

Subject **summer long-stay visitor camping issues - an open letter to District of Squamish from Squamish Access Society**

From Squamish Access Society <info@squamishaccess.ca>

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Dear Patricia, Linda and Gary

Very soon the Squamish summer season will begin, bringing a steady flow of visitors to our town from all over North America and beyond. A significant proportion will intend to spend the whole summer here, and of those, many come with expectations of camping (or living in their vans). Each summer, the numbers in this category grow larger.

Conversely, despite the town's "Hardwired for Adventure" branding, actual capacity to accommodate these visitors seems to be shrinking. Rising property prices have encouraged campground owners to sell out to property developers and the only new campground created in the last few years is small.

In response, more long-stay campers are choosing to camp for free in undesignated locations. In some cases their choices are poor and so, appropriately, lead to criticism from local residents and environmental groups. It has become common to read concerned posts on social media during the summer months. Illegal tent camping in riparian areas or camping vans parked overnight in downtown are two stereotypical examples.

As the advocacy group for rock climbing in Squamish, we have a direct interest in this issue as these type of visitors are usually assumed to be climbers and a negative perception of climbers is counter-productive to our aim of maintaining good relationships with land managers who own climbing assets, like the District, Ministry of FLNRO or BC Parks. In fact, we don't believe that every wild camper or #vanlifer is a climber - some are here for other outdoor sports like mountain biking or some just passing through - but we certainly acknowledge that many are climbers. The only direct action available to us is to attempt to educate visitors about camping options and constraints. We do this through our own [website](#), third-party websites like MountainProject.com, magazine articles and wherever else we believe visitors to be researching their visits in advance. However we know that we cannot reach everyone. Furthermore, we know that word-of-mouth information or repetition of prior season camping strategies play a large role in visitor behaviour.

Aside from trying to educate visitors ourselves, an indirect action available to us it to suggest solutions to government agencies like yourselves. Here are two we would like you to consider:

- **Proactive enforcement.** Identify the priority sites within the municipal boundary where you most want to discourage camping; for example, close to residential areas or riparian zones. Send your bylaw officers to these sites as soon as campers appear in late May or early June and move them on. If you do this, the message should start to flow through the word-of-mouth networks that these sites are off-limits, and the problem should lessen as the season progresses. Our impression is that in the past bylaw officers have only ventured out as a final resort, once complaints from residents have become overwhelming.
- **Temporary campground provision.** During the music festival that took place here between 2010 and 2015, the District provided temporary camping space on municipal property even though the main beneficiary was a private events company and music festivals not a component of Squamish's adventure tourism strategy. We suggest you consider providing temporary campgrounds at similar locations to regular visitors during peak periods, for example, during the weekends in July and August. Flat space and porta-potties are all that are really needed. The acres of space at the under-utilised Logger Sports grounds are one obvious candidate. We are also aware of sites on crown land identified by the local FLNRO office where the district could partner to provide longer-term low-cost camping.

A related topic is that we request a formal communication channel for climbers with the district, ideally with one designated staff member, similar to the channels we already have with the provincial agencies. Our society was confirmed in a 2007 council motion as "*representing the rock climbing community and be invited to provide advice to Council on matters of policy regarding rock climbing and mountaineering issues as they may affect the District of Squamish.*" Indeed, then-councillor Patricia Heintzman proposed it. However that has never been institutionalised in any way. Our only opportunity to communicate with the district is at the sporadic Smoke Bluff Park Select Committee meetings, where topics are necessarily limited to those directly pertaining to the

park. The regular dialogue between us should be broadened out to general topics like camping and other accommodation capacity, parking provision and transit to the "south" provincial parks.

Currently we perceive the majority of the District's attention being given to a short list of recreation activities, particularly mountain biking, that have a much shorter history - mountaineers have been coming to Squamish since 1900, rock climbers since the 1950s - and arguably less strategic significance for the town's brand. Furthermore we observe a tendency to use economic impact estimates for individual activities and events to justify decisions without analysis of their relative significance. (We do not claim to know the full economic impact of climbing but we can tell you that it directly supports three stores, a climbing gym, several equipment manufacturers/ distributors and multiple guide agencies. And climbing visitor numbers increase relentlessly year after year.) If Squamish is serious about "Hardwired for Adventure" all the related recreational activities like climbing, mountain biking, kiteboarding, backcountry skiing and hiking should receive proportionate attention.

We would be very happy to meet to elaborate on any of these points at any time.

Best regards

The directors of the Squamish Access Society

<http://squamishaccess.ca/about-sas/sas-board/>