BREAKING BARRIERS: TRANSGENDER INCLUSION AND EQUITY IN VANCOUVER

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Vancouver is known around the world as one of the best places to live and is a popular tourist attraction. Vancouver is also one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse cities in Canada with 52 percent of the population speaking a first language other than English. Vancouver has been host to many international conferences and events, including the 2010 Winter Olympics and 2010 Winter Paralympics.

The Vancouver Park Board's Trans and Gender-Variant Inclusion Working Group provides important recommendations on parks and recreation facilities, programming, training, and policy in order to create safe, inclusive, and welcoming spaces for transgender and gender-variant users.

In May 2013, a Working Group was established to assist the Vancouver Park Board with identifying barriers citizens face in accessing parks and recreation services. Leadership from the LGBTQ Advisory Committee to Council and the City of Vancouver prompted a decision to address potential barriers in the delivery of services to ensure a welcoming environment for all. Addressing the needs of trans and gender variant communities is an important dimension of improving the inclusivity of Vancouver. As a result of the communities having historically endured marginalization on account of stigma, discrimination, and restrictive policies, the Vancouver Park Board felt it was a priority to support these communities within its mandate. On April 28th, 2014 the Board unanimously approved a report, and accepted in principle, the recommendations put forward by the Trans and Gender Variant Inclusion Working Group (TGVI) to help improve the service quality for trans and gender variant patrons.

The TGVI report included 80 recommendations to make facilities more inclusive for all. Some of the actions include:

- New universal signage for all single-stall washrooms and change rooms so trans and gender variant people feel more welcome and included;
- Trans-inclusivity training for staff, volunteers, and contractors who interact with members of the public in parks and recreation facilities;
- More trans-inclusive programming;
- In-take forms with more gender options than Male/Female, and many other actions to help improve access, safety, privacy, and inclusion.

An interest in enhancing the inclusion of trans and gender variant communities in Vancouver existed even before the formation of the TGVI Working Group. The City of Vancouver's Aquatics Department was the first area to actively seek out support and direction on ways to better serve these patrons. In the past, washrooms, showers, change rooms,

swimming attire, and shared spaces were "policed" by patrons and staff to the exclusion of trans and gender variant individuals. To address this dilemma, Aquatic Services provided training to 750 staff (part-time and full-time) throughout Parks & Recreation. Facilitators from the TGVI provided 60-90 minute workshops designed to create greater awareness and understanding of transgender and gender variant people, including their needs and expectations when using recreation facilities and programs. They featured open and frank discussions with trans and gender variant individuals, presented legal and organizational responsibilities for inclusion, and facilitated skills-building to effectively respond to related conflicts and challenging situations. Participants were invited to develop a greater self-awareness of their assumptions and were encouraged to view gender as a continuum rather than a binary. They explored their own notions of gender identity and gender privilege with co-workers and two facilitators from the TGVI Working Group.

Staff members interested in learning more about terminology were provided a glossary on gender identity and gender expression (e.g. how one outwardly manifests gender through, for example, name and pronoun choice, style of dress, voice modulation, etc) The facilitators sought to increase staff members' understanding and empathy for the needs and concerns of trans people using the pools and recreation areas. The staff developed greater confidence and comfort in working with the public regarding gender identity and gender variance. Sean Healy, Aquatics Supervisor, has seen firsthand the very positive impact the training has had on both staff and members of the public. Unexpected benefits for staff have included: greater trust and understanding among one another about gender and sexual orientation, an embracing their ability to help educate the public, increased desire to learn more and to unlearn attitudes and assumptions about gender identity and its terminology, and a commitment to full awareness and inclusivity across the City of Vancouver.

By taking steps to ensure that all individuals and communities, including trans and gender variant, feel welcome and well-represented within the city's parks and recreational landscapes, Vancouver is breaking down the barriers to inclusion. The City sought feedback from a working group tasked with gathering information on the experiences of the public, and this initiative resulted in the identification of several concrete recommendations. As more recommendations are fulfilled, it will be clearer what the impacts have been on our communities. It is our goal that trans and gender variant individuals benefit from more inclusive services and programming by Vancouver Parks and Recreation, and more welcoming community overall.