

Alcohol Consumption in River Valley Parks

Pilot Project Results

RECOMMENDATION

That the January 31, 2022, Community Services report CS00633, be received for information.

Report Purpose

Information only

Community and Public Services Committee is being provided the results of the pilot project that permitted consumption of alcohol at designated picnic sites in the river valley.

Previous Council/Committee Action

At the May 3, 2021, City Council meeting, the following motion was passed:

That Administration conduct a pilot project to allow public alcohol consumption in select river valley parks from May 28, 2021 to October 11, 2021, as outlined in the April 28, 2021, Citizen Services report CS00350, and provide a report back on the results by the end of 2021.

Executive Summary

- Administration conducted a pilot project permitting the consumption of alcohol at designated picnic sites within seven river valley parks.
- Data was collected during the pilot through an online feedback form, enforcement reports and on-site observations from park staff. In addition, following the pilot's completion, an online survey was made available for Edmontonians to provide feedback on the pilot.
- The data shows that the majority of individuals using the designated sites were compliant with the rules and regulations. The majority of violations, most often resulting in a warning, were related to consuming alcohol outside designated areas. There were minimal operational issues identified in the designated sites.

Alcohol Consumption in River Valley Parks - Pilot Project Results

- As the pilot project has concluded, alcohol consumption is no longer permitted in any City parks.

REPORT

The Alberta *Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis Act* permits the owner of a public park to designate picnic areas to allow alcohol consumption during the hours determined by the owner with appropriate signage that:

- states that a person may consume liquor in the designated picnic area
- sets out the boundaries of the designated picnic area
- sets out the hours when liquor may be consumed

In May 2021, City Council directed Administration to conduct a pilot project to allow public alcohol consumption in seven river valley parks from May 28 to October 11, 2021, between 11 a.m. and 9 p.m. Forty seven of the City's 193 picnic sites were selected for the pilot project (Attachment 1). These picnic sites included bookable and non-bookable sites. The sites were selected in alignment with five guiding principles established before the pilot began: safety, accessibility, visitor experience, honouring existing park uses and inclusivity.

Compliance

Between May 31, 2021, and August 31, 2021, peace officers conducted 396 proactive site inspections of designated and non-designated picnic sites specific to the pilot program. The approach for these proactive inspections focused on education and awareness of approved site locations, unless there were any serious or egregious infractions observed.

Within the parks selected for this pilot, officers reported 2,450 total violations.

- 245 warnings and zero tickets were issued in designated sites. The majority of the infractions were attributed to alcohol use outside the designated picnic site area or use after 9 p.m.
- 1,664 warnings and two tickets were issued in non-designated sites. All infractions were related to unlawful consumption or possession of open liquor.
- 541 non-liquor-related violations were also recorded in both designated and non-designated sites. These included public littering, off-leash pets, cannabis use and groups exceeding the gathering limits set under the *Public Health Act* for COVID-19.

Twenty-two per cent of park users who received a warning provided feedback about the lack of clarity on approved locations and believed that liquor was allowed either throughout the park or in all parks.

Education and Awareness

Education and awareness focused on communicating the rules, regulations, and expectations of alcohol consumption at designated picnic sites to park users through a variety of channels including public services announcements, news releases and interviews, social media, edmonton.ca and signage in the designated parks. The information provided reinforced the pilot

Alcohol Consumption in River Valley Parks - Pilot Project Results

timeframe and where and when alcohol consumption was permitted. Administration heard from some park users that the restrictions and regulations were unclear.

Usage and Site Impacts

River valley parks operational staff tracked usage and impacts at designated picnic sites during their daily servicing duties. Between May 28, 2021, and October 11, 2021, staff logged approximately 2,100 observations relating to occupancy, consumption, litter, noise, capacity, damage, hazards and user behaviour from the seven river valley parks that were part of the pilot.

Overall, staff noted there was high usage of the designated picnic sites and minimal negative impacts. During the first month of the pilot, most issues were related to users' misunderstanding of where consumption was allowed (e.g. not allowed throughout the entire park) or the sites exceeded COVID-19 outdoor gathering restrictions that were in effect at that time. These gathering restrictions were removed on July 1, 2021. For the remainder of the pilot, staff indicated impacts/issues were negligible with just a few reports of excessive litter.

Pilot Project Costs

The costs for the pilot project were absorbed within existing operating budgets in order to assess the resource impacts and financial implications of the pilot.

Production and installation of required signage and posts totalled \$4,000. Additional temporary mobile signage was added at park entrances totalling \$10,000.

Peace officers provided proactive patrols and user engagement by reassigning general duty shifts from other areas or occasionally through overtime coverage. Approximately 100 service hours were covered through overtime, resulting in an additional expenditure of approximately \$8,266. The remaining costs were absorbed by existing budgets.

Next Steps/Considerations

As the pilot project has concluded, alcohol consumption is no longer permitted in any City parks. Park users have opportunities to consume alcohol in parks at licensed restaurants or festivals only. Tobacco and cannabis smoking is only permitted at select sites in parks, while edible cannabis is allowed in all public spaces.

A permanent program to allow alcohol consumption in parks could be established if directed by City Council. A permanent program could consider the number of areas where alcohol consumption would be allowed.

The level of patrols and monitoring provided by the peace officers during the pilot project is not sustainable in the long term without significant impacts to other services. Ongoing proactive patrols and monitoring services at a similar level and number of geographic locations as provided in the pilot program would require an additional two full-time peace officer positions and equipment at a cost of approximately \$350,000 annually. These peace officers would be able to deliver additional services and, during winter months, could supplement existing personnel in the delivery of traditionally under-resourced services. If

Alcohol Consumption in River Valley Parks - Pilot Project Results

opportunities were to expand to include additional geographic locations then costs for a similar level of enforcement service would increase proportionally.

Additional funding for on site signage installation and maintenance and communications materials would be required and would be similar to costs incurred during the pilot, up to approximately \$20,000 annually.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

During the pilot program, an online form was available to capture feedback about the pilot program (Attachment 2). The feedback form was made available through a QR code posted on the signage at designated parks and on edmonton.ca between May 28, 2021, and October 11, 2021. In total, 310 responses were received and indicated that:

- Among those who used a designated site, the overall experience was largely positive. Those who had a negative experience with the picnic site shared concerns of not being able to find a spot, concerns about disorderly behaviour, damage to the park, and safety. Overall, they suggested that alcohol should be allowed in the whole park.
- Among those who did not use a designated picnic site, many indicated the program negatively impacted the use of the park including concerns for the safety of families and an insufficient number of designated sites.

311 received 73 calls about the pilot project. The majority of calls (65) were for general information and the remainder (8) were with feedback, either positive or negative.

Upon completion of the pilot project, Administration conducted a survey to capture Edmontonians' feedback about the pilot program (Attachment 3). Administration conducted a survey, available on edmonton.ca and to the Edmonton Insight Community, from November 1 to 14, 2021. In total, 3,868 responses were received. The results indicate:

- 53 per cent of respondents who experienced the pilot rated their experience as very or somewhat positive, 22 per cent rated their experience as neutral, 12 per cent provided a negative rating and 12 per cent did not provide an opinion on their experience.
- 54 per cent of respondents indicated the pilot did not impact their park visitation and 30 per cent indicated it made them more likely to visit.
- Among respondents who were aware of the pilot, 50 per cent would like to see the program expanded while 19 per cent would like to see alcohol consumption banned at all parks.

Administration shared the high level results of the pilot project with the Community Services Advisory Board and has had a follow up conversation with Alberta Health Services. Both groups have identified concerns related to the trends/data and potential impacts of alcohol consumption on the community. Some of the key concerns include:

- Problematic use of all substances has increased throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including alcohol.
- Visible use of alcohol in public reduces stigma and increases normalization of use through

Alcohol Consumption in River Valley Parks - Pilot Project Results

increased exposure.

- Increased exposure to children, youth, marginalized groups, and people who are dealing with addictions and recovery.
- There are safety considerations with intoxication in a park, including isolated spaces, high and low use trails, proximity to the river, and steep embankments.
- There is a lack of data related to individuals using the parks.

GBA+

Five guiding principles were established to support park and picnic site selection for the pilot project. One of these principles was inclusivity, which was defined as spaces enabling all users to participate equally, confidently and independently. Considerations arising from this guiding principle included geographical distribution of selected sites, impacts to vulnerable populations, respecting those who do and do not consume alcohol, costs associated with accessing the opportunity, and maintaining a range of activities and spaces for a variety of park users.

While this guiding principle assisted in the pilot design, a full GBA+ analysis was not completed at the outset due to the timelines given to begin the pilot project. If the program is to become permanent, the project team has identified the following themes that could be explored in greater depth to help assist with setting direction for the permanent program:

- develop a deeper understanding of the perceptions and impacts by various cultural, ethnic and religious groups
- understand how the program could impact individuals who are experiencing substance abuse disorders
- understand how safety can be further addressed by those community members who feel their safety may be compromised
- develop further understanding to include various community groups who recognize the program as a benefit to the parks

ATTACHMENTS

1. Pilot Project Locations
2. Summer Pilot Feedback Results
3. Public Consumption Post-Pilot Research Survey Report