

National Urban Park Initiative

RECOMMENDATION

That the November 15, 2021, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE00781, be received for information.

Report Purpose

Information only.

To inform Urban Planning Committee of opportunities for Edmonton to participate in a new federal program established to create a network of National Urban Parks.

Executive Summary

- Parks Canada has a new program to establish a network of National Urban Parks.
- Administration has had discussions with Parks Canada to understand the goals of the program and intends to explore the opportunity through a non-binding agreement.
- Potential benefits of participating include access to federal funding, opportunities to advance Indigenous reconciliation and opportunities for Edmontonians to access nature.
- Potential drawbacks of participating include loss of municipal autonomy in decision-making and additional regulatory requirements.
- Further engagement and analysis is needed to better understand funding models, governance and operations of a National Urban Park designation in Edmonton.
- Administration will return to Council as needed throughout the process both for information updates and approvals.

REPORT

In August 2021, the federal government formally launched a program to support the creation of a network of urban parks and ecological corridors. The stated purpose of the National Urban Park Program (the Program) is to support conservation in urban areas and increase access for Canadians to green spaces. The Program is also intended to support nature-based climate solutions, help protect biodiversity, provide education opportunities for park visitors, and advance reconciliation with Indigenous Nations and communities.

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The Program is intended to be a collaboration between the federal government, municipalities, provinces, Indigenous partners and conservation organizations. The City of Edmonton has engaged with Parks Canada to understand the goals of the Program and potential benefits of participation. The City Manager intends to sign a non-binding working agreement to proceed as a stakeholder in this ongoing collaboration. Key insights from these discussions, and considerations around participation in the Program, are provided below.

National Urban Park Policy Framework

The Program is supported by a draft National Urban Park Policy Framework designed to assess candidate sites and ensure that objectives of the Program are met. The parameters for site selection are based on existing or future potential to protect nature, connect Canadians with nature, and support reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. The means of reaching these targets include:

- Conservation, biodiversity, and climate gains.
- Access to nature for local residents in an inclusive and welcoming environment.
- Achieving shared goals for protecting nature in a spirit of collaboration and reconciliation.

While the National Urban Park Policy provides guiding principles and objectives for the program, Parks Canada has indicated that governance, funding and operational models are developed in partnership with municipalities and stakeholders. The implementation of the program is intended to be flexible and tailored to the unique needs and context of each urban centre.

Establishment of the National Urban Park Program

Parks created under the Program will be unique in their goals and function and differ from other national parks in their mandate and their legislative context. Nevertheless, existing nationally recognized protected areas, including national parks, national historic sites and Canada's first National Urban Park, Rouge, offer insights into how future National Urban Parks might function. An overview of Rouge National Urban Park is found in Attachment 1.

Since the creation of Rouge, Parks Canada has committed to creating more national parks near large urban populations to reach more Canadians and provide a close-to-market nature and park experience. Dialogue and collaboration with the provincial government, regional partners, Indigenous Nations and communities, conservation organizations, recreation associations and community organizations will form a core component of the Program.

Opportunities and Challenges

Participation in creating a National Urban Park may allow Edmonton to access federal funding and resources, including in-kind support. Participation in the program also has the potential to elevate the profile and reputation of our city, and support tourism and investment. Discussions between the City and Parks Canada explored the possibilities presented above and other considerations, including governance models, funding models and legal implications.

Participation in the program may create opportunities to:

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- Protect and restore Edmonton's Green and Blue Network (our system of parks, waterways and water bodies, greenways, and urban trees) and contribute to nature-based climate solutions.
- Build relationships and partnerships between various levels of government.
- Explore distinct and regionally-significant partnership and co-governance opportunities with Indigenous Nations and communities.
- Share capital and operational costs associated with infrastructure development, management and protection of Edmonton's Green and Blue Network.
- Provide unique educational and recreation opportunities for Edmontonians.
- Support tourism and visitor experiences.
- Connect more Edmontonians to the national parks system.
- Elevate Edmonton's profile nationally and internationally.

Although speculative, potential challenges that require further evaluation include:

- Perception by some stakeholders of loss of autonomy over a resource that has been enjoyed, stewarded and protected by Edmontonians for more than a century.
- Potential loss of management rights or limitations on new or replacement infrastructure and recreation amenities, including through the introduction of additional decision-making authorities and regulatory bodies.
- Parks Canada's negative reputation among some Indigenous Nations and communities due to a history of negative interactions and displacement from traditional territories for the purposes of park establishment.
- Concerns about navigating policies and regulatory requirements of multiple layers of government.
- Potential reduced access or impacts to current use by numerous partner groups, agencies, and small businesses, including over 350 festivals and events and 28 partners in the River Valley alone.
- Federal funding capacity and priorities may change in the future, leaving the City of Edmonton in a vulnerable position and reducing its ability to implement agreed-upon plans.
- National Urban Park designation may impact equitable access to park spaces and create unintentional barriers for marginalized populations.

Administration believes that many of the challenges can be mitigated through the exploratory phase of further discussions with Parks Canada. Confirmation of potential negative impacts will be shared if additional steps are taken toward partnership with Parks Canada.

Alignment with Existing Municipal Programs and Policies

While the Program creates new opportunities to protect and manage the City's open space network, it is not the only mechanism available to ensure its protection and preservation. The City of Edmonton has committed to the protection of tableland natural areas and the River Valley and Ravine System through a number of policies, including ConnectEdmonton, The City Plan, Breathe: Edmonton's Green Network Strategy, Natural Connections Strategic Plan, Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan, Natural Area Systems Policy C531, and the North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan.

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Parks Canada's goals of conservation, access to nature, and Indigenous reconciliation align with a number of City Plan policies and the Greener As We Grow Big City Move. These policies include those that direct the City to protect and maintain a functioning and interconnected ecological network, improve access to the River Valley, provide opportunities for recreation and celebration, and acknowledge and celebrate Indigenous heritage.

Candidate Sites

At this time, no specific location or area in Edmonton is identified as a preferred site for a National Urban Park. Options include, but are not limited to:

- The North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System: The River Valley is the most prominent natural feature within Edmonton and the surrounding region, is a deeply valued place within our city, and benefits from a long history of environmental stewardship and protection. Its unique ecological, cultural, historical, and aesthetic value contribute significantly to Edmonton's identity and to the quality of life of Edmontonians. The Program could create new ways to protect the River Valley while offering additional recreational and cultural opportunities for Edmontonians and visitors. The scale of a National Urban Park in the River Valley could range from a network of smaller, dedicated sites within the River Valley to a continuous, regional park with a mix of uses and management outcomes.
- Tableland natural areas: A number of ecologically and culturally significant natural areas outside of the River Valley have the potential to meet Program goals and objectives. Such areas can include wetlands, grasslands, and forested ecosystems not represented in the River Valley. Partnerships with neighbouring municipalities could support the designation of a regionally-significant network of tableland natural areas.

The location and extent of potential sites, whether inside or outside the River Valley, would depend in large part on governance, funding and land management frameworks developed in partnership with Parks Canada. For instance, the City may wish to seek greater control and decision-making authority in existing programmed and developed areas. In addition, further work is needed to understand how funding and financial incentives from Parks Canada can be leveraged to facilitate land assembly.

Additional Considerations

Although there are many opportunities with the creation of a National Urban Park, further discussions with other levels of government, regional partners, Indigenous Nations and communities, stakeholders, and the general public are needed to fully evaluate opportunities and challenges associated with participation. Additional consideration must be given to:

- Park location and boundaries
- Alignment with Edmonton's long-term strategic vision and priorities for the open space network
- Funding models and financial structure
- Partnerships and governance models
- Jurisdictional powers, land ownership, and management rights
- Operational and management roles

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- Impacts to stakeholders, regional partners, and the general public
- Impacts to Indigenous Nations and communities

Further engagement and analysis are needed to better understand how the Program might function in the Edmonton context. Creation of a formal working relationship with Parks Canada would allow the City of Edmonton to continue exploring the feasibility and potential opportunities of a National Urban Park designation in Edmonton, without committing the City to establishing the park.

Next Steps

Administration intends to proceed to the exploratory stage with Parks Canada and enter into a non-binding agreement to collaborate. The Statement of Collaboration does not require that a park is established, but provides the mandate to enable funding to flow to the City for any technical work or study needed to inform discussions. Administration would return to Council with potential options for consideration under the Program, or to advise that the Program has not produced any viable options. Administration would work toward a high level concept for governance and site location for Council input and to inform the next budget cycle.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

Community engagement and collaboration is needed to understand the diversity of perspectives and insights informing the establishment of a National Urban Park in Edmonton. Should further work on this initiative be advanced, Administration will follow principles and processes established through the City's public and Indigenous engagement policies, strategies, and guidelines.

GBA+

Work on this initiative to date has been preliminary and focused on furthering the City's understanding of the Program. As such, technical work and planning analysis, including through a GBA+ framework, has not been undertaken.

Advancing equity will require evaluation of the social and community implications resulting from this project. Edmonton's GBA+ Process of Inclusion tool will help identify relevant equity measures to help integrate GBA+ into the project and align decision-making with the City's diversity and inclusion goals. Such comprehensive analysis would evaluate how the project may reinforce inequalities and marginalization of diverse individuals. Preliminary analysis suggests that the project could have both positive and negative impacts on marginalized communities. For example, a National Urban Park located in Edmonton's River Valley may affect Indigenous communities for whom the land has cultural significance and citizens who experience homelessness and have settled in these natural areas.

The City of Edmonton is committed to the application of a GBA+ framework and engaging diverse perspectives as part of its decision-making. Should further work on this initiative be advanced, Administration will follow principles and processes established through the City's GBA+ policies, strategies, and tools. GBA+ will be integrated into any subsequent work related to the Program.

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ATTACHMENTS

1. Rouge National Urban Park