



Committee Report to Council

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Date: October 16, 2024

To: **Mayor and Council**

Name and title: Advisory Committee on Bear Awareness

Subject: Recommendations to Council to Improve Bear Awareness

Attachment(s):

1. Appendix "A" – Terms of Reference (Advisory Committee on Bear Awareness)
2. Appendix "B" – "Bear Smart" Community Program: Background Report

Recommendation(s):

The Advisory Committee on Bear Awareness RECOMMENDS:

1. That Council:
 - a. ESTABLISH a City staff position with a focus on sustainable waste management that includes achieving Provincial Bear Smart Status and reducing human-wildlife conflict; and
 - b. COMMITS to sustained financial support for this position for each year of the 2025 to 2030 5-Year Operational Financial Plan.
2. That Council DIRECT Administration to establish a Bear Aware Technical Committee that meets regularly with membership to include at least:
 - a. a City staff whose operational focus is related to the Bear Smart Program and bear awareness; and
 - b. one (1) member of each of the following stakeholders:
 - i. Northern Bear Awareness Society;
 - ii. University of Northern British Columbia;
 - iii. Lheidli T'enneh First Nation;
 - iv. British Columbia Conservation Officer Service;
 - v. Regional District of Fraser-Fort George;
 - vi. Wildlife Biologist from Ministry of Water, Land and Resource Stewardship;
 - vii. Other City staff members as required.
3. That Council:
 - a. DIRECTS Administration to incorporate multiple automated bear-resistant solid waste garbage bins based on industry standards as a two-year pilot project to select a brand compatible with City operations and to be established in areas known to have high-bear encounters; and
 - b. DIRECTS Administration to return a report to Council within two months following the end of the pilot project advising on the results and budget implications for

implementing bear-resistant bins city-wide, with a priority roll-out on high bear conflict areas. The report should also propose incentive strategies for bear-resistant bin participation and consider allowing temporary opt-out provisions for homeowners/tenants with secure garbage storage, with the end goal of all residents having bear-resistant bins that are always secure, including on pick-up days.

4. That Council DIRECTS Administration to continue to phase in bear-resistant solid waste receptacles in public spaces, including parks and bus stops.
5. That Council DIRECTS Administration to consider the following tools when addressing bear-related issues:
 - a. Actively participating in and supporting programs aimed at reducing bear attractants through initiatives such as bear-resistant garbage bins, fruit gleaning and harvest sharing, and public education; and
 - b. Combining support for these programs with the enforcement of section 11 in the City of Prince George Property Maintenance Bylaw No. 8425, 2012, would effectively mitigate human-bear conflicts. Additionally, this approach offers an opportunity to foster community engagement and enhance local food security.
6. That Council ADOPTS a new bylaw specific to wildlife attractants and solid waste. The proposed bylaw should:
 - a. Use section 11 from City of Prince George Property Maintenance Bylaw No. 8425, 2012, which addresses "Feeding Wildlife and Control of Wildlife Attractants."
 - b. Use Section 6 from City of Prince George Garbage Collection Regulation Bylaw No. 7661, 2004, which pertains to "Garbage Containers and Locations."
 - c. Implement a progressive increase in fines for infractions related to wildlife attractants and solid waste, along with offering alternative payment options.
 - d. Establish requirements for the maintenance of fruit trees and bushes, specifically the need to manage fruit before it falls to the ground.
 - e. Mandate the securement and/or enclosure of wildlife attractants to prevent access by wildlife.
7. That Council DIRECTS Administration to amend the City of Prince George Zoning Bylaw No. 7850, 2007, and other applicable bylaws, to permit electric fencing to secure wildlife attractants specifying requirements for voltage, installation, and maintenance.
8. That Council:
 - a. DIRECTS Administration to include educational materials on human-bear interactions with the City's utility bills for the spring and fall billing cycles; and
 - b. DIRECTS Administration to continue incorporating bear awareness information on the garbage collection schedule, social media platforms, and website.

Background:

The City of Prince George has been working with various partners since 1998 to reduce and prevent human-bear conflicts. In 2011, the Council committed to achieving Provincial Bear Smart status under the Bear Smart Program. This program is a voluntary and preventative conservation measure aimed at addressing the root causes of human/bear conflict. The City of Prince George has worked towards achieving the Provincial Bear Smart status through an inter-agency partnership with the Conservation Office of British Columbia, Province of British Columbia, Regional District of Fraser-Fort George (RDFFG), and the Northern Bear Awareness Society (NBAS). On June 3, 2009, the Council received the Prince George Bear Hazard Assessment (2008) report, and a Human-Bear Conflict Prevention Management Plan (2009) commissioned by the Northern Bear Awareness Society, which fulfills part of the criteria for achieving the Provincial Bear Smart status. The city last actively worked on this program was in 2019.

The number of bears destroyed due to human-bear conflict in Prince George each year is consistently high compared to that in other communities. The Fur-Bearers organization has labelled Prince George as the deadliest city for black bears in British Columbia year after year over the last decade. In 2023, communities across British Columbia, including Prince George, experienced exceptionally high levels of urban bear activity, with the BC Conservation Officer Service noting record numbers of bear sightings reported and bears destroyed. This high level of bear activity served as a clear reminder about the need to proactively manage bear attractants within the city.

In July 2024, City Council established a limited-duration Advisory Committee on Bear Awareness with the purpose of returning to Council with recommendations to increase bear-proofing and reduce bear attractants throughout Prince George to minimize human-bear conflicts in the community and promote public safety and bear safety.

The committee was tasked to provide recommendations related to education opportunities for residents to make their properties more bear-resistant; residential bear-proof/resistant garbage bins and options regarding the roll-out of those garbage bins, and a residential fruit tree management, mitigation, and/or removal incentive program.

Strategic Priorities:

The recommendations within this report align with the Council's strategic pillars of "Environment Stewardship and Climate Action", "Social Health and Well-Being", and "City Government and Infrastructure" with the creation of a safe environment (for bears and humans alike), and continued improvement of processes and practices to support effective and efficient service delivery.

Discussion:

Process

Between July and October 2024, the Advisory Committee on Bear Awareness held eight meetings to develop a series of recommendations regarding the City's role in addressing opportunities for the community to reduce attractants and become more bear resistant.

At its July 2024 orientation, Committee Members identified five focus areas to guide Committee discussions at subsequent meetings. Priority themes included: Bear Smart status, solid waste management, fruit-bearing trees, enforcement, and education and communication were identified as being particularly relevant to fulfill the committee's mandate.

Focus Area Discussions

Focus Area 1: Bear Smart Community Program Status¹

Significance to Bear Awareness

- proactive conservation initiative that encourages efforts by communities, businesses, and individuals to reduce human-bear conflicts
- aims to address root causes of bear-human conflict to reduce those conflicts and reduce the number of bears destroyed
- the goal of achieving the “Bear Smart Status” is to improve public safety, reduce property damage, and reduce the number of bears killed due to conflict
- provincial standard developed by bear biologists
- City of Prince George and partners previously committed to working towards achieving Bear Smart status

Context

The Committee strongly recommends creating a dedicated staff position to focus on completing the work necessary to achieve Bear Smart Status. Additionally, the Committee recommends establishing a permanent technical committee, which would be coordinated by the City. This committee would advise the Council and Administration on strategies for promoting bear conservation and minimizing and managing ongoing human-bear conflicts in the City of Prince George.

Recommendations

Recommendation numbers 1 and 2 support the Committee’s discussion regarding the “Bear Smart Community Program Status” focus area.

Focus Area 2: Solid Waste Management²

Significance to Bear Awareness

- garbage is the largest reported bear attractant in Prince George, accounting for 68% of occurrences reported to the Conservation Officers Service of BC³
- garbage odours attract bears to neighbourhoods
- bears become accustomed to eating garbage and will protect those food sources causing bears to remain in the neighbourhood, potentially damaging property, and confronting pets and/or people
- there is a risk the bear will injure an adult or child, in its attempt to guard the food source

Context

The City of Prince George currently collects solid waste on a weekly basis for dumping at the Foothills Landfill. The committee is aware that conversations have taken place during Council meetings regarding the reduction of solid waste collection to a bi-weekly service with the consideration of adding the collection of compost materials. While the committee welcomes the ability to have compost materials collected regularly, the importance of storing those compostables in a bear-resistant bin becomes even more crucial, as it would become a highly attractive food source for bears.

In 2019, the City of Prince George piloted 285 Rehrig Pacific brand bear-resistant garbage bins in a high bear activity neighbourhood. At the end of that two-year pilot project, the carts proved to be successful at reducing human-bear conflict, however, the project did not continue to the roll-out

¹ https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/environment/plants-animals-and-ecosystems/conservation-officer-service/bearsmart_brchr.pdf

² <https://a100.gov.bc.ca/pub/eirs/finishDownloadDocument.do;jsessionid=C495414D20DC37A1D0B27F2F6A3EC42D?subdocumentId=3190>

³ https://www.northernbearawareness.com/uploads/1/4/6/6/146675593/nba_bear_hazard_assessment_for_prince_george_bear_smart_phase_1_-_2008.pdf

process due to the operational difficulties experienced with some of the carts. The specific Rehrig Pacific bin used in the 2019 pilot project has been discontinued and an improved model is now available. There are other comparable products available that may be better suited for use in Prince George.

The committee is proposing a new two-year pilot project for the City to test several bear-resistant bins from the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) approved list that will be compatible with city operations. This pilot project is to determine which of the tested bins will be utilized in a city-wide rollout, with a priority to high bear activity areas.

During this pilot project, the committee also suggests testing incentive strategies to encourage residents to opt-in to the use of bear-resistant bins. Residents who can provide proof of secure garbage storage, such as using a garage or outbuilding, may temporarily opt-out of the bear-resistant bin program. As garbage is the predominant bear attractant, the benefits of removing this attractant are only as effective as the weakest link. Once a city-wide roll-out has occurred, those who opt-out would become the prime targets of bears on garbage pick-up days when the bins are left unsecured at the curbside. The end goal must be for all residents to have bear-resistant bins that are always secured.

Recommendations

Recommendation numbers 3 and 4 support the Committee's discussion regarding the "Solid Waste Management" focus area.

Focus Area 3: Fruit-Bearing Trees⁴

Significance to Bear Awareness

- fruit-bearing trees and shrubs are highly attractive to bears
- failure to manage fruit-bearing trees will allow the fruit to attract bears to neighbourhoods as an easy food source creating a potential conflict between humans and bears

Context

Fruit trees and bushes are a seasonally recurring attractant to bears. They know when the fruit is ripe and at its highest sugar content. Therefore, it is important that fruit trees are managed properly, and fruit is picked early or just as it ripens. Waiting for the fruit to fall to the ground is too late. Bears may cause property damage as they try to access the fruit. This can include damaging or breaking the tree, adjacent fencing, or buildings. By removing or properly securing the fruit, the bears will have no reason to remain in the area and will continue to move on.

City Involvement

The committee is aware of fruit tree removal incentive programs operating in communities such as Jasper, Canmore, and Banff. It is the committee's understanding that the resident uptake to voluntarily engage in the fruit tree removal program has been low and therefore suggests the City connect with these communities (or others who may be operating a similar program) over the next two to five years to evaluate the effectiveness of the programs before implementing a similar program in Prince George.

The City has the responsibility and ability to manage the bear attractants on public property. The committee is aware that the City has worked to remove fruit-bearing trees on public property, having removed approximately one hundred fruit-bearing trees over the past year. The committee recommends the City expand efforts to remove/replace fruit-bearing trees on public property within their existing operational budget.

⁴ <https://www.northernbearawareness.com/managing-fruit.html>

Further, with the increase in wildfires, the Committee suggests the City consider augmenting their Recommended Tree List with information regarding a tree's fire resistance as noted on Firesmart BC's fire-resistant plant tool. This would provide individuals with one comprehensive resource when determining the types of trees to plant. The committee also recommends that the City increase its distribution of the Recommended Tree List as educational material to the public.

Local Food Security and Community Program Partnerships

There are several community- and volunteer-driven programs in Prince George that promote bear awareness and local food security through fruit gleaning and harvest sharing and public education. The committee recommends that the City participate in and support such programs to reduce the wildlife attractants on private property and to increase the availability of locally sourced food.

Recommendations

Recommendation number 5 supports the Committee's discussion regarding the "Fruit Bearing Trees" focus area.

Focus Area 4: Enforcement⁵

Significance to Bear Awareness

- wildlife management is a provincial responsibility, however, regulation and management of refuse and other wildlife attractants that bring wildlife into communities is the local government's responsibility
- enforcement is accomplished through education and bylaws that assist with minimizing the availability of human foods and other attractants

Context

After conducting a municipal bylaw review of the City of Prince George and other similar communities, the committee formed recommendations to specifically address wildlife attractants (fruit trees and bushes, beehives, bird feeders, including hummingbird feeders, pet food) and solid waste management. Many of the reviewed community bylaws used the "Wildlife Attractant Bylaw Toolkit"⁶ available on the WildsafeBC website and based on the District of Squamish Wildlife Attractant Bylaw.

The committee acknowledges that a significant number of Bylaw fines remain unpaid until they are referred to collection agencies. As a solution, the committee proposes exploring alternative payment options, such as implementing a bear-resistant bin opt-in program (once established) and making public education mandatory.

It is important to have both increased enforcement and education to change human behaviour for compliance. Neither tool can be used alone because you can't enforce something that people don't understand, and you can't rely on education for voluntary compliance.

Electric Fencing

Electric fencing is a proven-effective method for preventing bears from accessing unnatural food sources. For this reason several municipalities in British Columbia Bylaws to permit the use of wildlife electric fencing (designed and maintained per the electric fencing guidelines of the WildSafeBC⁷ program) to secure wildlife attractants such as chicken coops, beehives, and fruit-bearing trees and bushes during harvest season.

⁵ https://wildsafebc.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/1_WILDLIFE_ATTRACTANT_BYLAW_TOOLKIT.pdf

⁶ https://wildsafebc.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/1_WILDLIFE_ATTRACTANT_BYLAW_TOOLKIT.pdf

⁷ <https://wildsafebc.com/learn/electric-fencing/>

Wildlife electric fences, when properly installed and maintained, deliver a non-lethal electric shock that serves as a reliable deterrent to bears and helps them learn to avoid the fenced area. Regular maintenance is crucial to ensure that the fence delivers an effective shock each time a bear attempts to enter the protected area.

Recommendations

Recommendation numbers 6 and 7 support the Committee's discussion regarding the "Enforcement" focus area.

Focus Area 5: Communication and Education

Significance to Bear Awareness

- fostering coexistence between humans and bears, promoting safety, conservation, and community involvement
- awareness of bear behaviour helps people develop and implement strategies regarding food storage, trash management, and minimizing access to attractants to reduce risks of human-bear conflict
- fosters a spirit of stewardship and cooperation with residents and communities.

Context

The committee thoroughly examined the comprehensive education materials and outreach programs provided by the City's communication division and the Northern Bear Awareness Society. They also conducted a review of literature on education and communication strategies.

The committee's recommendations highlight the importance of:

- Actively participating in and supporting public education programs aimed at bear awareness
- Demonstrating the benefits for residents who take measures to reduce human-bear conflict on their property
- Instructing how to properly secure garbage and compost
- Reminding residents of existing bylaws related to waste management and wildlife attractants
- Conducting education outreach targeted at school-aged children, recognizing their influence on adult behaviour
- Distributing bear-aware information to new residents and renters
- What to do if a bear is spotted and whom to contact for assistance.
- Continuing to leverage the Residential Garbage Collection schedule and including leaflets as attachments to utility bills ensures that bear awareness reaches a broad audience.

The City of Prince George is located in an area where human-bear interactions are frequent and will never completely disappear. With increased bear activity from March to November, residents need to have the knowledge of how to safely coexist with these animals. Implementing effective communication strategies can significantly reduce bear encounters and promote community safety.

Recommendations

Recommendation number 8 supports the Committee's discussion regarding the "Communication and Education" focus area.

CONCLUSION:

The recommendations from the Advisory Committee on Bear Awareness outline a comprehensive and proactive approach to managing human-bear conflicts in Prince George. By achieving Provincial Bear Smart status, the city aims to establish a framework that not only reduces bear encounters but also promotes

community safety and environmental stewardship. This initiative will help raise awareness about bear behaviour and effective management strategies, making it easier for the community to coexist with wildlife.

Improving solid waste management through bear-resistant garbage bins is a critical step in minimizing the number one attractant that draws bears into urban areas. Coupled with education and incentives, this approach will encourage residents to adopt best practices for waste disposal, ultimately leading to safer neighbourhoods.

Addressing the management of fruit-bearing trees will further reduce potential conflicts. Educating residents about responsible fruit management and the city addressing fruit on public property can diminish the likelihood of bears being drawn into populated areas.

Strengthening enforcement through clear bylaws will ensure that regulations regarding wildlife attractants are effectively communicated and upheld. A system of fines and education will encourage compliance and foster a culture of responsibility among residents.

Finally, a robust communication and education strategy is vital for informing the community about bear safety and coexistence. By leveraging various platforms to disseminate information, the city can enhance public awareness and engagement, leading to a more informed citizenry.

In summary, these integrated efforts will not only enhance public safety but also promote a harmonious relationship between humans and bears. By committing to these strategies, Prince George can serve as a model for other communities facing similar challenges, showcasing the importance of collaboration, education, and proactive management in wildlife conservation.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

Lisa Cran, Chair
Advisory Committee on Bear Awareness

MEETING DATE: November 4, 2024