

NATIONAL URBAN PARK - OUTCOMES OF PRE-FEASIBILITY PHASE

RECOMMENDATION

That Urban Planning Committee recommend to City Council:

That Administration proceed to the planning phase of the National Urban Park Initiative, pending endorsement by Parks Canada, as outlined in the July 12, 2023, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE01668.

Requested Council Action		Decision Required	
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle		ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals	
CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals.		Healthy City	
City Plan Values Big City Move(s)	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	Making Transformative Changes for the Future		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Breathe: Edmonton's Green Network Strategy● Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan● Indigenous Framework		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● UPE00781 National Urban Park Initiative, Urban Planning Committee, November 15, 2021● UPE01667 National Urban Park Initiative - Outcomes of Pre-feasibility Phase, Urban Planning Committee, April 12, 2023		

Executive Summary

- Since 2022, the City of Edmonton, Parks Canada and Indigenous partners have explored the possibility of designating a national urban park in the Edmonton region.

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- A national urban park would provide an opportunity to contribute to biodiversity protection and climate change adaptation, provide access and recreation opportunities for current and future Edmontonians and visitors, and support reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.
- The first step of the designation process is the pre-feasibility phase. The outcome of this phase will be the selection of a preferred study area supported by the City of Edmonton, Parks Canada, Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations, Métis Nation of Alberta, and the Government of Alberta (the partners).
- Administration is engaging partners, external stakeholders and the general public. Administration has also completed preliminary planning analyses to evaluate a number of potential study areas.
- The North Saskatchewan River Valley has been identified as the preferred study area for a potential national urban park. Due to the large scope and scale of this option, Administration is analyzing a phased approach to designation.
- Additional work is needed to identify phasing options and preferred governance models.
- Proceeding to the planning phase would:
 - provide an opportunity to develop a park vision, refine boundaries, determine a governance model and begin more detailed planning. It would not commit the City to designating a national urban park.
 - facilitate potential access to federal funding to support the development of the national urban park. Receiving federal funding for the River Valley would not commit the City to designating a national urban park.

REPORT

The National Urban Parks Program is a federal program launched in 2021 to establish a network of national urban parks in urban centres across Canada. In early 2022, the City and Parks Canada entered into a formal agreement to explore the possibility of creating a national urban park in the Edmonton region. Since then, Administration has been engaged in discussions with Parks Canada, Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations, Métis Nation of Alberta and the Government of Alberta (the partners) to explore potential sites and better understand governance options before determining whether to continue participating in the program.

The new partnership is an opportunity to reaffirm Edmonton's commitment to take meaningful steps to conserve nature, achieve climate goals and provide increased protection and preservation of ecologically and historically significant sites as the city grows to a population of two million. The new partnership could also enhance public access, education, tourism and recreation opportunities. The National Urban Parks Program provides the opportunity to contribute to outcomes of The City Plan and accelerate and partially fund the implementation of the City's open space plans and strategies, including the Ribbon of Green strategic plan.

The key goals of the National Urban Parks Program include the following, with further details provided in Attachment 1:

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- Supporting conservation in urban areas, including biodiversity protection, and climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Increasing access to and opportunities to learn about local nature and culture in urban spaces.
- Advancing reconciliation by working in collaboration with Indigenous partners.

Potential benefits of creating a national urban park include:

- Access to federal funding for ecological protection, habitat restoration, parks programming and activation.
- Support Indigenous reconciliation through stewardship, connection to land and the promotion of Indigenous voices and stories.
- Economic benefits, including increased tourism and branding opportunities.
- Leveraging expertise from partners in natural areas and recreation planning, management and operations.
- Providing unique nature-based educational and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

It is expected that an Edmonton region national urban park would be a multi-phase, multi-year project. Edmonton is nearing completion of the pre-feasibility phase, the first step in this process. Should there be interest in proceeding past the pre-feasibility phase, the planning, designation and implementation phases would follow, as outlined in Attachment 2.

Through the pre-feasibility phase, Administration completed initial technical analysis on multiple potential sites and participated in discussions with partners. The City engaged internally as well as with a stakeholder committee, and completed high-level public engagement. Administration also undertook GBA+ and engagement with key organizations serving equity-deserving populations.

If, Parks Canada determines that the candidate site has completed the pre-feasibility phase of the national urban park process, it would enter the next phase, the planning phase. Support from project partners is considered an important component of completing pre-feasibility.

Proceeding to the planning phase would not commit the City to establishing a national urban park. The planning phase would provide opportunity to:

- Develop a park vision, refine site boundaries and develop phasing options.
- Define governance models and partnerships, including roles and responsibilities of the partners, and decision-making processes.
- Identify and implement priority foundational investments.
- Identify operational and capital funding requirements and a preferred funding model.
- Complete initial land assembly and operational planning.
- Evaluate impacts and risks to operations, administration, existing uses and community partners, including mitigation strategies.

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The planning phase would include additional public, stakeholder and Indigenous engagement, informed by a GBA+ approach, on proposed site boundaries, the park vision and potential impacts to the public and stakeholders.

Preferred Study Area

Three site options were explored by the partners as part of the pre-feasibility phase:

1. the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System (the River Valley)
2. the Big Lake area, in northwest Edmonton
3. the Emerald Crescent, in southeast Edmonton

The partners have identified the River Valley as the preferred study area for a potential national urban park. This outcome is supported by existing City data, mapping and a high-level analysis of the opportunities and constraints of each study area. It also aligns with the outcomes of The City Plan, the vision of the Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan and the goals of the National Urban Park Program. Selection of this study area was also informed by preliminary public and stakeholder engagement, which provided insights on priorities, opportunities, and concerns about a national urban park in the Edmonton area. Additional information regarding the preferred study area is outlined in Attachment 3.

Partners have identified a preference for a phased approach due to the vast scope of the River Valley and to prevent overextending resources. This approach would focus initial investment on one or more smaller areas within the River Valley, while working towards a long term vision that includes potential designation of the majority of the River Valley.

Further work is needed to better understand the scope and scale of a site within the River Valley, including phasing options and funding models.

Administration's Position

Administration recommends that the geographic scale of the site match the level of investment available from Parks Canada and other partner organizations. As funding levels and models are unknown at this time, it is anticipated that smaller geographic areas within the River Valley would be explored further as part of the planning phase, while examining the potential long term vision that may be attained as additional funding is made available over time. Areas to be further explored in the planning phase include the central, southwest, and northeast parts of the River Valley. In response to feedback heard through stakeholder engagement, Administration may also explore the inclusion of select ravines as part of the planning phase. The current preferred options will be refined as Administration completes additional analyses, engagement and through discussions with other project partners.

Governance

National urban parks do not need to be owned or administered by the federal government — this is different from a traditional national park. A range of governance models are possible, and it is expected that governance, partnerships, operations and management will be driven by local needs and context. While some urban centres participating in the program may wish for Parks Canada to own and/or administer their sites, this is not a requirement. While the governance

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structure for a potential national urban park has yet to be determined, it is not anticipated that the City would pursue a transfer of City parkland or governance authority to the federal government. Instead, partners would explore flexible governance models that allow for local control and jurisdiction, including opportunities for Indigenous co-management or co-stewardship.

Key topics that would be evaluated as part of the planning phase include:

- roles and responsibilities
- decision-making processes
- potential impacts of a national urban park designation on operations, administration, existing uses and community partners in the River Valley

Potential Impacts to River Valley Park Users

National urban parks will be created in consideration of local planning needs and context. Existing City of Edmonton River Valley statutory and non-statutory plans would set the foundation for land uses and permitted activities in the national urban park. Management of the park would be expected to align with the goals of the federal national urban park program while respecting local needs.

To facilitate welcoming and inclusive spaces, a national urban park would be free to access and open to the public. There may be occasions where admission or participation fees may be charged on a cost-recovery basis for programs, installations or the use of facilities, consistent with current River Valley management practices.

Next Steps

Administration is seeking approval to proceed to the planning phase, pending future confirmation of support from Parks Canada and other partners. Administration recommends that the City continue with the initiative with the River Valley as the preferred study area. Parks Canada will decide when the pre-feasibility phase is complete and planning is ready to begin, based on the progress of pre-feasibility activities.

Upon completion of the planning phase, City Council would determine whether to enter into a non-binding memorandum of understanding with Parks Canada and enter the designation phase, or withdraw from the initiative.

Budget/Financial Implications

Work completed to date by Administration has been funded by a contribution from Parks Canada and existing internal resources. Should the initiative proceed to the planning phase, a new contribution agreement between Parks Canada and the City of Edmonton would be required. It is anticipated that work completed in the planning phase would continue to be resourced by funding from Parks Canada and human resources from the City of Edmonton. Other federal funding may also be available to support relevant investments in the River Valley, in areas such as land acquisition, capital infrastructure improvements, or conservation initiatives such as ecological restoration.

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Parks Canada has not yet indicated whether federal funding is available for ongoing management and maintenance activities, but has proposed that fiscal responsibility be considered as a guiding principle under the new program, whereby national urban parks reflect the resources and capacity of partnering organizations and jurisdictions to ensure long-term sustainability.

The planning phase would identify potential funding structures and contributions from participating partners. Administration would seek Council direction regarding potential investments and other financial implications prior to proceeding to the designation phase.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

Public and Stakeholder Engagement

Preliminary engagement with the public, stakeholder committee and equity-deserving groups was conducted in fall 2022 through spring 2023 to introduce the National Urban Park Initiative, share information on the goals of the federal program, and identify the initial priorities, opportunities, concerns, and public sentiment toward a national urban park in the Edmonton area.

During this engagement, a diversity of perspectives, priorities, interests and concerns were shared with the project team regarding a national urban park, including the importance of preserving nature, the need to remove physical, social and economic barriers to access nature and the importance of maintaining local governance and influence over Edmonton's municipal park systems, particularly the River Valley.

A detailed summary of feedback from public, stakeholder and equity-deserving groups is provided in Attachment 4. If Urban Planning Committee confirms direction to proceed to the planning phase, Administration will make plans for a next phase of engagement, expected in fall 2023.

Indigenous Engagement

The Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations and the Métis Nation of Alberta are members of the partner committee and play a leadership role for the initiative. Indigenous leadership in the National Urban Park Initiative supports advancing reconciliation, strengthens the conservation of urban biodiversity and provides opportunities for people to connect with and enjoy the natural and cultural heritage nature in the Edmonton area. The Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations and the Métis Nation of Alberta are both undertaking direct community and resident engagement to inform decisions made by all partners. This engagement is expected to continue throughout the national urban park designation process. Parks Canada will begin Nation-to-Nation and Government-to-Government engagement in collaboration with partner committee members and will explore further opportunities to strengthen relationships with, and gather feedback from, other Indigenous Nations and communities not formally represented by the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations and the Métis Nation of Alberta. Administration is committed to supporting Parks Canada and Indigenous partners in these engagement efforts.

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GBA+

A number of GBA+ considerations have been identified for the National Urban Park initiative, and are outlined in Attachment 5. These include:

- Understanding whose voices may be missing, and who might be impacted by a national urban park designation.
- Planning and delivery of targeted engagement opportunities to reach vulnerable and equity deserving groups including people with disabilities, newcomers, people experiencing or at risk of houselessness, seniors, low-income families, children/youth and 2SLGBTQI+ communities.
- Building relationships and capacity with targeted organizations to continue engaging in future project phases.
- Identifying and addressing any impacts of open space planning decisions that may lead to inequity or exclusion of marginalized Edmontonians.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Draft Parks Canada National Urban Park Program Policy Framework
2. Parks Canada Process for National Urban Park Designation
3. Preferred Candidate Study Area - the North Saskatchewan River Valley
4. National Urban Park Pre-Feasibility What We Heard Report
5. GBA+ Findings and Recommendations