careful planning and sustained attention to its welfare by all levels of government and civil-society organizations.

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## APPENDIX 1

### COLLABORATIVE TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE GORGE WATERWAY

#### BACKGROUND OF THE COLLABORATIVE:

##### City of Victoria “My Great Neighbourhood Grant”

The Gorge Swim Fest Society applied to the City of Victoria for a grant to look into improving access to the Gorge Waterway. Text from that application follows:  
“The Gorge Waterway continues to become more popular for water-based recreation such as swimming, paddling, rowing and just plain hanging around this magnificent watercourse. This is, in large part, due to the massive clean up efforts that resulted in the Gorge Waterway being judged clean enough for swimming (in the year 2000). This rediscovery of the Gorge Waterway for recreation bodes well for maintaining the health of the waterway for now there are many more eyes on the waterway watching for potential abuses. However, this increased use has strained the existing infrastructure and community members are now asking for further infrastructure improvements and access points. The Gorge Swim Fest Society (GSFS) has taken a lead role in facilitating discussions around improving infrastructure for and access to the Gorge Waterway. This resulted in a long list of potential projects that were ranked by interested participants at various festivals in 2017 and provided to City staff for consideration in the new Vic West Neighbourhood Plan (VWNP). “

##### Collaborative’s Purpose and Goals

Purpose - To protect the health of the Gorge Waterway

- Through citizen stewardship
- Enabled by improved recreational access

Goals

- To establish environmental concerns, criteria & targets.
- To identify recreational users & needs
- To identify, categorize & prioritize access improvements
- To report **to municipalities to include in parks planning**

##### COLLABORATIVE PROCESS:

Meetings, Reporting and Feedback

Three general meetings and two working group meetings

- March 21/19 - Kick off/Fact Finding
- April 25/19 - Brainstorming
  - April - Working Groups to develop ideas
- May 30/19 – Presentations & Feedback
  - June (early) - Working Group to refine ideas
  - June (mid) – Draft Report
  - June (mid) – Working Group review of draft report
  - June (end) – Final report is sent to City Representatives and all interested parties

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## Participants (close to 100 people participated in the process)

- Community Association members VWCA, BGCA, GTCA
- Environmental Groups – GWI, GWAS, Peninsula Streams, Salmon in the City, World Fisheries Trust, ...
- Dragon Boaters, Rowers, paddlers, kayakers
- Gorge Swim A Month Club members
- Gorge Swim Fest Society
- Community members
- Veins of Life
- First Nations: our attempts to make contact with the Esquimalt First Nation through intermediaries were unsuccessful, and given their current state of mourning and reorganization in the wake of Chief Senupin/Andy Thomas' death in 2018, we did not push the issue. In the absence of Esquimalt Nation participation regarding a piece of their traditional territory to which they have a particular connection, we were not comfortable pursuing communications only with the Songhees First Nation. We recognize that the lack of First Nations input is a major omission, and suggest that such levels of government as have a responsibility to communicate with First Nations do adequate consultation regarding any major initiatives on their traditional territory.

## Information Resources

- Victoria/Saanich/Esquimalt Parks planners
- Federal Department of Fisheries staff
- Capital Regional District staff

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## APPENDIX 2

### COLLABORATIVE TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE GORGE WATERWAY

#### DETAILS FROM MEETINGS HELD IN SPRING 2019

##### Meeting 1 – March 21<sup>st</sup>

##### **Municipal Government Presentations:**

Representatives of Parks Departments from Victoria, Saanich & Esquimalt identified 21 potential access points along the Gorge Waterway. (see Appendix 3 for a list of these sites)

Several attendees noted that many of these points are overrun with private development works such as docks, out buildings, garages, landscaping, hardening of riparian areas, compost piles that introduce invasive species, etc. An attendee noted that historically there was a bridge for a time between Harriet Street and Arm Street and there is some interest in exploring installing a new bridge as part of the walking and cycling network.

An attendee raised the need for more education and signage related to celebration of traditional First Nations (Kosapsum) village at head of Gorge Waterway

##### **Environmental and Cultural Presentations:**

##### **Overview (VWCA):**

Andrew Gow introduced the second half of evening and discussed intent of collaborative and highlighted that it is not principally about making more access points for Gorge but rather determining appropriate access to enable stewardship of the Gorge. Andrew highlighted how the Gorge has always been a thoroughfare and its history obliges us to take care of it. He also highlighted the importance of having “eyes on the Gorge”, paraphrasing Jane Jacob’s work. Principle that certain forms of recreational use and environmental use can go hand in hand to elevate the health and well-being of the Gorge.

##### **Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary:**

Jacques Sirois provided overview of the Victoria Harbour Migratory Bird Sanctuary, which is over 28 km long, and was originally created to control market hunting of the Brandt goose and other marketable birds. He noted that 100% of Oak Bay and Victoria seafront is in bird sanctuary. He also noted that historically, the Gorge was known for its significant herring population that supported traditional livelihoods of the Lekwungen-speaking peoples.

##### **Federal Department of Fisheries:**

Melissa Nottingham noted the importance of the Collaborative’s purpose (“To protect the health of the Gorge Waterway”) and the need for improved access as well as non-access (i.e. natural settings undisturbed by humans). She spoke of the need for considerations to be made to thoughtful access that encourages development of



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riparian areas as part of work. An attendee stressed the importance of providing data collected through stewardship groups to Department of Fisheries.

## **Victoria Waterways Loop:**

John Rogers provided an overview of Victoria Waterways Loop ([www.Vicwaterloop.ca](http://www.Vicwaterloop.ca)) and its efforts to research and engage the paddling community to identify amenities needed along its route. They have been working with Saanich to try to acquire access through an easement at Curtis Point. He highlighted the need to work with jurisdictions to figure out how to manage and encourage limiting access to environmentally sensitive areas in Portage Inlet.

### **Attendees Feedback:**

- Ladder accessibility for all ages is critical (specific to Banfield Park dock - several mentions)
- Need for larger dock at Banfield was unanimously confirmed
- Currently the Banfield beach area is part of forage fish egg surveys being completed
- There is a vital need to select sand of particular size to promote forage fish if the beach was developed.
- Parking was noted as an issue at Banfield Park particularly for paddle group users.
- Olympia oyster colony was noted in vicinity of private marina adjacent to Banfield Park
- Paddlers requested washroom facilities adjacent to the Banfield Park dock

## **Meeting 2 – April 25, 2019**

Presentation was made by Ian Bruce of the Peninsula Streams Society on beach restoration for forage fish. This presentation was very useful in determining that a beach for forage fish could also be used by humans.

Beach access points were short-listed to eight and then further reduced to five high priority sites:

1. Beach at Banfield Park (Victoria)
2. Improved dock at Banfield Park (Victoria)
3. Burleith Park (Victoria)
4. Esquimalt Gorge Park (Esquimalt)
5. Curtis Point (Saanich)

Access Points dropped from short list:

- Arm Street Park (Victoria & Esquimalt)
- Tillicum Bridge dock (Saanich)
- Arbutus Park (Victoria)

Concerns anticipating an increased use of the Gorge:

- Parking at all access points is very limited and difficult at times
- Pollution from storm sewer run-off during the rainy season
- Improved amenities increase attractiveness to homeless people and camping boaters

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- Toilets are an important amenity
- Safety equipment should be considered in any improvements
- Potential conflict between user groups-swimmers, boaters, picnickers and paddlers
- Toxicity of sludge on the bottom. What does wading, feet on the bottom do to stir that up? Is it dangerous? Should we be encouraging feet on the bottom activity?
- The Banfield Park dock is inadequate in design and size to meet the current needs of users

## General Suggestions:

- Need to clean up muck and debris at each access point
- Toilets and water are important considerations
- Bike racks are essential at all access points
- Rinse off showers would be nice due to salt water
- Safety equipment (e.g. life rings) should be considered
- Provide rock danger signage
- Provide child safety signage
- Provide stewardship signage regarding birds, forage fish, sunscreen, history of the area, dogs
- Entry points to the Gorge should strive to be as accessible as possible (no steep slopes)
- Improved access for dogs is a goal but we need to think about conflicts with other users and forage fish.

## Meeting 3 – May 30th, 2019

Working Groups continued their brainstorming work on the design requirements for each site. Presentations were made and feedback received from the attendees. Design requirements were refined and submitted for inclusion in this draft report.

## Other suggestions comments from this meeting were:

- Identify funding/grant sources such as Mountain Equipment Co-op, Ocean River, Vancity to get something going while report filters through the system.
- There is a need for new pool stairs/ladder, better ladder for people with accessibility issues, life jackets for children are examples of items that could be expedited through the Gorge Swim Fest Society and grants or fundraising at Gorge Fest.
- Check permits for present dock in order to .?????
- Environmental assessment of water and sludge quality should be undertaken to guide development that may disturb the bottom of the Gorge.
- Washrooms are a critical item. One solution may be to work with Vic West Community Centre (VWCC) to provide more hours of access to washrooms and the possibility of using the building showers at VWCC.
- Build a water feature for children that would double as an outdoor shower.
- Provide straighter access path to dock. At the moment it is difficult to maneuver kayaks down path.

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- Bike racks are an essential item for all Gorge Access Points.
- The sediment on the bottom of the Gorge should be analyzed to see if it is appropriate to be stirred up (i.e. with a beach access)
- The quality of the water in the storm water outlets during periods of high rainfall should be analyzed when considering when enhancing access to the Gorge
- Parking near to the Gorge is problematic and cycling should be encouraged including installation of bike racks
- The restoration of beaches can provide both habitat for forage fish and recreational areas

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## APPENDIX 3

### COLLABORATIVE TO IMPROVE ACCESS TO THE GORGE WATERWAY

#### PUBLICLY OWNED ACCESS POINTS TO THE GORGE WATERWAY

The following public parks were assessed for potential improved access to the Gorge Waterway:

1. Banfield Park (Victoria)
2. Burleith Park (Victoria)
3. Arm Street Park (Victoria)
4. Arm Street Park (Esquimalt)
5. Esquimalt Gorge Park (Esquimalt)
6. Gorge Waterway Park (Saanich)
7. Craigflower/Kosapsom (Saanich)
8. Saanich Gorge Park (Saanich)
9. Curtis (aka Aaron) Point (Saanich)
10. Arbutus Park (Victoria)

In addition to the above, the following eleven (11) sites were reviewed. They are sourced from the document “The need to protect public waterfront on the Gorge from private use and occupation” prepared by the Environmental Law Centre for the Veins of Life.

1. De Costa Place, Esquimalt
2. Arcadia Street
3. Grange Road, Saanich
4. Glenwood Avenue, Saanich
5. Rhoda Lane, Saanich
6. Mesher Place, Saanich
7. Murray Drive, Esquimalt
8. Aral Road, Esquimalt
9. Glen Vale Road, Esquimalt
10. Garthland Road, Esquimalt
11. Rankin Road, Esquimalt

These were marked onto a map generously supplied by the CRD so that people could clearly understand where potential access points were. See photo of map on next page.

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## APPENDIX 4 POST COLLABORATIVE IDEAS/FEEDBACK

The following ideas were submitted after meeting #3 and the draft report of the Collaborative's work was circulated.

### A 4.1 ARBUTUS PARK (VICTORIA)

The vision is to create a forage fish / paddle beach at the foot of Washington Street. This is supported by the Victoria Waterway Loop and local businesses. It is south facing and would provide water access for local residents and is well serviced by BC Transit.

Design should include/consider the following recommendations:

1. Test the bottom for contamination and clean up if needed.
2. Evaluate the storm drains for contamination and deal with as appropriate.
3. Remove the rock debris close to the edge of the water.
4. Create a designated forage fish spawning area (as per presentation by Peninsula Streams).
5. Improve access to water at the shore for people of all ages and abilities.
6. Install bike racks visible from the beach.
7. Install "kayak friendly" stair access from parking area
8. Install park benches and picnic tables
9. Include signage to encourage stewardship.

Arial View of Arbutus Park



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## A 4.2 ARM STEET PARK DOCK (VICTORIA/ESQUIMALT)

The vision is to enhance the experience at Arm Street Park by adding a ramp and dock to provide access to the water for recreational users such as paddlers and swimmers. Design should include/consider the following recommendations:

1. Test the bottom for contamination and clean up if needed.
2. Install a ramp and dock to the existing viewing platform.
3. Ensure the design provides all abilities and all ages access (perhaps with a pool type stair access).
4. Ensure the design meets the needs of various user groups.
5. Include signage to encourage stewardship.
6. Include safety signage noting any hazards such as rocks.
7. Install bike racks visible from the dock.

### CONCEPT IMAGE OF PROPOSED DOCK & RAMP

