

NORTH SASKATCHEWAN RIVER HERITAGE DESIGNATION INITIATIVE - UPDATE

RECOMMENDATION

That Urban Planning Committee recommend to City Council:

That the Mayor, on behalf of City Council and in partnership with Smoky Lake County, write a letter to both the Minister of Alberta Environment and Protected Areas, and the Minister of Environment and Climate Change of Canada, supporting the designation of the North Saskatchewan River (Alberta) as a Heritage River under the Canadian Heritage Rivers System.

Requested Council Action	Decision Required		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals.	Climate Resilience		
City Plan Values	PRESERVE BELONG		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	Greener as we Grow	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Arts and Culture Economic Growth 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 • Ribbon of Green • River Valley Alliance, Plan of Action • Explore Edmonton Tourism Master Plan 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UPE01667, National Urban Park - Update on Pre-feasibility Phase, Urban Planning Committee, April 12, 2023 		

- UPE01668, National Urban Park Initiative - Outcomes of Pre-feasibility Phase, Urban Planning Committee, July 12, 2023

Executive Summary

- In August 2021, the Mayor, on behalf of City Council, provided a conditional letter of support to nominate the North Saskatchewan River for recognition within the Canadian Heritage Rivers System. This support was conditional upon better understanding the governance and funding models, as well as the City's role as part of the Heritage Designation initiative.
- In August 2022, the federal and provincial governments announced their endorsement to formally nominate the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta as a Canadian Heritage River. This nomination was a requirement to advance the designation process, which is being led by Smoky Lake County.
- Smoky Lake County is undertaking a non-statutory Heritage River Designation Concept Plan in support of the initiative. The Heritage River Designation Concept Plan is part of completing the formal designation process.
- The designation of the North Saskatchewan River as a Heritage River aligns with existing initiatives including the National Urban Park, River Valley Planning Modernization, River Valley Alliance, River Crossing Business Plan and the Explore Edmonton Tourism Master Plan.
- Administration recommends that City Council support and advocate for the designation of the North Saskatchewan River as a Heritage River under the Canadian Heritage Rivers System.

REPORT

Established in 1984, the Canadian Heritage Rivers System currently includes 41 rivers that are recognized nationally for natural, cultural and recreational heritage. While the Canadian Heritage Rivers System has no legislative authority, the program is a model of stewardship, cooperation and participation. Through designation the City of Edmonton will continue to work with regional partners to champion the natural, recreational and heritage values of the North Saskatchewan River. A 50 km portion of the North Saskatchewan River within Banff National Park was added to the System in 1989, and Alberta joined the program in 1994. The inclusion of the remaining portion of the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta as part of the Heritage Rivers System reflects a culmination of work starting in the late 1990s to assess and document the river's cultural, natural and recreational resources, including a background study completed in 2005.

Since 2019, Smoky Lake County has led a revived collaborative community initiative to nominate and formally designate the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta as a Canadian Heritage River, in part due to alignment with its Victoria District Economic Development Strategy¹, centred around Métis Crossing.

To support this initiative, City Council passed the following motion in April 2021:

¹ [Town of Smoky Lake and Smoky Lake County. Victoria District Economic Development Strategy. Municipally Controlled Corporation Business Plan. 2021.](#)

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That the Mayor, on behalf of City Council, write a letter to the Alberta Minister of Environment and Parks conditionally supporting the initiative being led by Smoky Lake County in collaboration with other river municipalities and Indigenous groups to nominate the 818 km length of the North Saskatchewan River across Alberta as a Heritage River under the Canadian Heritage Rivers System.

Further to Council's motion, former Mayor Iveson provided a conditional letter of support in August 2021, see Attachment 1, to nominate the North Saskatchewan River for recognition within Canada's national river stewardship system, protect its significant heritage value and collaborate toward shared long-term benefits and enjoyment of Edmontonians, Albertans, Canadians and visitors. To date, the initiative is being supported by 15 municipalities that share an immediate boundary with the North Saskatchewan River including the City of Edmonton, as well as more than 50 other organizations, including municipalities, community groups, civic clubs and Indigenous communities.

Smoky Lake County presented the nomination to the Canadian Heritage Rivers System Board in November 2021. At the Board's recommendation, the respective provincial and federal ministers jointly announced acceptance of the nomination in August 2022, which is required to complete the formal designation.

Heritage River Designation Update

At the time of the former Mayor's conditional letter of support in 2021, the initiative's funding and implementation or governance models were not known. As such, Council was unable to consider these aspects of the initiative and Administration was expected to update Council once the relevant parties had an opportunity to advance and clarify these details.

Smoky Lake County is leading the development of a Heritage River Designation Concept Plan as required by the designation process. To help guide work on the Heritage River Designation Concept Plan, Smoky Lake County established a municipal advisory committee, with invited representation from each municipal partner. The City of Edmonton participated in this advisory committee, providing information, guidance and advice. This Concept Plan remains in draft as Smoky Lake County completes ongoing municipal partner engagement. The identified river study area and Heritage River Designation Concept Plan is included in Attachment 2, along with the table of contents for the draft concept plan.

Implementation and Governance

Implementation of the Heritage Designation Concept Plan will require collective accountability for stewardship, collaboration, cooperation and management among many organizations, individuals and governments. The North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance will act as lead agency tracking implementation activities and compiling and submitting the required annual and 10-year monitoring reports. This role builds on the Watershed Alliance's existing role as convener and collaborator for this river basin in Alberta. In executing this new role, the North Saskatchewan Watershed Alliance will seek participation from other organizations, including the City of Edmonton, to:

- Provide input and updates on ongoing river-based initiatives.

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- Participate in annual and 10-year reporting activities.
- Provide subject matter expertise on a variety of topics including heritage and land use planning.

There is no obligation for participating partners to allocate direct funding. Projects identified as opportunities under the designation will be prioritized within existing budgetary decision-making frameworks and processes. The draft governance and reporting framework in Attachment 3 identifies the intended relationship and reporting framework between various partners.

Smoky Lake County intends to file a Heritage River Designation management plan for consideration at the Canadian Heritage Rivers System Board Annual General Meeting in fall 2023. From there, endorsement from both provincial and federal ministers will also be required to complete the designation. Should formal designation be approved, reporting and implementation partners, including the City of Edmonton, would continue to collaborate to develop formal terms of reference to actively support, develop and shape implementation, and finalize the governance model.

Alignment with City of Edmonton River Valley Initiatives

The City Plan describes the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System as “the most important feature of the city.” It is a vital ecological corridor, a valued recreation destination, a place of cultural significance and a draw for visitors throughout the region. In addition to supporting the direction of The City Plan, Heritage River designation aligns and intersects with a number of river valley initiatives listed in Attachment 4.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

Led by Smoky Lake County, the Heritage River Designation Concept Plan work to date has included significant community insight and engagement, the bulk of which took place over fall and winter 2022, and follow-up with select stakeholders in spring 2023. Edmontonians had the opportunity to participate in an online province-wide public input survey launched in 2021; the majority of survey respondents were from Edmonton metropolitan area². Invitations to complete the survey were also directly sent to a variety of Edmonton-based stakeholders including the Edmonton Heritage Council, Edmonton and District Historical Society, Edmonton River Valley Conservation Coalition and River Valley Conservation Society.

Engagement work undertaken to date has drawn on the expertise of the pipikwan pêhtâkwan public relations agency to lead Indigenous engagement activities with communities and Nations across Treaties 6, 7 and 8, and the Métis Nation.

Most of the individuals and groups who have participated so far support the inclusion of the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta to the Heritage River System. Those who opposed the nomination felt that no change was needed, or that a designation could eventually result in restricted access to the river.

² What We Heard Report: Canadian Heritage River System Nomination Survey - North Saskatchewan River, 2021.

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Input provided from engagements to date are actively being considered and incorporated into the non-statutory Heritage River Concept Plan.

GBA+

Through the development of the Heritage River Concept Plan, Smoky Lake has engaged with several diverse communities and stakeholder groups. These discussions have sought to contribute to a greater regional understanding of the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta and to promote and include equity considerations in balancing the unique regional perspectives that a diversity of Albertans hold towards the North Saskatchewan River. The designation of the North Saskatchewan River in Alberta recognizes the river as a traditional gathering place, travel route and home for Indigenous peoples. The designation will support inclusive acknowledgement of the North Saskatchewan River as an important cultural and historic resource. The designation will further complement existing river valley initiatives underway, and foster greater regional collaboration with fellow municipalities and organizations via information sharing and a shared goal of ecological integrity of the river.

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE REVIEW SECTION

This report was reviewed for environmental and climate risks. With respect to the North Saskatchewan River Heritage Designation Initiative:

- This stretch of the North Saskatchewan River is being nominated for Canadian Heritage River Designation based on its cultural heritage and recreational values. However, it was not eligible for nomination on its natural values due to the presence of dams, including the Big Horn and Brazeau Dams.
- Canadian Heritage River Designation does not mandate environmental protection measures; existing municipal, provincial and federal environmental policies and regulations will continue to be respected.

ATTACHMENTS

1. City of Edmonton Conditional Letter of Support (August 2021)
2. Draft Heritage River Concept Plan: Focus Area Map and Table of Contents
3. Draft Governance and Reporting Framework
4. North Saskatchewan Heritage River - Strategic Alignment