

## NATURAL AND AGRICULTURAL LAND PROTECTIONS (E. RUTHERFORD)

### RECOMMENDATION

That the June 1, 2021 Urban Planning and Economy report UPE01103, be received for information.

#### Report Purpose

##### Information only.

Executive Committee is being informed of existing Administrative measures taken to protect natural features and agricultural land.

### Previous Council/Committee Action

At the February 16, 2022, Executive Committee meeting, Councillor Rutherford made the following inquiry:

Can Administration provide a report that outlines a brief summary of the measures being taken to protect agricultural lands and other natural habitats (e.g., wetlands, urban forest, etc.) within the context of the City of Edmonton and the region.

### Executive Summary

- Administration works with the region and Province to implement policy and practices that protect agricultural lands and other natural habitats.
- The City as a member of Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board (EMRB) actively participated in the development of Regional Agriculture Master Plan (RAMP) and is implementing all city applicable policies. RAMP ensures that regional growth depends on conserving a supply of prime agricultural land, which can create opportunities for the value-added agri-food sector to grow.
- The City Plan incorporates policy direction that supports the protection of both Agricultural lands and natural areas under a dedicated City Building Outcome (5.3).
- To protect agricultural lands within the city boundary, measures are taken to conserve agricultural lands for as long as possible

## **Natural and Agricultural Land Protections (E. Rutherford)**

- The City protects natural areas using an ecological network approach with natural areas planning incorporated into planning processes, requiring ecological information to support planning and development applications. The City has a 15 year award-winning history of using the ecological network approach in its land use planning processes.
- Administration will be reviewing natural and agricultural land protection programs and determining how the City can partner with other orders of government to advance this work. Administration will also review if further funding is needed as part of the 2023 to 2026 budget process.

### **REPORT**

Protecting natural and agricultural land is vital to the livelihood, wellness and shelter of people and wildlife. The City of Edmonton is directed by both regional and municipal strategies to protect natural habitats and responsibly manage agricultural lands as the city grows.

The Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board (EMRB) Provincial Regulation requires that a Growth Plan for the Edmonton Metropolitan Region be developed that has an integrated regional land-use plan that includes agricultural lands, as well as policies regarding “environmentally sensitive areas” and “the conservation of agricultural lands.” The EMRB regional Growth Plan outlines guiding principles related to protecting natural living systems and the management of agricultural resources.

The City Plan also supports the protection of agricultural lands and natural features (referred to as natural assets or natural areas in City policy). City Building outcome 5.3 states “Edmonton maintains and invests in regionally significant ecological connectivity, natural assets, agricultural lands and infrastructure services.” This outcome is supported by five policy intentions and 15 policy directions that guide conservation of agricultural lands or natural areas as the city grows.

While The City Plan combines agricultural and natural lands into one City Building outcome, the measures taken for conservation vary between the two areas. The differences arise due to how the land types are treated in approved statutory plans and the municipal tools available to protect each area. Therefore, it is best to outline the measures being taken to protect agricultural lands and other natural habitats separately.

### **Measures to Protect Agricultural Lands**

The EMRB Regional Growth Plan (2017) outlines three objectives to ensure the management of the region's agricultural resources (Attachment 1). Within metropolitan areas like Edmonton there is direction to conserve agricultural lands “for as long as possible,” but there is also recognition that such agricultural lands will urbanize over time to accommodate growth.

The EMRB Regional Agriculture Master Plan (RAMP) was developed as a key component of the Growth Plan between 2018 and 2021 and awaits provincial approval. The Regional Agriculture Master Plan identifies policies for the protection and use of agricultural lands, to guide decisions of EMRB member municipalities. The RAMP outlines four Policy Areas and Edmonton’s lands predominantly fall into Policy Area 3, Transition Lands.

## **Natural and Agricultural Land Protections (E. Rutherford)**

Transition lands are recognized in the RAMP as lands approved for future growth for the next 25 to 50 years. RAMP policies direct municipalities to retain large parcels for agricultural use until it is shown that the lands are needed for population or employment growth. RAMP Policy 5.2.1 (Attachment 1) requires the completion of a regional growth study to identify thresholds to be met before transition lands are considered for development.

The City Plan identifies the lands south of 41 Avenue SW as 'future growth area'. The City Plan designates significant portions of the future growth area for Agricultural / Residential and Agricultural / Non-Residential use. These areas are identified for the long-term conservation and ongoing support of agricultural lands and activities. The intention is that lands remain unfragmented and in agricultural operation for the long term.

However, to accommodate long-term growth, The City Plan indicates that these lands may transition over time. The City Plan's Policy direction 2.3.2.3 requires substantial completion of the developing area (including service provision, amenities and infrastructure) prior to authorizing the preparation of statutory plans for development of the future growth area. The policy work underway to shift the development pattern of Edmonton from primarily greenfield development, to primarily redevelopment will further serve to conserve agricultural land.

Administration is currently defining the components of private and public investment in the developing area, which will be formalized into a standard for administrative approval with annual reporting to City Council. The standard will provide evidence-based advice to Council regarding appropriate timing for proceeding with statutory planning in the future growth area. More information is scheduled to be presented in the UPE01029 Growth Management Framework Update at Urban Planning Committee on June 14, 2022.

From a property assessment and taxation perspective, land that is actively being used for farming operations is given a preferential assessment value in accordance with Provincial legislation. While farmland in the Edmonton region would typically sell for anywhere between \$35,000 to \$200,000 an acre, the regulated assessment value of farmland is set to a maximum of \$350 per acre. Given Edmonton's farmland tax rate is equal to its residential tax rate, this results in property owners with farmland paying very little in property taxes. If and when farmland is scraped of its topsoil in preparation for development, the City immediately adjusts the property assessment to its market value resulting in a significant tax increase. This process means developers will typically wait until development is taking place before converting farmland to development land. Farm buildings are also fully exempt from taxation in accordance with Provincial legislation.

### **Measures to Protect Natural Habitats**

The EMRB Growth Plan (2017) outlines four objectives to protect natural living systems and environmental assets (Attachment 2). The plan highlights a number of important local natural features including the North Saskatchewan River and ravine system, Big Lake, water courses and surface water bodies. The Growth Plan directs the region to work together to conserve and restore natural living systems through an ecological network approach.

## Natural and Agricultural Land Protections (E. Rutherford)

The City has a 15 year award-winning history (Attachment 3) of using the ecological network approach in its land use planning processes. Through the Council adoption of the Natural Connections Strategic Plan (2007), Edmonton was the first municipality in Canada to formalize the ecological network approach in urban natural areas planning, protection and management. This commitment has been reaffirmed by Council through the approval of Breathe (2017), and The City Plan (2020), which incorporates policy direction (1.4.2.1) to “Protect, restore, maintain and enhance a system of conserved natural areas within a functioning and interconnected ecological network.” It is clear that ecological protection is a priority for Edmontonians, and has been strongly supported by successive City Councils.

The City Plan includes two outcomes related to natural features and their protection for the benefit of biodiversity and the enjoyment of all Edmontonians. Another outcome highlights the role of the city’s natural system in providing security and resilience against extreme weather and other environmental hazards. All three outcomes are supported by four policy intentions, and eight policy directions (which describe the specific course of action which contributes to meeting the policy intentions) that speak to the protection and restoration of natural features within the city.

Supporting The City Plan, Breathe and Natural Connections, the City also has strategies and implementation plans to provide direction on protecting important or environmentally sensitive components of the City’s natural areas system (also in Attachment 2). There are Council-approved plans and policies specific to protecting natural features within the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System, tableland (outside of the river valley) natural areas, and a dedicated wetland strategy which combines the strategies and tools pertaining to Edmonton’s natural wetlands and constructed stormwater management facilities (EPCOR-maintained) in a single document.

The implementation of these strategies and policies are integrated in planning processes as outlined in City Policy C531 - Natural Area Systems, which directs Administration to require ecological information to support planning and development applications. Approved by City Council in 2007 in conjunction with the Natural Connections Strategic Plan, the Administrative procedures in the policy outline ecological information requirements that must be met at key points in the development process, including the creation of new plans (Area Structure Plans, Servicing Concept Design Briefs, Neighbourhood Area Structure Plans, Neighbourhood Structure Plans and Industrial Plans) and major amendments to existing plans. A brief description of this process and associated technical requirements is outlined in Attachment 4.

In addition to the tools provided through the *Municipal Government Act* for natural area conservation (i.e., environmental reserve, municipal reserve), the City acquires and/or seeks to enhance environmentally significant lands through both capital acquisitions, operational changes which encourage naturalization and restoration as well partnerships. This includes:

- Natural Area Reserve Fund, which was created by Council in 2009 to fund the purchase of tableland (outside of the river valley) natural areas that can not be acquired through either environmental reserve or municipal reserve dedication.

## Natural and Agricultural Land Protections (E. Rutherford)

- Parkland Purchase Reserve Fund, which receives funds from developer levies, the sale of municipal reserve lands in industrial and commercial areas, proceeds from the sale of municipal reserve land in the river valley communities (where land was originally purchased with Parkland Reserve funds) and money received from the rental of City property on park land. The funds collected can be used anywhere in the city for parkland purchases.
- Operational changes that encourage naturalization of existing open space. Since 2014, nearly 280 hectares of City-maintained parkland has been naturalized or has begun the process of being naturalized. This includes roadways, stormwater management facilities and parkland contributing to and aligning with updated landscaping standards that contribute to greater biodiversity.
- Edmonton and Area Land Trust (EALT), a registered charity established in 2007 by the City and its partners. The Edmonton and Area Land Trust secures and stewards land within a 150-kilometre radius of Edmonton through land donations and conservation easements. The Trust has secured 14 natural areas in the Edmonton region, three in Edmonton.

### Challenges

The City works to secure priority natural areas on the tablelands and within the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System. However, natural areas historically are removed at a rate faster than the City has the ability to acquire. Under the *Municipal Government Act*, municipalities have few conservation tools for the acquisition of reserves for the protection of natural areas that are not prone to flooding, are unstable, or are required to provide a pollution buffer or public access to provincially-regulated water bodies and drainage courses. The conservation of natural areas for biodiversity protection or climate mitigation strategies is not enabled under the *Municipal Government Act* definition of environmental reserve. Municipal tools for agricultural land protection are even more limited than those currently available to the City for natural area protection.

In 2009, City Council approved approximately \$18 million in tax supported debt to assist with acquiring priority table land natural areas. This amount was distributed over a two year period and is to be repaid over a 25-year term. To date, Administration has leveraged available funds to acquire approximately 70 hectares of natural areas. Administration continues to advance purchase requests on sites located in the Decoteau and Riverview areas which will fully utilize remaining funds. As the Natural Area Reserve Fund is fully subscribed, remaining tableland natural areas compete with public parks and school sites for municipal reserve dedication, or are lost through the development process.

The City's natural area systems data and strategic documents that originally were designed around Edmonton's 2018 municipal boundary and The Way We Grow require technical updates including additional work to advance the implementation of Breathe: the City's Green Network Strategy. Administration has prepared a project charter to advance updates to the City's natural area systems data. This work, which is pending confirmation of timing for available consultant dollars through the Branch, will support overall improvements to the City's open space data and will support upcoming work to implement Breathe.

### Future Opportunities

## Natural and Agricultural Land Protections (E. Rutherford)

The value of agricultural lands and natural areas to support climate resilience commitments is yet to be fully leveraged, however it is under exploration. A cross-departmental team is beginning to work through technical information and processes that integrates Administration's understanding of natural area systems, including their value as assets that promote climate adaptation. Edmonton's Climate Resilience Policy (C627) speaks to this commitment by "Promoting a nature-based solutions approach to climate resilience by implementing and promoting actions that protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural and modified ecosystems." Climate Resilient Edmonton: Adaptation Strategy and Action Plan includes a pathway for Edmonton to prepare for changing ecosystems, which includes actions around ecological protection and restoration. Edmonton's Community Energy Transition Strategy includes carbon capture and nature-based solutions as one emissions-reduction pathway.

Nature-based solutions are the primary focus of the actions in this pathway due to the co-benefits they provide, including increasing Edmonton's resilience to climate change impacts. More information is scheduled to be presented in the UPE00604 Community Energy Transition Strategy - Annual Update at Executive Committee in Q2 2022.

## COMMUNITY INSIGHT

Public engagement and gathering of community insights for this information report were not undertaken, as this report is an administrative summary of existing policies and processes. Through the development of the City Plan, citizens consistently identified the desire to preserve natural areas for the benefit of both wildlife and people and to preserve agricultural lands to address food security. Both areas were considered important to become a Climate Resilient city, while natural, naturalized and restored areas were also identified as being instrumental in creating a Healthy City as well as important considerations for the design of our Urban Places. Respondents to a Greener as We Grow survey indicated that the most important goal of this Big City Move was to enhance and restore natural areas to support plant and animal life (55 per cent of respondents). As summarized in the Phase 3 City-wide engagement report, "Overall, there was significant support for limiting or better managing suburban growth in Edmonton. This desire stemmed from multiple values including a desire to preserve remaining agricultural lands and natural areas..."

## GBA+

While the measures used to identify, evaluate, and protect natural areas and agricultural lands are not believed to cause inequities, land development near natural features has the potential to result in inequalities to accessing these areas. This can occur where public access through surrounding developments is missing, requires traveling further or is otherwise restricted. Restricted access is a greater hardship for persons with limited mobility.

In 2017 the City undertook a re-evaluation of its open space planning strategies, which found these inequities could be mitigated by urban design, land use, and open space planning practices that prioritize equitable access to natural areas. Through the development of Breathe: Edmonton's Green Network Strategy (2017), evaluations were completed to assess community access to open spaces throughout the city. Technical analysis identified neighbourhoods with

## **Natural and Agricultural Land Protections (E. Rutherford)**

high social vulnerability (based on indicators including employment, income, education and language), and research and engagement identified barriers such as language and cost that vulnerable populations face in accessing open spaces. Targeted engagement was undertaken to reach people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, newcomers, people with disabilities, seniors and children/youth to understand their experience of open spaces, and barriers to access, including to natural areas. This work, and measures taken to remove inequities, was previously described within the June 23, 2017 Urban Planning Committee report CR\_4551 Breathe: Edmonton's Green Network Strategy.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

1. Agricultural Objectives and Policies
2. Natural Areas Systems Objectives, Policies and Plans
3. City of Edmonton Natural Area Systems Planning Awards
4. Ecological Information Requirements to Inform Land Use Planning