

ALIGNING TURF AND HORTICULTURE RESOURCES AND SERVICE LEVELS

Recommendation

That the January 15, 2024, City Operations report CO02130, be received for information.

Requested 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	LIVE		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	A community of communities	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Arts and Culture
Corporate Business Plan	Serving Edmontonians		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • C614 - Turf Management Policy • Bylaw 2202 - Parkland Bylaw • Bylaw 14600 - Community Standards Bylaw • Bylaw 12800 - Zoning Bylaw 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CR_5463 Turf Maintenance Enhancement Program, Community and Public Services Committee, October 17, 2018 • CR_6559 Turf Maintenance Enhancement Program, City Council, November 28, 2018 • CO00251 Weed Control Program - Reduction in Funding, Community and Public Services Committee, May 28, 2021 • CR_8442 Alternative Landscape Options for Boulevards and Turf, Community and Public Services Committee, March 21, 2022 • CO01217 Urban Farms and Gardens on Public Land, Community and Public Services Committee, August 8, 2022 		

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Executive Summary

- The City's Turf and Horticulture Programs support a healthy city and enhance community vibrancy by providing safe, attractive and well-maintained outdoor green spaces.
- Administration analyzed resource and service levels for the Turf and Horticulture Programs. This analysis determined that there are insufficient resources to meet current service level targets or targets that are consistent with industry best practices. Administration will adjust posted service levels to match available resources.
- The turf and horticulture asset inventories grew by 5.1 and 18.8 per cent since 2019, respectively. In that time, operational budgets decreased by 9.3 per cent for turf and 11.9 per cent for horticulture.
- Edmonton's turf and horticulture asset inventories are expected to continue increasing as residents seek more opportunities for outdoor recreation.
- Administration will complete a comprehensive review of the Turf and Horticulture Programs, including reprioritizing assets, to support efficient and equitable high quality services.

REPORT

The City's Turf and Horticulture Programs maintain turf and plant bed assets in parks and open spaces. Turf maintenance tasks include mowing and line trimming. Horticulture tasks include shrub bed annual flower planting; weed control; litter pick up and shoulder season pruning, chipping and mulching.

Administration reviewed the resourcing and service levels for the Turf and Horticulture Programs, including:

- Analysis of current resourcing and service levels
- Assessment of green space asset management best practices
- A jurisdictional scan comparing City of Edmonton service levels to other municipalities of similar size and climate
- Budget and financial implications for service enhancements

To better plan for the operating impacts of inventory growth, the results of this review will inform the creation of a resource calculation tool.

Analysis of the Current Programs

Administration analyzed changes to Turf and Horticulture inventory and budgets that occurred from 2019 to 2023 (Attachment 1) and found that:

- The parks and open space network contains more than 4,000 hectares of mowed turfgrass and 2.1 million metres squared of shrub beds.
- Current operational budgets for the Turf and Horticulture Programs for 2024 are \$12.59 million and \$6.58 million, respectively.
- From 2019 to 2023, the Turf Operations budget decreased by \$1.3 million (-9.3 per cent) and inventory increased by 197 Hectares (+5.1 per cent). From 2019 to 2023, the Horticulture Operations budget decreased by \$0.9 million (-11.9 per cent) and inventory increased by 334,621 metres squared (+18.8 per cent).

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- From Administration's review of the budgetary trends, some of the decreases resulted from balancing service delivery with cost effectiveness for Edmontonians.

Administration reviewed seasonal performance for the Turf and Horticulture Programs (Attachment 2) and found that:

- Administration is unable to meet target service levels based on the budget and inventory.
- Where service levels are being met quantitatively, it is because operational teams have adjusted practices to reduce the quality of service. For example, in horticulture beds employees use string trimmers (weed whackers) to cut down weeds rather than pulling them out at the root. This results in increased weed growth between maintenance cycles.
- Performance indicators measure the quantity (e.g. number of beds maintained) but not the quality of work (e.g. whether weeds were cut or pulled). This can negatively impact user experience; for example, difficulty walking or playing sports due to taller turf or reduced aesthetics due to weeds. Operational challenges may also result from reduced visibility; for example, damage to mowers or trimmers due to unseen infrastructure or objects hidden in tall vegetation.
- Work tracking measures do not appropriately reflect the increasing complexity of turf inventory and open space landscapes due to the addition of park elements such as gardens, signage, sculptures, paths, benches, trees and other landscaping. These amenities can affect the required time, maintenance and type of equipment necessary to maintain an area.

Administration continues to implement improvements to enhance efficiency and service delivery with available resources. Some examples include:

- Improved operational routing and mapping systems reduce travel times and fuel consumption, resulting in faster service delivery, cost savings and environmental benefits.
- Incorporating front line employee intelligence and feedback into routing updates ensures routes reflect current field conditions.
- Measuring completion of in-field work in comparison to target service levels improves resource allocation and service consistency between districts and routes across the City.
- Increased public communications about tasks such as turf mowing and trimming, weeding and naturalization increases public awareness of service levels.
- Using internal web maps and apps to track data, and updating 311 scripts, enables City staff to respond to a higher volume of inquiries, quickly and accurately. In the future, Administration will publish this data to increase program transparency and reduce inquiries.
- Initiating a project to track work and accomplishments in real-time, through the use of GPS-enabled equipment. This will improve the accuracy of program data and resource calculations, reduce the need for manual tracking and enable staff to spend more time on operational tasks.
- Updating and enhancing the turf performance monitoring program to include quality measures and include routed inspections. Information gathered through inspections will support evidence-based decision making, help Administration identify opportunities for improvement and ensure consistent city-wide service delivery.

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Jurisdictional Scan

Administration conducted a jurisdictional scan comparing Edmonton's service levels to other close proximity municipalities (Attachment 3). Key findings include:

- Turf and horticulture inventory classification prioritization vary between cities.
- Edmonton's targeted turf mowing level is similar to most respondents when comparing high priority assets like sports fields. Sherwood Park and St. Albert service their parks and neighbourhood walkways at higher frequencies of seven- or 10-day cycles compared to Edmonton's 14-day cycles.
- All other respondents complete turf trimming more frequently than Edmonton (weekly to every two weeks, compared to twice per season in Edmonton).
- Edmonton completes horticulture shrub bed maintenance less frequently than all respondents for most service classifications.
- Calgary does not schedule service for all classifications; some assets are maintained on an as needed basis.

Administration used Yardstick benchmarking analysis¹ to compare program costs with Western Canadian municipalities. Edmonton's costs per hectare and metre squared for turf and horticulture maintenance, respectively, are lower than most other participants.

Future Service Delivery

Edmonton's turf and horticulture asset inventory will continue to grow as residents look for more opportunities for outdoor recreation and beautification. Based on historical averages from 2019-2023, Administration anticipates potential increases of:

- Horticulture beds: 3.92 per cent (69,000 metres squared) per year
- Sports fields turf: 0.40 per cent (2.14 hectares) per year
- Turf: 1.63 per cent (56.5 hectares) per year

Administration will adjust posted service levels for the Turf and Horticulture Programs to match current funding existing service delivery while planning for future growth. Additionally, a service review and improvement project is reviewing how the City can improve and sustain the delivery of parks and open spaces services. The review will evaluate current successes and gaps against the City's five service drivers: efficient, open, progressive, community focused, and collaborative. The work will evaluate and prioritize existing inventory, and improve how the City plans and accounts for future inventory growth.

Budget/Financial Implications

Attachment 4 provides detailed information on the financial investments required to meet or exceed current service level standards.

Community Insight

Administration receives program feedback and responds to resident inquiries regarding turf grass, weeds and horticulture maintenance through 311, public surveys and engagement with

¹ <https://www.yardstickglobal.org/projects/parks>

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community groups. Inquiry statistics from 2019-2023 indicate that Edmontonians notice and are concerned about changes to turf and horticulture service levels (Attachment 5). This is especially evident in the increased volume of inquiries seen as a result of temporary service level adjustments during the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the City's 2023 Service Satisfaction Survey, 82 per cent of respondents felt that parks, sports fields and green spaces are an important service and 70 per cent reported that they are satisfied with the service. The survey also showed 35 per cent of respondents indicated these programs should receive more funding; 57 per cent indicated current funding levels are appropriate.

The City collected public feedback for CO01165 Homeowners' Association's - Maintenance on City Land (Urban Planning Committee, March 21, 2023).

- 70 per cent of respondents to a January 2023 survey of Homeowners Associations asked for an increase in service provisions and improvements, particularly for mowing, weed control, tree pruning and horticultural bed maintenance.
- Many Homeowners Associations and community organizations are interested in agreements which would allow them to perform enhanced maintenance on City lands.

City employees in the Turf and Horticulture Programs provided feedback that aligns with Administration's program assessment in May 2023 through their union, CUPE30.

- Current mowing cycles are not sufficient to keep fields playable and readily accessible, particularly during peak growth in the early spring.
- Lengthened mowing cycles often lead to a perception of neglect in parks.
- Staff members report increased negative interactions with the public while performing their duties, due to resident dissatisfaction with mowing and maintenance schedules.

GBA+

Well maintained, accessible green infrastructure provides opportunities for outdoor recreation and activity as aligned with The City Plan goal of a healthy city. Changes to turf and horticulture service levels may impact some users more significantly than others. Youth, residents of multi-family housing, families, vulnerable populations and others who do not have private outdoor space may be more dependent on access to public outdoor spaces to recreate. Mowing and weeding service levels may also impact accessibility for residents with limited mobility, including seniors, persons with disabilities, persons using mobility devices, caregivers using strollers and others.

Through GBA+ processes the City is able to assess the allocation of staff and resources across Edmonton to ensure equitable distribution. Furthermore, GBA+ underscores the pivotal role that neighbourhood design plays in resource allocation. GBA+ encourages city planners to consider how different neighbourhood designs can impact the accessibility of open spaces.

GBA+ processes will continue to inform how Administration delivers turf and horticulture maintenance service levels at a city-wide level. This will ensure through operational implementation that equality of outcomes and barriers to equity are considered.

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Attachments

1. Turf Inventory and Budget Comparison
2. 2023 Turf Summer Season Performance Results
3. Jurisdictional Scan
4. Future Service Delivery
5. 311 Notifications and Councillor Inquiries (January 1, 2019 - October 13, 2023)