

City Council: June 28th

Presentation by Edmonton River Valley Conservation Coalition (ERVCC)

Touch The Water Plan

Introduction

Thank you to City Council for the opportunity to speak. My name is Sheryl Savard and I am speaking on behalf of Edmonton River Valley Conservation Coalition.

Our goal is to support the City's vision for Edmonton's river valley, as documented in the Natural Connections Strategic Plan (2007).

We Oppose the Touch the Water Plan

A healthy and bio-diverse waterfront in a large city is rare. It not only protects us against climate change, it also doubles as an urban escape for Edmonton citizens. The Touch the Water plan does the opposite. It speeds up climate change by squeezing out biodiversity through infrastructure built over one of Edmonton's most active cycling and pedestrian routes.

The project intends to replace an existing sustainable non-motorized traffic route with structural walkways and lookouts. Additionally, they plan to construct plazas and a man-made wide path, scraping away natural terrain and creating hard-surface run-off that contributes to rapid erosion where roots and vegetation holding the earth in place no longer exist. Given the silty composition of our fragile river valley, this would be an environmental mistake.

Indigenous Considerations

When the River Crossing Business Plan came before city council in September, 2019, Tsuu'tina Elder Violet McGinnis recommended that "[t]he waterfront area as much as possible...be kept in a natural state...This area has to reflect the indigenous peoples."

At the same public hearing, Tracy Friedel, President of Metis Region 4 recommended that "the waterfront remain as natural as possible...that would be from the people to the trees to the animals...and bring to life the relationships that have always been core to this land."

We agree with the recommendations by Indigenous leaders, which is consistent with river valley bylaw 7188's goal of "ensuring the preservation of the natural character and environment" of the river valley.

Environmental Sensitivity

With regards to the sensitivity of the area being proposed for environmental destruction, the City's ecological planners have labeled it as containing "high, to extremely high, environmental value." See below (Image 1) for the City's Environmental Sustainability graph. Some of the considerations made by the City in

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considering this rating included: wildlife movement, aquatic habitat, natural vegetation, and unique landforms. The only element consistent with the City's Natural Connections Strategy is the daylighting of Groat Ravine, which would include tree planting. It is noteworthy that we create our own costly environmental problems when we tear down mature trees only to later have to replant young trees. Notwithstanding the lost bio-diversity of natural vegetation that we then have to replace with thirsty grass landscapes. We are creating more problems than we have time or money to later fix.

Ribbon of Green Plan

An added complication is Touch the Water planning is happening at the same time as the Ribbon of Green plan is nearing its final stages and changes to North Saskatchewan River Valley ARP, bylaw 7188, are being contemplated.

Advancing Touch the Water plans before these policy documents are finalized creates administrative and policy conflicts that will disrupt long-term strategic planning.

Our Proposal

Before spending millions to shoehorn people into costly and short-sighted infrastructure, we need to think about how we can meet the recreational needs of our citizens while simultaneously protecting the bio-diversity of our river valley. We can do both, but not with the Touch The Water plan.

We propose moving the River Valley Road further inland, or re-purposing it for cyclists and pedestrians. We also propose that the harsh environmental requirements of maintaining the Victoria Golf Course be reconsidered in light of current climate change realities. Simply reducing the size of Victoria golf course would support other recreational opportunities that are more bio-diverse and in line with the City's goals for environmental sustainability. This is an opportunity for Edmonton to be true environmental stewards leading the race against climate change.

Real Natural Connections

Rather than making the riparian lands more resilient, this plan puts a hard edge on what now is soft and pliable. As the Natural Connections strategy states, our goal should be to adapt the city to the ecology, not the other way around. Moving infrastructure back from the water is an important step in this process.

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During this pandemic, people have voted with their feet and embraced the natural elements that previous Edmontonians have left as a unique legacy. Touch the Water risks paving over this legacy.

