



March 28, 2022

MEMO TO : Park Board Commissioners

FROM : Donnie Rosa - General Manager, Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation

SUBJECT : **Bright Nights in Stanley Park 2021 – Board Briefing Memo**

Dear Commissioners,

The purpose of this memo is to provide an overview of the Bright Nights in Stanley Park 2021 event, focussing on operational challenges and the ongoing work of train staff to mitigate the potential for future cancellations of public events at the train.

Background

Bright Nights 2021 was scheduled for November 26, 2021 to January 2, 2022. This was the first large-scale public event at the train since Bright Nights 2019. Due to current conditions of the pandemic, with many public health requirements still in place, train staff moved forward with a plans for a modified, in-person event with online-only ticketing, timed entry, and limited capacity, focussing on the core experience of the train ride and plaza lights. The goal was to provide an opportunity for the community to enjoy a holiday event while safeguarding the health of visitors, staff, and volunteers. With pent-up demand for seasonal events, when tickets went on sale on October 25 the response was immediate and few tickets were available by the time Bright Nights opened to the public four weeks later.

Bright Nights operates later in the day, from 4pm to 10pm, in many different weather conditions, historically closing only when conditions endanger public and staff safety. In recent years, the event has had a few closures due to high winds - twice during the 2018 event and once in 2017.

Operational Challenges

COVID-19 Pandemic

Public health requirements were sufficiently relaxed by fall so that large scale holiday events could take place with some safety measures in place. Train capacity was limited to 60% of pre-pandemic levels. Attendees were encouraged to mask and maintain physical distancing, while controls such as Plexiglas dividers, installed on the train in 2020, were retained. New entry and boarding processes were implemented to ensure sufficient distancing on the plaza and in the train station, to support the safe, efficient loading and unloading of passengers.

Event venues with publicly-accessible indoor spaces were required to ask for proof of vaccination status for attendees over the age of eleven (11). Though Bright Nights takes place outdoors and initially proof of vaccination was not required to attend, the emergence of the Omicron variant triggered a decision to implement a proof of vaccination status check for attendees beginning December 20.

Ticketholders who were unable to comply with the proof of vaccine requirement received refunds upon request. Ticketholders who decided not to attend due to the spike in COVID-19 cases were also provided with refunds. Almost all refunded tickets were resold immediately due to timely messaging communicated through the train's social media channels.



Equipment Failure

The four gas-powered locomotives in service at the Stanley Park Train were built in the 1960's and the engines are nearing their end-of-life. The pandemic-triggered closure of the train meant the locomotives were not driven regularly for 16 months. Though the trains were in service over the summer months with few issues, the additional strain of an extended event like Bright Nights led to an unprecedented number of failures. Despite pre-event and ongoing support from the Fleet Team, who attended several times weekly, all four locomotives failed numerous times over the course of the event for various reasons. The planned capacity reduction helped mitigate the impact of the incidents, but there were some lengthy waits and cancelled time slots, leading to considerable frustration and disappointment for visitors.

Weather

Although the series of extreme rainfall events causing flooding and infrastructure damage in the Fraser Valley and other parts of the province in late November and early December did not affect Bright Nights operations, any affected ticketholders who were unable to travel due to highway closures received refunds. There was no disruption to operations, though mitigation strategies were implemented to ensure the comfort of train passengers.

Winter storm weather bringing high winds posed a threat in December. Due to the routing of the train track through the forest, there is risk to public and staff safety from falling branches and tree failure during wind storms. Train staff worked closely with senior Park Operations staff, in conjunction with City Emergency Management staff, to develop a coordinated response plan that was supported by Urban Forestry. There were no closures due to wind storms this year.

A week of extreme cold weather began late Christmas Eve, with temperatures that remained well below freezing during the day. The sustained cold effected the tracks, causing a derailment on the evening of December 26, which damaged a locomotive and carriage. Passengers were safely evacuated and the remainder of the evening was cancelled as the damaged equipment could not be removed from the track. The continuing cold over the next days hindered the work of repairing both train and track. Bright Nights was closed December 27-30, while staff worked to re-open for the last weekend of the event (Dec 31 - Jan 2).

Theft

On December 31, as staff prepared for the re-opening, they discovered that the majority of the power cables laid in the track area were missing. Despite the inclement weather and the presence of 24-hour security while the train was closed, intruders had cut and removed the cabling, leaving the displays along the train ride unlit. The decision was made to cancel the final 3 days of the event as it was unlikely, given the holiday weekend and staffing constraints, that train staff could source and re-lay the cabling in time for the next day's show.

Current Work and Future Considerations

As the pandemic is not yet over, train staff will continue to align safety protocols for 2022 events with public health guidelines, as well as maintaining a site-specific safety plan in accordance with Occupational Health & Safety requirements. Train staff work with the City Public Safety staff in Special Events and Filming, and consult with Vancouver Coastal Health to determine operational impacts of health orders when they are implemented by the Provincial Health Officer.

While the expectation is that most COVID-19 safety protocols will be lifted and drop-in viewing of Bright Nights displays on the plaza will resume, until equipment deficiencies have been addressed



train capacity will be capped at 2021 levels. While staff are exploring a funding plan to ensure the viability of future operations, in the interim, capacity limits can help to mitigate the number of visitors impacted by equipment failures as well as reduce the load on event staff working to rectify emergent problems.

Train staff are now collaborating with a project team from SFU School of Sustainable Engineering to explore cost-effective solutions for retrofitting the existing locomotives with zero-emission engines. The student team is in the final design stages and staff are reviewing options on how to best advance this project. A successful retrofit with zero emission engines would align with the City's Green Operations Plan and enhance visitor experience by eliminating odorous emissions and reducing the potential for cancellations due to equipment failures.

While closures due to winter storms are not unheard of for extended outdoor events at the train, 2021's weather challenges were multiple and highlighted a previously not-considered gap. The response plan for high winds will be augmented by guidelines for operating the trains during extended periods of extreme cold. Train staff will be engaging with their track maintenance contractor to discuss mitigation strategies and specific solutions to reduce the potential for derailments due to weather-induced track changes. It is likely that a minimum temperature threshold will need to be established for safe train operations, much as thresholds for wind speeds have been established to ensure safe conditions for the public, staff and volunteers.

Staff have been engaging with Corporate Protective Services (CPS) and the contracted security vendor Securiguard to determine how best to harden the perimeter of the train site, including exploring technological solutions. Securiguard's post-event report acknowledged the inherent challenges of securing the track area, while proposing several enhancements to coverage and personnel training. It is worth noting that two previous significant thefts in 2016 and 2017 targeted Burn Fund equipment in the plaza, and security personnel subsequently focussed on safeguarding the assets of our event partner. Burn Fund has not had any equipment losses since the 2017 incident. Train staff work closely with both CPS and Securiguard in pre-event planning to determine appropriate coverage levels and considerable resources are allocated to this service. Both CPS and Securiguard teams have committed to closing the gaps for 2022 to prevent a recurrence.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Donnie Rosa'.

Donnie Rosa *(they/she)*
General Manager - Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation

/ry/sj/clc

Copy to: PB Leadership Team
SP Train Lead
PB Communications