

CALGARY RIVER ACCESS STRATEGY AND THE IMPACT OF RESTRICTED ACCESS TO TRAIERED RIVER BOAT USE.

Calgary City Council passed a motion on June 14, 2016 directing the City of Calgary Administration to develop the Calgary River Access Strategy (RAS). During the development of the strategy, departments within the city's Community & Protective Services Division formulated a plan to address public river access to both the Bow and Elbow Rivers. Public stakeholders were consulted during the development of the strategy. Calgary River Users' Alliance (CRUA) played a role in the consultation process to meet trailered boat access needs. RAS was finally approved by Council in February 2017.

One of the obstacles to be addressed from the onset of the stakeholder discussion was the Calgary Fire Department (CFD) resistance to any integration of public access to the existing boat ramps designated for exclusive emergency use. Discussions were held between CRUA and Calgary Parks, who spearheaded RAS and CFD to resolve this issue. The CFD refused to move from their entrenched position and RAS was developed around a series of upgraded and new river access sites. Priority was given to the upgrade of West Baker Park and new boat ramps at Inglewood/12 Street NE and Ogden Bridge/Old Refinery Park SE. A budget of \$1.69 million was allocated to these three sites to be completed within a two to three-year period.

Restricted Boat Ramp Access in the City:

The Priority Development Plan indicated that trailered boat access would be possible at West Baker Park and Ogden Bridge in 2018 followed by Inglewood in 2019. It became increasingly evident during the summer of 2017 that these objectives would not be met. Bow River Trout Foundation as a member of CRUA made the decision that if construction delays continued, there was a need to investigate what options were available for trailered-boat access to the Bow River. It was felt it was reasonable to approach the CFD to grant an easement of the restricted access policy that currently exists until the new public trailered boat access sites were available. To move forward with the request, more information was needed on the river operational procedures by the CFD Aquatic Response Unit.

Before approaching CFD on this subject, a Freedom of Information Request (FOIR) was submitted to the City of Calgary to document the activities of the CFD Aquatic Response Unit. Following receipt of that information, contact was made with the Assistant Deputy Chief, CFD in November of 2017 to gather supplemental information to better understand the working model of the unit. In summary, during the peak summer months of May to early September there were generally daily patrols out of one of three boat ramps, West Baker Park, Eau Claire and/or Quarry Park. And in the case of an emergency, as defined by a 911 call, an additional boat is dispatched from the nearest location to the incidence. Unfortunately, at the time of the discussion there was no data available to document which boat ramps were used specifically for emergency deployment.

A summary of the freedom of information data is presented in Table 1. The various data categories were compiled from the March 2016 to July 2017 raw data into monthly averages for the two-year period.

Table 1:

Calgary Fire Department - Aquatic Response Unit

Operational Categories

2016/ 2107 Average

	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Boat Patrol	1	5	33	41	44	27	5	0	1	0	157
Boat Patrol - % per month	1%	3%	21%	26%	28%	17%	3%	%	1%	0%	
Boat Patrols - # per day			1.1	1.4	1.5	0.9					
Rescue Calls	2	3	13	6	25	9	1	0	1	0	59
Rescue Calls - % per month	3%	4%	22%	9%	42%	15%	2%	%	2%	0%	
Rescue Calls - # per day			0.4	0.2	0.8	0.3					
Verbal Contact	2	20	240	448	940	726	58	0	10	0	2443
Fisherman	35	73	282	311	470	294	63	0	37	0	1564
Swimmers	0	1	41	164	401	259	36	0	0	0	902
Boats on the River	4	55	439	887	2636	2342	149	0	7	0	6519
Boats on the River - % per month	0%	1% 10	7%	14%	40%	36%	2%	%	0%	0%	
Occupants in Boats	6	8	1091	2524	7952	9927	676	0	16	0	22299
Occupants in Boats	2	2	2	3	3	4	5	0	2	0	
PFD's Use	6	89	1004	2392	7330	9564	276	0	16	0	20677
PFD's Use - % of boat occupants			92%	95%	92%	96%	41%				

Ref: City of Calgary - Freedom of Information File # 2017-G-0345, November 2017

The summary indicates several important issues that should be addressed:

Boat Patrols: These are concentrated into the four summer months of May to August with on average, one and sometimes two patrol boats on the river each day. It would be almost impossible to cover the entire city reach of the river and be able to respond quickly to an emergency call. The concept of a river patrol access to the river does not constitute an emergency in the same way as any emergency service vehicle travelling on city roads is not given preferred right-of-way. Shared respectful access to the city boat ramps would be more appropriate than the current CFD restricted access mandate.

Rescue Call: As defined as a 911 call, a second patrol boat is dispatched to assist with what has been reported as an emergency. **On average 59 dispatched each year, an extremely low number.** Less than one every couple of days and may be concentrated into afternoon and weekend activities. There is no data indicating the number of calls that did not become emergency rescues. These data would indicate that there is little justification to restrict public access to city boat ramps, but rather signage needs to be installed to instruct the public to move out of the way when emergency vehicles need immediate access to boat ramps. There is little evidence to suggest that the CFD is using sirens and lights to respond to river emergencies. It is impossible for the public at boat ramps or on the river to be aware that an emergency response is taking place.

The remainder of the data suggest that most of the time the Aquatic Response Unit spend on the river is a public relations exercise, not emergency response.

This brings into debate the question as to why the CFD boat ramp restrictions are needed. Very few true river rescue emergencies take place each year. There is therefore limited justification to close boat ramps to the public, but rather work on a public awareness campaign to avert potential conflicts at boat ramps and on the river. The new RAS river access signage goes a long way to address this issue and with an education mandate by all stakeholders any potential conflicts could be eliminated. In addition, the CFD needs to differentiate between patrol and emergency river use. Sirens and flashing lights need to be used when emergency boat ramp access is needed and when a CFD river boat is going to an emergency on the river itself. This is common practice across other North American jurisdictions and would be appropriate for the City of Calgary.

History of Public Boat Ramp Access in the Calgary.

Public trailered boat access to the Bow River has been on a general decline for 15 years. As late as 2000, nine river access sites were available to those river users who wished to launch a trailered boat and float the river:

Bearspaw Dam – Access to the river bank below the outflow of Bearspaw Reservoir was available for many years. Closed to the public in 2005.

West Baker Park - A double concrete ramp built for both public and emergency use. Although a gate was installed, it was rarely locked and used as a public boat ramp until 2013 when CFD designated the boat ramp for “Emergency Use Only”

Shouldice Park – A popular trailered boat river access site for many years. A new “Emergency Use Only” boat ramp was built after the 2013 flood. The previous public launch site under the 16 Ave NW Bridge was closed by barricades in 2014.

St. Patrick’s Island – An access site used primarily as a drift boat take-out point above the WID weir was available at the east end of the island. It was closed to the public by the redevelopment of St. Patrick’s Island and the new 12 Street NE Bridge.

Cushing Bridge – A popular public launch site just below the WID weir. Closed to public use in 2003 by what appeared to be a new CFD mandate to establish control over what had previously been a respectful coexistence between emergency services and the public. The Bow River Angling Outfitters Association were granted keyed access to the boat ramp for several years. But recently the key lock has changed, restricting access to all but those who have found a way to access the site. Riverwatch continues to have keyed access to the boat ramp.

Ogden Bridge – Casual trailered boat access has been possible on public property from the west side of the river adjacent to the bridge and accessed from Ogden Road SE. Popular for anglers during the summer months when the river has higher flows. Access will not be possible at this site once the new Bonnybrook Flood Barrier is completed.

Graves Bridge – Public boat ramp that CFD does not use with the development of Quarry Park as an “Emergency Use Only” boat ramp. Was closed by the City of Calgary in 2016 but reopened and remains the only public trailered boat ramp in the city.

Ivor Strong Bridge - A popular launch site on the east side of the river. Accessed out of the Douglasdale community until the 2013 flood when Enmax closed public access to the adjacent service road.

Douglasdale Ball Park - Historically it was possible to launch a trailered boat over the bank at this site, but recently, a cable and post barrier was put in place to restrict access to only a hand launch.

A Short-Term Solution to Public Trailered-Boat Access to the Bow River:

Today, Calgary's River Access Strategy has reached a stage that would indicate it will be difficult to meet the timelines to complete Priority 1 River Access Developments before the end of 2019 or the spring of 2020.

To move forward with a short-term solution to these potential delays we would like to make the following proposals based on the following parameters:

- We respect the City of Calgary directive for "Emergency Use Only" restrictions to boat ramp access **once public access needs are met** by the Calgary River Access Strategy. But in the meantime, shared access between the CFD and the public is needed at selected sites.
- The current trailered boat access restrictions are a punitive mandate directed at a relatively small but respectful group of river users that contribute significantly to the safety, habitat protection and support of the City of Calgary's mandates to improve river access for all its citizens.
- A recognition that trailered boat access, and specifically fishing boat access to the Bow River is generally early in the morning and later in the evening and generally outside of the paddle and float tube use of the river when emergency service patrols are on the river.
- A recognition that in the absence of emergency services patrols on the river, that experienced river boat users offer a significant contribution to the safety of the casual recreation river user.

The short-term proposals are as follows:

West Baker Park: Using a format of enhanced education and signage CRUA believes that public trailered-boat access to this site should be granted. The double lane boat ramp is more than adequate for both emergency and public access. Boat drop-off space and off-site parking is available. And finally, public trailered boat access to this site would generally be outside of the normal operating hours and days for the CFD patrols.

Shouldice Park: It is our understanding that the new emergency use single lane boat ramp has very limited use and therefore has the potential for shared use with the public with similar enhancements and use patterns as West Baker Park. As an alternative the previous public access site under the 16 Ave NW Bridge should be temporary reinstated until a new public access boat ramp is developed as a part of the RAS Priority 2 timelines.

St. Patrick's Island – Once the 12 Street Bridge SE construction site offices are removed it would be possible to use the site as a launch and -take-out location. Some mitigation of the construction site would allow for short-term access to the river. Paid parking is available.

Cushing Bridge: Although problematic as a public boat access site in its current format, there is a potential to use the current roadway access to the boat ramp and by extending access up the construction roadway to the new boat ramp below the Harvie Passage Low Flow Channel. A gate would be reinstated at the top of the existing boat ramp to protect CFD mandates. This proposal was presented in Bow River Trout Foundation's document "A Boat Ramp to Nowhere", as an option for access to Harvie Passage. A creative mind set could make public access possible at this site. There is also a need to recognize that the CFD has granted access to River Watch that is more intrusive than any fishing community trailered-boat.



Calgary, Alberta

Ogden Bridge: With a few rudimentary improvements including a clean up of the site, garbage bins and a park bench the site is useful for trailered boat access during the summer months. The timeline for the Bonnybrook Flood Barrier construction at this site needs to be determined.

Key-Lock: As an alternative to the above suggestions, a short-term access solution could be keyed access to West Baker Park, Shouldice Park and possibly Cushing Bridge boat ramps. CRUA is prepared to work with Calgary Parks and the Calgary Fire Department to control access by distributing keys to those river users who attend a 1-2-hour course explaining restriction and conditions of use. We believe this is a workable solution giving access to those who are responsible river users and committed to the Calgary River Access Strategy.

In summary, Calgary River Users' Alliance's mandate is in part to support the City of Calgary in what ever way we can to enhance public access to the Bow and Elbow Rivers. This will not only benefit the fishing community but all recreational river users. We appreciate that not all commitments made in the Calgary River Access Strategy can be rolled out in the priority timeline proposals, but it is important that RAS does not get tied up in an endless malaise of bureaucratic debate, inaction and delay. Improvements in communication between the City and the public is critical to offset what we see as avoidable criticism and hopefully a more successful pathway to a successful outcome.

Calgary River Users' Alliance

30 March 2018