

BYLAW 20996

To adopt a new North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan

Purpose

To repeal the current North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan and replace it with a new North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan.

Readings

Bylaw 20996 is ready for first and second readings after the public hearing has been held. Administration is required to refer this application to the Edmonton Metropolitan Region Board prior to returning to City Council for third and final reading.

Advertising and Signing

This Bylaw was advertised in the Edmonton Journal on November 22, 2024, and November 30, 2024. The Bylaw can be passed following third reading.

Position of Administration

Administration supports this proposed Bylaw.

Report

Edmonton's North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System (the "River Valley") is a highly valued ecological, recreational and active transportation corridor through the city. It is also a place of cultural significance, providing Edmontonians with the unique opportunity to connect with nature within an urban environment. Indigenous people have accessed and stewarded the River Valley for food, medicine, camping, transportation, gathering, and celebrating for thousands of years – a cultural and spiritual connection with the land that local First Nations, Métis, and urban Indigenous peoples continue to practice today.

The River Valley supports individual and community wellness, is a draw for tourism, and is the core of Edmonton's open space network. It provides countless services that benefit people and ecosystems alike, supporting biodiversity, water management, and climate change mitigation and adaptation. The river, creeks, riparian areas, woodlands, and geological features provide habitats and corridors for diverse wildlife and plants, forming an ecological network that maintains wildlife movement and healthy ecological flows across the Edmonton region.

The City Plan sets the direction for how Edmonton will grow and change as it becomes a healthy, urban, climate resilient city of two million people. Within The City Plan, there are five Big City Moves encompassing the tangible and intentional areas of transformative change for the city.

One of these Big City Moves is “Greener As We Grow”, which is about developing a healthy city while protecting and enhancing our land, air, water, and biodiversity. The River Valley ARP contributes to this goal and aligns with several The City Plan policies directing the preservation of the River Valley along with access and connectivity to and from the river valley and ravines.

The River Valley experiences pressures from many sources, including increasing demand for access as a result of growth in population and interest in outdoor recreation. There is a growing demand for events and commercial opportunities, as well as facilities, amenities, utilities, and other municipal infrastructure.

To address these challenges and support the implementation of The City Plan, Administration has renewed two key long-term planning documents for the River Valley: the Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan (“Ribbon of Green”) and the North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan (“River Valley ARP”). These plans were originally adopted in the 1990s and 1980s, respectively, and have not been subject to comprehensive renewal since that time.

Renewing the plans provided an opportunity to:

- Renew, streamline and clarify Edmonton’s approach to planning the River Valley, including planning processes and priorities.
- Reaffirm Edmonton’s commitment to preserve the environment and enhance public access to the River Valley.
- Address gaps in programming and access while modernizing the City’s approach to environmental management and stewardship.

Together, the Ribbon of Green and River Valley ARP provide an overarching planning and land use policy framework for the River Valley. The Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan¹ provides strategic direction: the City’s overall vision for the future of the River Valley, high-level plans for the connected open spaces within it, and the policy direction that guides decisions about what happens in those spaces. The Ribbon of Green Plan Guide (Attachment 2) provides a concise overview of the plan.

The River Valley ARP is the statutory plan for Edmonton’s River Valley and Ravine System. It provides land use policies that set the development pattern for the plan area and guide the evaluation of future development proposals.

North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan - Key Components

The River Valley ARP supports our collective vision for the River Valley:

“The North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System is a protected, connected, ecologically resilient landscape that honours our collective history and promotes healthy living through diverse opportunities for recreation, active transportation, learning, and gathering in the tranquility of nature.”

¹ City of Edmonton. Draft Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan. December 2024.
https://www.edmonton.ca/city_government/initiatives_innovation/ribbon-of-green

Plan Objectives

The primary objectives of the River Valley ARP are to:

- ensure the environmental protection of the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System; and,
- provide public access to the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System for celebration and wellness.

The River Valley ARP advances these objectives by:

- identifying the intended land use of the majority of the plan area as open space;
- limiting land uses and development that may compromise the environmental health of the River Valley or public access to the River Valley;
- directing the application of the Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan on lands directly managed by the City; and,
- providing a decision-making framework for future development proposals, including key criteria for technical assessments and approval requirements.

Each of these components is discussed in more detail below.

Plan Components

Intended Land Use

The intended land use for the majority of the River Valley and Ravine System is open space, which includes publicly accessible natural areas, parks, recreation amenities, and spaces for gathering and ceremony. Some of the River Valley is designated for public utility use as the primary land use, corresponding to existing water, wastewater, and waste management facilities.

The River Valley ARP does not propose any specific type of development or infrastructure for the River Valley. Rather, it provides high level planning direction to guide the overall land use pattern and to guide decisions when future proposals for development or infrastructure are brought forward by the City or external proponents such as utility providers, community groups, non-City landowners, leaseholders, or operators.

Much of the land within the plan area is not owned by the City. Policies within the River Valley ARP direct the City to acquire those lands through a combination of purchase, reserve dedication, donations, or bequeathments. Expansion of the City's holdings in the River Valley over time will allow the City to increase public access to the River Valley and ensure that these lands are planned, protected, and managed primarily for open space use.

Restricted Land Uses and Development Types

New or significantly expanded land uses and development types that do not align with open space as the primary land use, or that are most likely to result in adverse environmental or community impacts, are generally limited throughout the plan area. Specifically, policies within the River Valley ARP discourage or do not support new:

- industrial uses, including natural resource extraction;

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- residential uses;
- principal commercial uses;
- principal urban service uses;
- intensive open space facilities;
- intensive transportation facilities; and,
- intensive utility facilities.

Existing development and development rights, as granted by existing zoning, are acknowledged and may continue in the plan area.

Developments that provide essential urban services, such as transportation and utility infrastructure that can't be located outside of the River Valley, may be supported, subject to further technical review and, in some cases, City Council approval. Developments that provide supporting functions to the primary open space land use function of the River Valley, such as accessory commercial uses and other urban services, may also be supported.

Application of Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan

The River Valley ARP directs that lands identified as River Valley Open Space on the Existing Land Use map be subject to the direction of the Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan, which guides the City's long-term strategies for acquisition, management, programming, and development of lands in the area of the River Valley ARP. Specifically, the Ribbon of Green:

- contains policy direction to guide decision making, further planning, monitoring, and management of the River Valley and Ravine System;
- informs collaboration, public engagement and partnerships with communities, institutions, and other orders of government;
- defines and applies Land Management Classifications to outline the protection and level of programming appropriate for different locations within the River Valley and Ravine System; and,
- provides program direction to inform future site-specific planning.

Decision-Making Framework

The River Valley ARP identifies technical reporting and approval requirements for development proposals in the plan area.

All applications for development permits in the plan area may be subject to environmental reporting intended to identify and mitigate site-specific environmental impacts, geotechnical risks, or flood risk. These requirements for environmental reporting are at the discretion of the development planner, in consultation with the department responsible for river valley strategic planning, recognizing that not all development types or site contexts carry additional environmental risk.

All development on lands identified as River Valley Open Space or Public Utilities is subject to additional reporting requirements above and beyond those associated with development permits. Specifically, a strategic assessment and an environmental assessment are required for all such developments. The scope, scale, and complexity of these assessments are expected to vary with the

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scope, scale, and complexity of the proposed development, as well as in response to site-specific context, including local environmental conditions.

The strategic assessment allows for an evaluation of the rationale for the proposed development and its location with the River Valley and Ravine System, its alignment with River Valley ARP policy and Ribbon of Green direction, and possible environmental or community impacts. The strategic assessment is intended to be developed early in the planning process, before significant time and financial resources are committed to further design and technical studies, in order to facilitate decision-making regarding the proposal's merits by City Administration and, in some cases, City Council.

City Council review and approval of the strategic assessment is required for a subset of new or significantly expanded developments on lands identified as River Valley Open Space or Public Utility:

- intensive open space facilities;
- intensive transportation facilities;
- intensive utility facilities;
- any development likely to result in permanent, adverse environmental or community impacts that cannot be mitigated, as determined by the department responsible for river valley strategic planning.

City Council review and approval of the strategic assessment is also required for proposals that necessitate an amendment to the River Valley ARP, including:

- any rezoning that is in conflict with any objective or policy of the Plan;
- any development that proposes to change the boundaries of the Plan, where that change is not based on updated technical information reflecting current site conditions; or
- where directed by Council.

In its review of a strategic assessment, policy directs City Council to evaluate whether the proposed development:

- meets the goals, objectives, and policies of this Plan;
- requires a River Valley and Ravine System location; and,
- is in the public interest.

An environmental assessment is prepared following the strategic assessment and provides an opportunity to identify potential environmental impacts of a proposed development and mitigation measures intended to address those impacts. The environmental assessment addresses a number of environmental considerations, including impacts to soil, air, water, vegetation, and wildlife. The environmental assessment is reviewed and approved by a number of technical subject matter experts in City Administration, including those with expertise in environmental planning and ecology. Should significant misalignment between the outcomes of the environmental assessment and the strategic assessment be identified, changes to the project scope, amendment of the strategic assessment, and review of the amended strategic assessment by City Administration and/or City Council may be needed.

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A general schematic of the decision-making process is provided in Attachment 3.

Plan Boundaries

The plan boundary follows the physical limit of the River Valley and Ravine System as established through desktop-based or field-verified slope analysis, geotechnical assessment, and flood studies. The boundary is consistent with the River Valley boundary shown in District Plans. In some cases, the boundary is based on historical delineations, including within the 1985 River Valley ARP, and predates current practice with regard to boundary delineation. Plan boundaries are validated and, if needed, corrected during site-specific planning in alignment with Policy 542, Development Setbacks from River Valley/Ravine Crests.

Implementation

The River Valley ARP will be implemented through the development application process and the development permit process. Administration's recommendations to Council on rezonings, amendments to other statutory plans, and the creation of new statutory plans will be guided by the River Valley ARP. When development planners must exercise discretion to consider a development permit, they will also consult the River Valley ARP direction as needed. The River Valley ARP will also be implemented through City initiatives and capital projects and associated design, review, and approval processes applying to development proposals on lands identified as River Valley Open Space or Public Utilities.

Plan Maintenance

The River Valley ARP will be monitored to ensure it continues to be relevant, effective, and aligned with evolving City policies and practices. Updates to the plan may include those made to adjust policies and policy direction, or to adjust plan boundaries to align with technical studies or legal survey information. Amendments to the plan may also be sought by development proponents, including the City or third parties. All amendments will be initiated through land development applications, will include public engagement and be considered by Council at a public hearing.

Community Insights

Public Engagement

A comprehensive, multi-year engagement process was delivered as part of the RVPM project, with engagement activities at both the Refine and Advise levels of the City's public engagement spectrum. In each project phase, participants were invited to review and share input to inform both the River Valley ARP and Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan streams of work. Engagement opportunities were designed to be accessible to a wide audience, including Edmontonians who live, work, and play in and around the River Valley; as well as community organizations representing a variety of existing and potential River Valley users and uses. Across all four phases of the project, more than 10,000 responses were recorded through engagement activities including in-person and online workshops, surveys, pop-up/intercept engagement sessions, and online interactive maps.

Specifically, engagement participants were invited to help shape:

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- the vision, guiding principles and system-wide policies for River Valley planning;
- land management classifications and proposed planning guidance for the different segments of the river valley and ravines; and,
- the River Valley ARP land use concept, policies, and decision-making process.

Indigenous Engagement

A separate, parallel stream of engagement focused on inviting input from Indigenous Nations and Communities with connections to the river valley lands and the region. While the same opportunities were provided to share feedback on the draft plan materials, the RVPM project was also the beginning of important conversations about shared governance, co-management and co-stewardship with Indigenous Nations and Communities in the context of River Valley planning and management. Ribbon of Green planning and policy guidance reflects that input at a strategic level, but there is work ahead, and ongoing engagement with Nations and Communities, to define a path forward together.

For more information on project engagement opportunities and the input received, see Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3 and Phase 4 RVPM What We Heard Reports (Attachments 4, 5, 6, and 7, respectively), as well as the RVPM What We Did Report (Attachment 8).

GBA+

As a citywide shared asset, the River Valley and Ravine System needs to provide opportunities for diverse community members to access and enjoy a connected network of open spaces through the heart of the city. It is essential that the River Valley Planning Modernization work reflects and accounts for the diverse perspectives, abilities, and lived experience of Edmontonians.

The River Valley Planning Modernization project is applying a GBA+ process in two primary ways:

- planning and designing public and Indigenous engagement; and
- developing River Valley policies and planning direction.

Administration's research has shown that a number of socially vulnerable communities may face barriers to participating in conventional engagement activities, including Indigenous community members, people with a disability, people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, newcomers, seniors and children/youth. Research has also shown that open space planning and policies have the potential to lead to inequity, and the exclusion of marginalized community members. Spatial analysis has also shown that many neighbourhoods with high social vulnerability are at a considerable distance from the River Valley and do not have good multimodal access to open spaces.

To help address barriers to participation that some communities may face, as part of engagement in each phase, the project team worked with community agencies to organize pop-up sessions to engage community members from previously underrepresented groups. In order to facilitate participation, the project team planned the pop-ups in places that were accessible, including at a National Indigenous Peoples Day event, an assisted living residence managed by the Bissell Centre, a social services agency for newcomers, a seniors centre, and a Gay-Straight Alliance drop-in session at a library.

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Feedback received through these engagement sessions was included in What We Heard reporting for each phase, and, together with feedback heard from other engagement audiences, was considered by Administration in the development of River Valley policies.

Legal Implications

The North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan has been prepared in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Municipal Government Act.

Attachments

1. Bylaw 20996
2. Ribbon of Green Plan Guide
3. River Valley ARP Decision-Making Schematic
4. River Valley Planning Modernization Phase 1 “What We Heard” Public Engagement Report
5. River Valley Planning Modernization Phase 2 “What We Heard” Public Engagement Report
6. River Valley Planning Modernization Phase 3 “What We Heard” Public Engagement Report
7. River Valley Planning Modernization Phase 4 “What We Heard” Public Engagement Report
8. River Valley Planning Modernization “What We Did” Report