

# River Valley Planning Modernization Phase 1 Update

## Recommendation

That the June 29, 2021, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE00544, be received for information.

## Executive Summary

Edmonton's North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System (the River Valley) is a highly valued ecological, recreational and active transportation corridor, a place of cultural significance, a draw for tourism, and the core of Edmonton's open space network. In response to a variety of increasing pressures on the River Valley and in support of The City Plan's Guiding Values, two projects are underway:

- The North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan ("River Valley ARP") Regulatory Update is intended to address immediate challenges with the River Valley ARP and reflect the City's new boundary as a result of the 2019 annexation
- The River Valley Planning Modernization (RVPM) involves a more holistic review of the City's planning guidance and regulation of the River Valley and will:
  - Renew and replace the existing Ribbon of Green Concept and Master Plan
  - Modernize the River Valley ARP.

The Regulatory Update project is planned for completion in 2021 and the RVPM is planned for completion in Q1 2023.

The original River Valley ARP and Ribbon of Green plans were approved in the mid-1980s and early 1990s when Edmonton's population was approximately 600,000 people. Updating these documents is necessary to ensure guidance and implementation as the River Valley is aligned with the City's current planning framework. It will also ensure it considers the needs and values of the Indigenous peoples for whom this is part of traditional territory, and all Edmontonians, today and into the future. These projects will help to reaffirm Edmonton's longstanding commitment to the most significant ecological corridor in the Edmonton region and the largest contiguous stretch of urban parkland in Canada.

Once complete, the current Ribbon of Green stream of work will be consolidated with the Ribbon of Green SW+NE and implemented in accordance with the regulatory direction provided in the modernized River Valley ARP. At the conclusion of these projects, the completed Ribbon of Green will outline what is appropriate in the River Valley, and the modernized River Valley ARP will outline how to evaluate and make decisions on proposals.

### Report

Edmonton's River Valley experiences pressures from a number of sources, including:

- Growth, expansion and densification of Edmonton's neighbourhoods;
- Increased interest in diverse outdoor recreation activities, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- Development, utility, and infrastructure projects.

As the demands on the River Valley increase, it is critical to have clear and updated policy, sound planning guidance, and a strong regulatory framework in place.

With the exception of the lands addressed through the Ribbon of Green SW+NE completed in 2020 (Attachment 1), the existing framework for much of the River Valley system is over 30 years old, leaving Administration without adequate direction to balance ecological protection and appropriate use within the River Valley.

Existing policy does not adequately address emerging trends and tensions for use of the River Valley, nor does it address Indigenous perspectives regarding River Valley use and protection. These complex and overlapping issues have resulted in a lack of clarity about what projects or uses are appropriate for specific locations. The absence of updated strategic direction also makes it difficult to clearly rationalize decisions to project proponents, stakeholders, and the public. Additionally, there is potential to miss opportunities for strategic coordination, innovation, alignment, distribution, and connectivity of open space functions within the River Valley as a cohesive system.

To address these issues, Administration has undertaken two projects:

- **River Valley ARP Regulatory Update** - The Regulatory Update project is intended to address immediate challenges with the River Valley ARP and reflect the City's post-annexation boundary, including a text amendment to clarify the definitions of major and minor facilities. A Land Development Application reflecting these two amendments was made in April 2021; the bylaw will be presented to City Council after the 2021 municipal election.
- **River Valley Planning Modernization (RVPM)** - The RVPM launched in late 2020 and will be completed in four phases by early 2023. This project is a holistic review of Administration's planning guidance and regulation of the River Valley with the goal of ensuring that the River Valley remains a high-functioning,

vibrant and ecologically resilient open space network as the city grows. The RVPM consists of two streams:

- ***The Ribbon of Green Renewal*** - Replacement of the existing Ribbon of Green Concept and Master Plans, which provide strategic direction for River Valley land. Administration completed the Ribbon of Green SW+NE in 2020 to address the urgent need for planning guidance in the southwest and northeast areas of the city due to advancing greenfield development in Riverview, Windermere, and Horse Hill. The Ribbon of Green SW+NE provides the foundation for the rest of the River Valley.
- ***River Valley ARP Modernization*** - A comprehensive review of the ARP, including evaluation tools, position within the City's planning hierarchy, alignment with District Plans, and River Valley decision-making procedures.

Attachment 2 illustrates the areas affected by the two projects.

### **Strategic Alignment**

Both River Valley projects align with ConnectEdmonton's strategic goals: Healthy City, Urban Places, Regional Prosperity, and Climate Resilience. The health and vibrancy of the River Valley is a key factor in achieving these goals. The River Valley is a place that supports physical and mental well-being, is the backbone of Edmonton's open space network and many vibrant communities, creates economic opportunity, and is Edmonton's most significant asset to mitigate the effects of climate change. The projects will also implement key River Valley and open space policy direction of The City Plan (Attachment 3).

As part of The City Plan implementation, District Plans will include the River Valley within their boundaries. The RVPM will ensure a system-wide approach to River Valley planning. Therefore, District Plans will direct users to consult the Ribbon of Green and River Valley ARP for information and guidance on River Valley planning, land use, and programming decisions.

### **Project Approach**

The Regulatory Update has been designed to address immediate needs while the RVPM project will address holistic, long term goals. The Regulatory Update is required to address a gap in the City's oversight of portions of the River Valley that were brought into the corporate boundary with the 2019 annexation.

The Update will clarify definitions of major and minor facilities and set out a process for how approvals of projects under the minor facility definition are achieved. Major facilities will still require City Council approval while minor facilities may be approved by a Development Officer, with the option to refer proposals to City Council for a decision on the advice of a Development Officer, in consultation with other civic departments and environmental agencies.

The boundary amendment and definition updates are intended to:

- Ensure all areas of the River Valley are addressed under the same rules
- Improve efficiency of decision-making for low impact projects, including those that involve renewal or repair of existing infrastructure

If the facility definition changes are approved, projects in the River Valley under both the major and minor facilities definitions will still require environmental review by a Development Officer in consultation with other civic departments and environmental agencies.

The RVPM will address long term goals by providing strategic guidance through the Ribbon of Green and an updated evaluation framework through the River Valley ARP. The Ribbon of Green is a 20-year plan that provides:

- A vision for the future of the River Valley
- Policy to guide the City's decisions about what happens in the River Valley
- High-level guidance, based on desktop-level studies and public engagement, on locations for infrastructure and programming, conservation, and preservation within the River Valley

Once complete, the current Ribbon of Green stream of work will be consolidated with the Ribbon of Green SW+NE to provide one simplified Ribbon of Green plan for the entire River Valley network. This will also include the retirement of the Capital City Recreation Plan (1978), Ribbon of Green Concept Plan (1990), and Ribbon of Green Master Plan (1992).

The other stream of work in the RVPM project, renewal of the River Valley ARP, will ensure the River Valley is protected through statutory direction for planning and development of the system, including:

- Standards and rules to guide decision-makers and subject matter experts when evaluating projects and development that is proposed for the River Valley
- Updated tools and processes based in best planning and ecological practice to support decision-makers and subject matter experts

### **Indigenous & Public Engagement**

Community input is critical to the success of the RVPM project. Through conversations with Edmontonians, Indigenous Nations and communities, and stakeholder groups, a shared vision for the future of the River Valley and a clear approach to decision-making over the long term will emerge.

When the original River Valley ARP and Ribbon of Green plans were approved in the mid-1980s and early 1990s the City did not engage directly with Indigenous Nations and communities. While Indigenous engagement was completed through the Ribbon of Green SW+NE, plans for the current Ribbon of Green study area, as well as the

system-wide direction in the River Valley ARP, have not yet been informed by conversations with Indigenous Nations and communities.

To respect the unique engagement interests, cultural context, and participation needs of Indigenous Nations and communities, Indigenous engagement will be carried out through a separate engagement stream alongside public engagement. Each project phase will provide opportunities for input from Indigenous Nations and communities, as well as the public.

Multiple methods and tools will be used to seek public and stakeholder organization feedback, while adhering to public health guidelines. As appropriate, feedback will be sought through public meetings and workshops, an interactive map, on-site signage, surveys, and discussion guides. Phase 1 engagement is underway at the time of writing this report. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all engagement in Phase 1 will be conducted virtually.

### **Next Steps**

The River Valley ARP Regulatory Update was submitted via Land Development Application in April 2021. If approved by Council, the boundary amendment requires evaluation by the Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board through its Regional Evaluation Framework prior to third reading. The application will be presented to City Council after the 2021 election.

The RVPM is planned to shift in emphasis from strategy (Ribbon of Green) to implementation (River Valley ARP) as the project progresses. The Ribbon of Green is a strategic plan that speaks to *what* is appropriate in the River Valley, while the River Valley ARP is about *how* (i.e. how to evaluate and make decisions on proposals) - as expressed through regulations and decision-making processes. Once high-level Ribbon of Green strategy and appropriate land use is established, focus will shift to the River Valley ARP and the rules and processes that will implement the Ribbon of Green. Project phases are illustrated in Attachment 4.

Administration will provide an update to Urban Planning Committee at the conclusion of each phase.

### Corporate Outcomes and Performance Management

<b>Corporate Outcome: Edmonton neighbourhoods are more vibrant as density increases, where people and businesses thrive and where housing and mobility options are plentiful.</b>			
Outcome	Measures	Results	Targets
Parks, green spaces, natural areas, river valley are available and accessible	Square metres of public outdoor recreation space per capita (WCCD Indicator)	61.3 m <sup>2</sup> /capita (2019)	TBD through Breathe Implementation (project underway)
	Green area (hectares) per 100,000 population (WCCD Indicator)	5,751ha/100 000 (2019)	TBD through Breathe Implementation (project underway)
<b>Corporate Outcome: Edmonton protects its natural environment, minimizes its environmental impact and mitigates climate change.</b>			
Outcome	Measure	Result	Target
Parks, green spaces, natural areas, river valley are protected	Percentage of areas designated for natural protection (WCCD Indicator)	5.3% (2019)	TBD through Breathe Implementation (project underway)

### Attachments

1. Ribbon of Green SW+NE - June 2020
2. Edmonton River Valley Plan Boundaries
3. City Plan Alignment
4. River Valley Planning Modernization Project Phases

### Others Reviewing this Report

- M. Persson, Chief Financial Officer and Deputy City Manager , Financial and Corporate Services
- C. Owen, Deputy City Manager, Communications and Engagement
- G. Cebryk, Deputy City Manager, City Operations
- A. Laughlin, Deputy City Manager, Integrated Infrastructure Services
- R. Smyth, Deputy City Manager, Citizen Services
- K. Fallis-Howell, Acting City Solicitor