

## RIVER VALLEY PLANNING MODERNIZATION PHASE 2 UPDATE

### RECOMMENDATION

That the May 31, 2022, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE01049, be received for information.

#### Report Purpose

##### Information only.

This update on the River Valley Planning Modernization project (Phase 2) will guide Administration in addressing gaps in River Valley programming and access while modernizing the approach to environmental management and stewardship, in alignment with The City Plan.

### Executive Summary

- This report provides an update on the River Valley Planning Modernization project work to date. The project is now entering Phase 3 where the draft planning guidance - including Land Management Classifications and program/ecological guidance - for each part of the study area will be refined, along with policy for the system as a whole, based on input and other considerations received in Phase 2.
- Edmonton's North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System (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.
- As the plan and programming are developed, there is a need to bring forward Indigenous perspectives, to address growing demand for recreational and commercial opportunities, to protect and restore valuable natural areas and corridors, and to create more inclusive and accessible open spaces. Any plans and programming recommendations will consider impacts to the River Valley's ecology as a result of increased use, development and climate change.
- Existing policy, planning and regulatory guidance is outdated and does not reflect today's increasingly complex planning context. The River Valley Planning Modernization project is updating that guidance through the renewal and alignment of the Ribbon of Green strategic plan and the North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan.

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- This report highlights Phase 2 of the project, which developed preliminary direction for each of the 12 River Valley planning reaches, and explored potential changes to how decisions are made regarding project proposals in the River Valley.
- Extensive input was received through Indigenous, public and stakeholder engagement, which included more than 4,500 Edmontonians and members of 17 Indigenous Nations and communities.
- In response to community concern about the future of informal trails in the River Valley, and recognizing risks associated with inaction, at Council's discretion, Administration will bring forward a service package as part of the 2023-2026 budget to develop a detailed River Valley trail strategy. This would be net new work outside of the scope of this River Valley Planning Modernization project.

### REPORT

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.

Edmonton's River Valley experiences pressures from a number of sources, including increasing demand for access as a result of growth in population and interest in outdoor recreation. There is growing demand for events and commercial opportunities, as well as an increase in proposed development, utility and infrastructure projects.

With the exception of the lands addressed through the Ribbon of Green SW+NE Plan (2020) (Attachment 1), the planning direction for much of the River Valley is more than 30 years old, and Administration requires updated direction to balance ecological protection and appropriate use. As 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.

### Project Overview

An overview of this work was presented to the Urban Planning Committee on June 29, 2021 (UPE00544 River Valley Planning Modernization Phase 1 Update).

The River Valley Planning Modernization includes two streams of work:

1. Ribbon of Green: This is a renewal of strategic planning direction for River Valley land. This stream of work will build on the Ribbon of Green SW+NE (2020) to replace the Ribbon of Green Concept Plan (1990) and Master Plan (1992). The completed Ribbon of Green will be a 20-year plan that includes a vision for the future of the River Valley. It will contain policy to guide the City's decisions about activity and development and provide high-level guidance, based on desktop-level studies and public engagement, on locations for environmental protection, restoration, infrastructure and programming.
2. North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan (River Valley ARP): This will serve as a comprehensive review of the River Valley ARP, including evaluation tools, relationship to other planning tools, alignment with District Plans and the Zoning Bylaw Renewal, and River

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Valley decision-making procedures. The updated River Valley ARP will ensure the River Valley is protected by statutory direction for planning and development of the system. It will include updated regulations, tools and processes, based on best practice in planning and ecology, to guide decision-makers and subject matter experts when evaluating projects and development proposed for the River Valley.

A map of the project boundaries is included as Attachment 2.

The River Valley Planning Modernization provides the following opportunities:

- To renew, streamline and clarify Edmonton's approach to planning the River Valley and Ravine System, including planning processes and priorities.
- To reaffirm Edmonton's commitment to preserve the environment and enhance public access to the River Valley and Ravine System, in alignment with The City Plan.
- To communicate the River Valley's importance to Edmonton's past, present, and future.
- To address gaps in programming and access while modernizing the approach to environmental management and stewardship.

Deliverables that are out of scope for the River Valley Planning Modernization project are described in Attachment 3.

### Phase 2 Project Outcomes

Administration is currently at the end of the second of four project phases. Phase 2 of the project took place during the fall/winter of 2021-22 and included the following outcomes:

#### *Ribbon of Green*

- Refinement of a vision and guiding principles for the River Valley and Ravine System
- Classification of study area lands as Preservation, Conservation or Active/Working Landscapes
- Identification of a vision, locations of amenity nodes (and associated facilities/activities), trailheads and a primary trail network for each segment ("reach") of the River Valley and ravines

#### *River Valley ARP*

- Review of the River Valley ARP to identify opportunities for better alignment with the Ribbon of Green and assurance that regulations reflect current planning context
- Research into potential tools to support environmental impact assessment and mitigation
- Establishment of a framework for updated processes and procedures to facilitate effective and efficient decision-making

### River Valley Vision

In Phase 2, the River Valley vision developed through the Ribbon of Green SW+NE was adjusted to reflect input received in Phase 1. The revised vision is:

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“The North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System is a protected, connected, ecologically resilient landscape that honours our collective history and promotes healthy living through diverse opportunities for recreation, active travel, learning, and gathering in the tranquility of nature.”

### **Land Management Classifications**

This phase of work also assigned each part of the study area a Land Management Classification (LMC): Preservation, Conservation or Active/Working Landscapes. LMCs outline the level of protection or permitted development and use for an area. The LMCs also guide design and programming decisions to create park amenities and manage lands in a way that is appropriate to their location and ecological context. The proposed boundaries were determined considering environmental analysis, existing use and plans, and engagement. They will be further refined in Phase 3 to reflect input from Phase 2 engagement.

The LMCs in the Ribbon of Green are a starting place for more detailed stages of planning (e.g., concept plans and trail planning). The boundaries will continue to be refined throughout implementation, based on new information that becomes available through on-the-ground technical studies and further engagement.

### **Reach-Level Planning Guidance**

Draft planning guidance was developed for each “reach,” or segment, of the study area, including a reach-level vision and planning priorities (actions which enable the achievement of the vision), a high-level network of trails (key connections and access points only) and amenity nodes (key destinations in the River Valley that facilitate various activities).

### **River Valley Project Assessment and Decision-Making**

This phase also explored changes to the way the City evaluates proposed River Valley projects. This included new environmental considerations that might be assessed as part of evaluating project proposals. Examples include climate change mitigation and adaptation impacts, recreation benefits, and consideration of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge. This phase also included establishing guidance for reviewing how well a project proposal aligns with the long-term vision for the River Valley.

Administration sought input from the public, stakeholders and Indigenous Nations and Communities on clarifying the decision-making process for proposed River Valley projects, including the development of more detailed criteria outlining when a proposed project must be approved by City Council. Administration also sought input from Indigenous Nations and Communities on how Indigenous perspectives could be better incorporated into the decision-making process.

## **COMMUNITY INSIGHT**

Extensive stakeholder and public engagement, including engagement with Indigenous communities, was undertaken in Phase 2 to share project work and invite input. The focus of engagement was on confirming preliminary direction for each of the 12 River Valley planning reaches, and seeking preliminary feedback on how decisions are made regarding project

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proposals in the River Valley. More detail about Phase 2 engagement opportunities, questions and input is included in Attachment 4.

### What We Did: Phase 2 Engagement Opportunities

All Phase 2 engagement was conducted virtually due to COVID-19 protocols.

Indigenous engagement included workshop sessions with individual Nations and Communities. An invitation to participate was extended to 31 Nations and Communities with traditional and cultural connections to the study area lands. In total, 16 sessions were held with 17 Indigenous Nations and partner organizations.

More than 4,500 people participated in stakeholder and public engagement opportunities, which included virtual workshops (six in total, with two added to accommodate high demand); a stakeholder discussion guide; an online portal with project information, engagement questions and an interactive map where participants could provide place-specific comments; and a survey shared online or hardcopy mailed (upon request). One-on-one meetings were also held with stakeholder organizations upon request (eight in total).

### What We Heard: Phase 2 Engagement Themes

The following themes provide an overview of the input that was shared through Phase 2:

- **Indigenous perspectives:** desire for opportunities for shared stewardship and learning, and for Indigenous Peoples to become more involved in River Valley planning and decision-making; the importance and opportunity of raising awareness of Indigenous heritage and cultural connections to River Valley lands, and sharing both positive and challenging history.
- **Recreational trail use:** most feedback received was related to this topic, with two strong narratives emerging:
  - Concern (particularly from the mountain biking community) about potential loss of access to existing informal trails in environmentally sensitive parts of the River Valley.
  - Concern about potential ecological impacts, user conflicts and risk to the public associated with the creation and use of informal trails.
- **Diverse experiences:** desire for diverse and unique River Valley opportunities, including recreation, immersion in nature, learning (culture/heritage/ecology) and events.
- **Ecological stewardship and restoration:** protection and restoration of the natural systems of the River Valley, as well as the associated learning and interpretive opportunities, continued to be a strong theme in both Indigenous and public engagement.
- **Inclusive open spaces:** importance of making River Valley open spaces accessible for diverse users, both physically (for those with limited mobility) and from a perspective of personal safety and a sense of belonging; importance of engaging with people experiencing homelessness who live in the River Valley to understand the potential impacts of decisions.
- **Tourism, commercial and economic opportunities:** desire from some to see more focused effort to develop opportunities in the River Valley; concern from others about potential ecological and social impacts of development and use.

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- **Proposal evaluation:** support from many to expand the considerations when a project is proposed in the River Valley and develop more robust evaluation criteria and procedures for evaluating development or redevelopment proposals; also a desire for public engagement and transparency in the process.
- **Decision-making:** interest from many stakeholders for more involvement in decision-making, for example through the creation of an advisory committee, and greater information sharing when a development proposal is received.

### Informal Trails

The majority of Phase 2 public and stakeholder engagement received on the River Valley Planning Modernization project was related to informal (single-track) trails in the River Valley. Many members of the mountain biking community expressed deep concern about potential loss of access to trails in areas that have been designated as Preservation through the draft LMC maps that were presented. They wish to see continued use of existing informal trails in Preservation areas, and greater permission to maintain these trails, which they see as benefiting other users as well.

Many other participants expressed concerns counter to this about potential ecological impacts, user conflicts, and risks to the public associated with the creation and use of informal trails throughout the River Valley. Some expressed frustration that the City has not done more to respond to and close illegal trails. Others indicated that the increase in use of informal trails by mountain bikers has resulted in a diminished experience of these trails by those who prefer (or are required) to move more slowly through the River Valley.

### Next Steps

Administration is now at the midpoint of this project. In Phase 3, the draft planning guidance (including LMCs and program/ecological guidance) for each part of the study area will be refined, along with policy for the system as a whole, based on input and other considerations received in Phase 2. Processes for evaluating and making decisions about proposed River Valley projects will be further developed, along with opportunities to better align the Ribbon of Green and the River Valley ARP to create an integrated planning system for the River Valley. Indigenous Nations and Communities, stakeholders and the public will be engaged again in fall 2022. Administration will provide a further update to Council in Q1 2023, and project completion is anticipated in Q3 2023.

Additionally, in response to the community feedback regarding the future of informal trails in the River Valley, and recognizing risks associated with inaction, if directed by Council, Administration will prepare a budget request for the 2023-2026 budget cycle to develop a detailed River Valley trail strategy. The strategy will be informed by the high-level planning guidance in the Ribbon of Green, and by research, field assessment, public and stakeholder engagement, and an understanding of best practice in trail planning and management. It will include an integrated network of recreational trails to meet the needs of diverse users and protect sensitive natural areas, and will outline management guidelines, partnership opportunities and trail user education approaches.

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## Budget/Financial Implications

At Council's direction, Administration will bring forward a service package as part of the 2023-2026 budget to proceed with developing a detailed River Valley trail strategy.

## GBA+

Technical assessment, public and Indigenous engagement and research completed through Breathe: Edmonton's Green Network Strategy (2017), Ribbon of Green SW+NE (2020) and Phases 1 and 2 of this project have identified a number of GBA+ considerations for the project, outlined in Attachment 5. These include:

- Planning and delivery of targeted engagement opportunities to reach vulnerable and equity-seeking groups, including people with a disability, newcomers, people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, seniors and children; and
- A review of relevant research/literature, and completion of a GBA+ analysis of proposed River Valley policies and land use planning direction to identify and address any policies that might lead to inequity, or exclusion of marginalized Edmontonians.

## ATTACHMENTS

1. Ribbon of Green SW+NE Plan | June 2020
2. Edmonton River Valley Plan Boundaries
3. Out of Scope Deliverables
4. Phase 2 What We Heard Report
5. GBA+ Findings and Recommended Measures