

OPTIONS TO STRENGTHEN NATURAL AND AGRICULTURAL LAND PROTECTIONS

RECOMMENDATION

That the September 28, 2022, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE01321, be received for information.

Requested Council Action	Information Only		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals.	Healthy City		
City Plan Values	PRESERVE		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	Greener as we Grow	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Climate Adaptation and Energy Transition
Corporate Business Plan	Transforming for the Future		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The City Plan • Breathe, Edmonton's Green Network Strategy • Natural Connections Strategic Plan • Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan • City of Edmonton Wetland Strategy • North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan (Bylaw 7188) • C531 - Natural Area Systems Policy • C594 - Open Space Policy • C267 - Climate Resilience Policy • C542A - Development Setbacks from River Valley/Ravine Crests Policy • Parkland Bylaw C2202 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UPE01343 Climate and Resiliency Mitigation - Priority Projects, Executive Committee (September 28, 2022) • COO1217 Urban Farms and Gardens on Public Land, Community and Public Services Committee (August 8, 2022) • UPE00604 Community Energy Transition Strategy - Annual Update, City Council (June 29, 2022) 		

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- UPE01029 Growth Management Framework Update, Urban Planning Committee (June 14, 2022)
- UPE01103 Natural and Agricultural Lands Protection, Executive Committee (June 1, 2022)
- UPE01049 River Valley Planning Modernization Phase 2 Update, Urban Planning Committee (May 31, 2022)

Previous Council/Committee Action

At the June 1, 2022, Executive Committee meeting, the following motion passed:

That Administration review and provide a report to Committee with recommended options to strengthen natural and agricultural lands protection programs and policies.

Executive Summary

- The City protects natural areas using an ecological network approach; natural areas planning is incorporated into the City's planning processes.
- There are opportunities to strengthen the protection of natural lands, for both existing natural areas and new sites not yet in the City's land inventory.
- Options to strengthen protection of natural and agricultural lands are broken down into three categories:
 - land securement;
 - land management; and
 - planning and policy.

REPORT

At the June 1, 2022 Executive Committee meeting, Administration provided a report outlining the measures being taken to protect agricultural lands and natural habitats in the City of Edmonton and metropolitan region. New opportunities in response to the motion are captured through three broad categories including:

- Land securement - the options to accelerate acquisition of natural areas.
- Natural area land management - options available to enhance the health and resiliency of existing natural areas.
- Planning and policy - the tools available to address current planning and policy gaps to strengthen protection of natural areas.

The identified opportunities focus on gaps within the existing strategy and policy framework. With respect to agricultural lands, both The City Plan and Regional Agricultural Master Plan seek to conserve existing agricultural uses through responsible urban growth, keeping agricultural lands in production until they are required to support urban development, and identifying prime agricultural areas that are to remain in production over the long-term. Through growth

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management, Administration is creating a substantial completion standard for the developing area. The standard would need to be met prior to Administration recommending that Council authorize preparation of statutory plans for development of the future growth area identified in The City Plan.

Land Securement Opportunities

The Natural Area Reserve Fund, created in 2009, is the primary source of funding to support acquisition of priority natural areas. The fund, supported by \$18 million of tax-supported debt, has led to the acquisition of approximately 70 hectares of natural areas outside of the river valley system, referred to as tablelands. On an annual basis, Administration funds the repayment of this debt through tax levy funding of \$1.0 million. As the Natural Area Reserve Fund is fully subscribed, no further funding is available for opportunistic purchases or purchases in future growth areas.

As a result, remaining tableland natural areas not dedicated as environmental reserve (e.g. wetlands) through subdivision are considered along with public parks and school sites for municipal reserve dedication as part of the Area and Neighborhood Structure Planning process. Sites that cannot be preserved through a municipal reserve dedication are subsequently developed in accordance with approved statutory plans. While sensitive natural areas identified as environmental reserves are protected through dedication, additional funding of the Natural Area Reserve fund could support further conservation efforts to acquire natural areas within developing and future growth. This funding would complement other acquisition efforts including land dedication of both municipal and environmental reserves through subdivision.

Potential Opportunity:

- Increase funding to the Natural Area Reserve Fund to support acquisition of high priority natural areas and restoration efforts to improve functionality of degraded natural areas.

Partnerships between conservation agencies and the City of Edmonton support land acquisition for both natural and agricultural lands and supplement City-led natural area acquisition efforts. The City of Edmonton has successfully worked with the Edmonton and Area Land Trust to support conservation initiatives within the City including securing three natural areas. As land trusts rely on land donations, higher land values and higher maintenance costs associated with natural sites within an urban context make acquisition more challenging.

Potential Opportunities:

- Work collaboratively with the Edmonton and Area Land Trust to identify and work to address current barriers and program limitations, including land acquisition challenges, maintenance costs, expectations and partnership opportunities.
- Develop and implement an expanded partnership program with Edmonton and Area Land Trust or other conservation agencies.

The National Urban Park Initiative provides another opportunity to align natural area protection goals and targeted land acquisition. This project is in a pre-feasibility stage which includes

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identification of potential candidate sites. Administration intends to bring forward a report to Council with initial findings in Q1 2023.

Potential Opportunity:

- Continue collaborating with Parks Canada and other external partners to ensure that natural area protection goals are considered through the National Urban Park Initiative.

Land Management Opportunities

Natural Area Management Plans

Ongoing management of natural areas is informed through site-specific natural area management plans. These plans provide a framework for the operation and maintenance of natural areas to help ensure their long-term health, and are required in the Natural Areas Protection Zone when new sites are zoned and dedicated through development. Approximately 35 per cent of the City's tableland natural areas have an approved site-specific natural area management plan. The lack of approved plans for the majority of the City's previously acquired natural areas creates challenges in delivering a consistent maintenance and monitoring program. In addition, the City-wide Natural Area Management Plan, which sets out general objectives and strategies for managing natural areas owned by the City of Edmonton, lacks guidelines to inform ongoing monitoring expectations and restoration objectives.

Potential Opportunity:

- Review and renew the City-wide Natural Area Management Plan, with consideration given to established or emerging best practices in ecological monitoring and restoration. Administration is currently preparing a service package for Council consideration as part of the 2023-2026 budget process.
- Identify and prioritize natural areas requiring additional site-specific management planning, and undertake natural area management plans for high-priority sites. Administration is currently preparing a service package for Council consideration as part of the 2023-2026 budget process.

Restoration and Enhancement

Restoration of degraded natural areas, and naturalization of open spaces already within the City's land inventory, support a resilient open space network. They also align with a nature-based solutions approach to climate resilience by implementing and promoting actions that protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural and modified ecosystems. Nature-based solutions are a focus for Edmonton's climate change strategies, partially due to the co-benefits they provide such as greater flood protection, urban heat reduction and habitat and biodiversity benefits. Maintaining and restoring healthy and resilient ecological function contributes to ecological goods and services such as carbon sequestration, urban heat mitigation, air quality purification, stormwater management, and more, all of which are needed for climate resilience.

Potential Opportunity:

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- Prioritize nature-based solutions as part of budget and operational planning. Further information on short term climate adaptation priorities, including needs related to nature based solutions and resilient ecosystems, is presented in UPE01343 Climate and Resiliency Mitigation - Priority Projects report (Executive Committee, September 28, 2022).

Planning and Policy Opportunities

Zoning

The Natural Areas Protection Zone seeks to conserve, preserve and restore identified natural areas, features and ecological processes. Permitted uses within this zone are limited to natural areas and passive and appreciative recreation activities such as hiking, walking, bird watching and picnicking. While most natural areas are zoned accordingly, there are gaps within the open space network, such as natural areas within the boundaries of the river valley.

Potential Opportunity:

- Undertake planning work required to ensure that natural areas within and outside of the river valley are zoned accordingly to align with broader open space objectives for the city's ecological network.

Environmental Impact Assessments

Outside of the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System, there is no formal mechanism or process for ensuring that environmental impact assessments are completed for projects that may impact natural areas. This may include assessing project-related disturbances, and identifying appropriate mitigation measures, when development occurs within or adjacent to natural areas. This is a noted deficiency and creates inconsistencies in how Administration assesses potential impacts and corresponding mitigation and restoration requirements.

Potential Opportunity:

- Impose a formal environmental review process to assess potential impacts to tableland natural areas. This process already exists as part of the North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan and could be replicated to ensure that impacts to natural areas outside of the river valley are assessed through a similar process. Administration is currently preparing a service package for Council consideration as part of the 2023-2026 budget process.

Breathe Implementation

Breathe: Edmonton's Green Network Strategy includes several implementation items to preserve and enhance the ecological quality and connectivity of the City's open space network. This includes advancing initiatives with a focus on natural area protection and restoration.

Potential Opportunity:

- Support the implementation of *Breathe*, which is closely aligned with The City Plan. Administration is currently preparing a service package for Council consideration as part of the 2023-2026 budget process.

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Each of these potential opportunities would strengthen natural and agricultural land protection. The opportunity that would have the most impact would be to “increase funding to the Natural Area Reserve Fund to support acquisition of high priority natural areas and restoration efforts to improve functionality of degraded natural areas”. However, this option would have the largest budget impact.

Budget/Financial Implications

The potential opportunities noted above are not currently resourced and would require additional funding to support implementation.

In addition to the motion described in Previous Council/Committee Action above, at the June 1, 2022 Executive Committee meeting, the following motion passed:

That Administration prepare an unfunded service package for the protection of natural areas for consideration during the 2023-2026 budget discussion.

Administration will bring forward an unfunded operating service package for consideration as part of the 2023-2026 budget discussion to support protection of natural areas. Should Council wish to pursue additional land acquisition and restoration opportunities beyond those currently funded, Administration would bring forward a capital growth request as part of the 2023-2026 budget at Council’s direction. These requests would consider the potential responses identified in this report to identify both funding and resource requirements to further enhance protection of natural areas.

Administration is currently developing the four year 2023-2026 operating and capital budgets using a prioritized budgeting approach that will balance the need to maintain existing service priorities with the desire to make transformational change in key strategic areas identified in ConnectEdmonton and The City Plan. However, with nearly all unconstrained funding anticipated to meet renewal needs over the 2023-2026 capital budget, there will be limited funds for growth investment in new assets. As discussed in the 2023-2032 Capital Investment Outlook, it is likely the only new growth projects to proceed will be those that are mandated by legislation, those that have high safety impacts, or are high priority and eligible to receive funding from partners and other orders of government.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

Through the development of The City Plan, Edmontonians 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 urban places.

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GBA+

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 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 also 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*.