RIVER ACCESS STRATEGY

GUIDING PRINCIPLES & STRATEGIES

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THE CITY OF Edmonton

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The North Saskatchewan River valley is Edmonton's jewel and is one of the largest urban parks in North America. Edmontonians believe that access to the river is key to the enjoyment of their quality of life. Currently, the City of Edmonton lacks policy direction pertaining to river use and access. Decisions on the provision, location and design of accesses to the river have historically been made on a case-by-cases basis. An overall strategy is needed in order to address increasing demands for river recreation while protecting the river valley as the City's signature natural, cultural and recreational resource.

Since August 2013, Community Services has been leading the development of the River Access Strategy in collaboration with multiple City departments. The strategy will focus primarily on river use and the associated infrastructure for current and future users. It will provide guidance on development, locations and use of river recreational facilities, as well as identify a number of strategies and implementation actions.

Several policy documents speak to the need to balance environmental protection with recreational activities, including the Ribbon of Green Concept and Master Plans, and the River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan (Bylaw 7188); however, these documents are limited in their specific guidance about access to and recreation on the river itself. As such, establishing a set of guiding principles and strategies to guide the City's actions and decisions made pertaining to river access and use is vital to the success of the strategy.

This report outlines work that has been carried out to date, including development of the guiding principles and strategies based on input from a variety of stakeholders. A wide range of engagement tools were used to gain perspectives from the general public, City staff, partner groups, researchers and users of the river. Methods included the use of online surveys, workshops, individual and group interviews, as well as open houses. The general themes that emerged from these discussions were: to ensure access for all, habitat protection, education and engagement, collaboration and partnerships, public safety and enforcement, recreation, and cultural and historical recognition. These themes formed the foundation for the guiding principles and strategies that have been developed. This report concludes with a status update on ongoing work and next steps required to finalize the River Access Strategy.

THE NEED FOR A STRATEGY

The banks of the North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton support river-based activities for the enjoyment of Edmontonians through the provision of boating facilities, launches and docks. This infrastructure is located on city-owned land for use by the public, partner groups and emergency response. Private clubs and commercial users also hold licenses and leases for areas adjacent to the river to support their specific activities, with limited public access.

Every year, there are increasingly more requests for river access from user groups. City Council has approved funding for the development of seven new docks and two launches, as per the River Valley Alliance's 'Plan of Action'. As well, Community Services is focused on increasing activity and use of the river and riverside parks. However, there are no existing guidelines or criteria for site selection, supporting infrastructure, programming, intensity of use, and design for river-based activities.

Decisions on the provision, location and design of access points to the river and river-based infrastructure have historically been made on a case-by-case basis which has resulted in an inconsistent approach to resource allocation and design. An overarching strategy is needed to ensure orderly and responsible development of amenities that support river activities in balance with the environment and public safety.

WHAT THE STRATEGY WILL DO

The River Access Strategy will inform future programming, operations and infrastructure improvements that support access to the river and activities associated with the river. It will define locations and use guidelines for development of river-based amenities, in addition to their maintenance and programming. It will also balance environmental stewardship while encouraging a broader appreciation for activities on the river. All of this will enhance enjoyment of the North Saskatchewan River for existing and future users, as well as provide direction and assurances to partners.

The strategy will benefit current users and partners by providing a more comprehensive and consistent approach to site criteria, function and design, and ensure a more balanced distribution of resources. This will result in better and safer access which will ultimately increase public use. The strategy will develop a partnership model that will promote collaboration and coordination as it relates to river access, programming and event management. It is not yet determined whether the strategy will address regulations for river use such as speed limits.

STRATEGIC AND POLICY ALIGNMENT

The City has a number of policy documents, strategic plans and implementation strategies that are relevant to the development of the River Access Strategy as they pertain to the river valley, as follows:

- North Saskatchewan River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan (1985) protects the river valley and ravine system as part of Edmonton's valuable open space heritage. Major goals include preservation of the natural character and environment while establishing opportunities for recreational, aesthetic and cultural activities.
- The Ribbon of Green Concept Plan (1990) established the initial vision for the North Saskatchewan River Valley and established publicly accepted goals for its development and management.
- The Ribbon of Green Master Plan (1992) expanded on the Concept Plan and established guidelines for the long-term development, use and care of the entire river valley, and identified Land Management Units including: extensive use, conservation and preservation areas.
- The City of Edmonton's suite of strategic plans ('The Ways') supports the above direction through:
    - the need to "protect, preserve and enhance the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine System" (The Way We Green, 3.7; and The Way We Grow, 7.3.1); and
    - ensuring "that the North Saskatchewan River Valley and Ravine system remains primarily an area of unstructured, low-intensity, and passive recreation, while accommodating appropriate balance of recreation activity within park nodes as described in the Urban Parks Management Plan and the Ribbon of Green" (The Way We Green, 3.8.1; and the Way We Grow, 7.3.2.1).

However these policy documents and plans are limited in their specific guidance about access to and recreation on the river itself.

The River Valley Alliance's Plan of Action, approved by Council in 2007, was the first plan to contemplate river use and river-based amenities. It's vision is to create a linked and accessible regional metropolitan park, identifying canoeing and water taxis as modes of recreation and transportation, as well as identifying a number of dock and launch locations along the river. While this document supports the provision of river-based amenities, it did not detail parameters for site development, use and operational guidelines, or a model for partnership.

For these reasons, the development of a set of guiding principles and a comprehensive strategy is required to ensure the responsible and orderly use and development of amenities supporting river-based recreation. It should be noted that regulations for the North Saskatchewan River crosses multiple jurisdictions, including provincial and federal legislation related to waterways and fish habitat (A full listing of policy and legislation is attached as Appendix 1).

RIVER USE TODAY

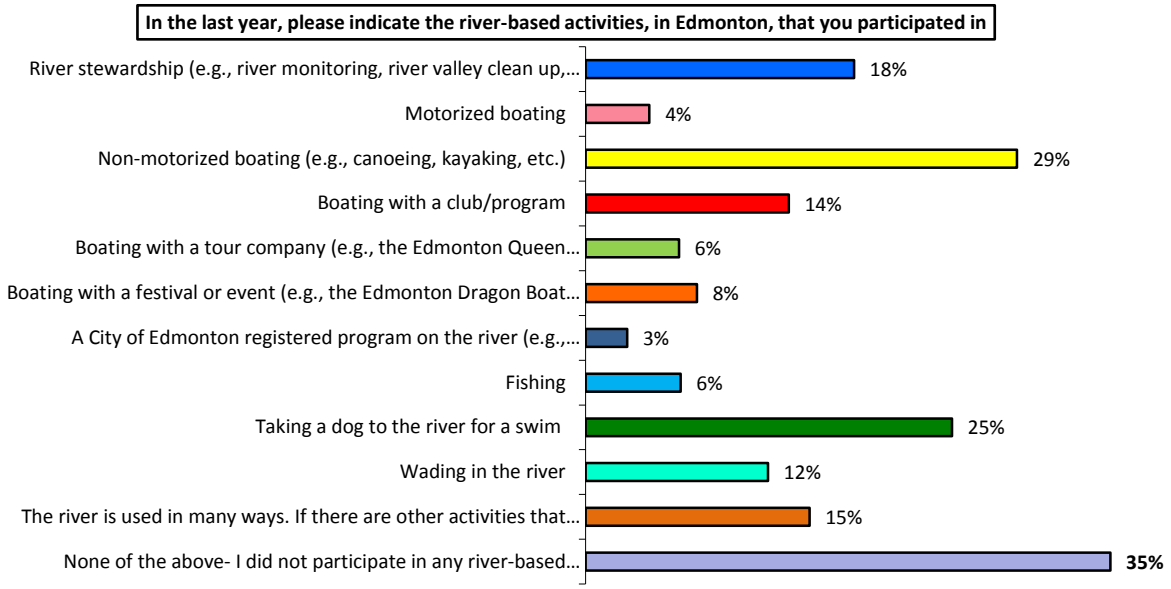
Existing Infrastructure

The City currently has five formal hand launch locations, two vehicular launches, two public docks and three partner docks. Many informal opportunities for river access also exist along the riverbanks. Additionally, the City of Edmonton received funding from the River Valley Alliance to build or refurbish docks and launches at seven locations throughout the river valley. The majority of the identified sites involve improvements or upgrades to existing launch locations. Input from stakeholders is currently being sought and implementation will occur in 2016.

Current Users

There are a number of groups who utilize the river in a variety of ways. These include nine paddling groups (canoeing, kayaking, and rowing); seven educational and stewardship groups (university, public school groups, RiverWatch, etc.); six tour operators (canoe & voyageur trips, jet boat tours and the Edmonton Queen); three fishing groups; three primary paddling retailers; and one gold panning group. Additionally, the City of Edmonton's River Valley Programs offer a number of opportunities for schools and the public to develop skills including canoeing and fishing.

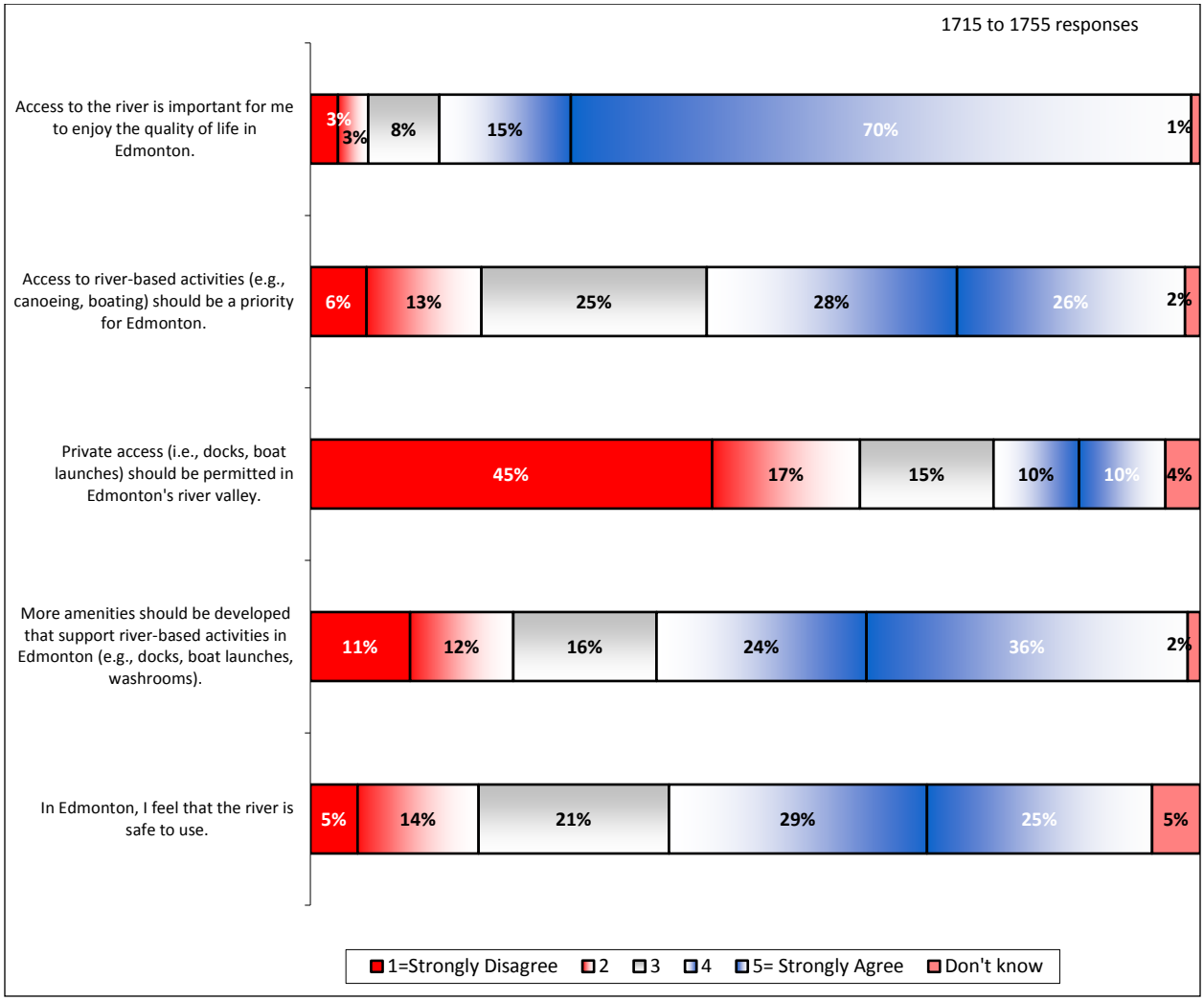
Additionally, the general public uses the river to enjoy a number of activities. Almost half of Edmontonians polled through an omnibus survey (n=418) indicated they participated in river-based activities. Through the 'River Usage and Attitudes Baseline Online Survey" (n=1930) the most popular activities included non-motorized boating (29%), taking a dog for a swim (25%) and river stewardship (18%).



Public Attitudes Toward River Use

During spring 2014, a preliminary online survey (n=1930) outlining attitudes towards river use was conducted to inform the strategy. Survey respondents were also asked their opinion on various statements about access to the river, river-based activities, amenities and river safety:

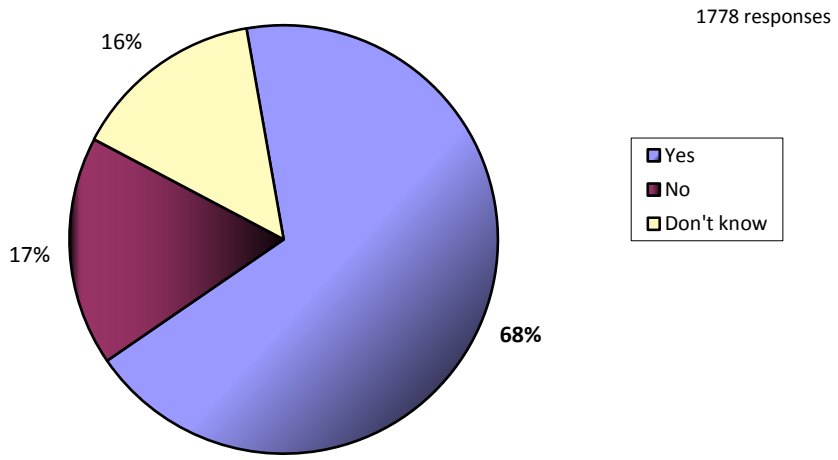
- 85% agreed that access to the river is important to enjoy the quality of life in Edmonton
- 54% agreed that access to river-based activities (e.g. canoeing, boating) should be a priority for Edmonton
- 62% agree that private access (i.e. docks, boat launches) should not be permitted
- 60% agreed that more amenities should be developed that support river-based activities in Edmonton (e.g. docks, boat launches, washrooms)
- 54% feel the river is safe to use



Other key findings include the following:

- 50% agreed that Edmonton's river valley should be preserved in its natural state (i.e. there should be no further development)
- 41% did not know where to get information about river-based activities
- 40% agreed that there are adequate opportunities for river access in Edmonton
- 45% said they would make more use of the river for recreation purposes if additional amenities such as docks, boat launches, etc., were provided in Edmonton
- 68% feel that there should be limits on the types of activities allowed on the river

In Edmonton, do you feel that there should be limits on the types of activities allowed on the river?



SURVEY OF OTHER MUNICIPAL APPROACHES

The project was initiated by conducting best practice research from fourteen municipalities throughout North America. Interviews were conducted to gain an understanding of river management in different jurisdictions. Questions were designed to inquire about issues related to infrastructure design, planning, application processes, hydrological factors, partner and stakeholder processes, operations, enforcement, maintenance, safety and security.

Interview findings revealed that few regulatory processes were in place at the municipal level, whereas the majority of processes and enforcement rely on the regulatory framework in place at the provincial and federal level.

This survey provided an overview of how other municipalities manage river-based activities, as follows:

- Use of a master planning exercise to determine dock locations
- Use of river 'zones' for different types of watercraft or uses
- Use of a conservation framework for the management, development, maintenance and administration for infrastructure on waterways
- Generally there is guarantee of public access and/or shared-use of public and private infrastructure
- Differing governance models are used, including a separate authority to develop, regulate, program, construct and maintain river-based infrastructure

To date, no overarching river-based strategy has been found among the research. Documentation, where available, spoke to relatively consistent design standards for boating infrastructure and amenities.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The establishment of a set of guiding principles is an important step in the development of the strategy as they will guide the City's actions and decisions pertaining to river access.

The development of these principles began with a series of internal and external workshops where participants were asked what key principles they would like to see guide decision-making on river access and use. Through these discussions multiple themes were identified: to ensure access for all, habitat protection, education and engagement, collaboration and partnerships, public safety and enforcement, recreation, and cultural and historical recognition.

Based on these themes the draft guiding principles were developed and presented back to stakeholders and the public for feedback. An online survey (n=231) was conducted in spring 2014, to test the draft principles with the public. Respondents supported the draft guiding principles as follows: ensure public access (93% support); value the river as a unique natural, historical and cultural resource in need of protection (94% support); educate and engage Edmontonians (88% support); promote public safety (83% support); and foster collaboration and partnerships (78% support).

"River access should be for everyone, not just those who can afford access"

The draft guiding principles were then reviewed by internal stakeholders and partners through two separate workshops held in June 2014. Generally speaking, there was strong agreement with the draft principles. However, it was recommended that principle #2 ("Value the river as a unique natural, historical and cultural resource in need of protection") be separated so that 'natural' and 'cultural' resources could be identified independently. As well, it was recommended that a new principle be added to focus on river recreational opportunities.

"With an increase in users of the river there will be an increased need to have access to safety and skill training"

RIVER ACCESS GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Based upon the aforementioned consultation findings, seven guiding principles were developed, as follows:

1. **Ensure public access** to the river and riverside infrastructure as public domain.
2. **Value and protect the unique character and environment in the river valley** by stewarding, protecting, conserving and restoring the integrity of the river.
3. **Educate and engage Edmontonians** to build lifelong skills, as well as awareness and appreciation of the river and its natural surroundings in order to nurture stewardship of a valued resource.
4. **Foster collaboration and partnerships** so that infrastructure and facilities are shared and programming is coordinated.
5. **Promote public safety and responsible use** to communicate safe water recreation behaviors, emergency response and bylaw enforcement.
6. **Provide and support a range of river recreation opportunities** to enhance Edmonton's unique quality of life.
7. **Celebrate the cultural, historical and social role of the river in our city** to build awareness and appreciation of our river.

These guiding principles, developed through extensive consultation, discussion and workshops, will guide the development of the strategy and inform future programming, operations and infrastructure improvements that support access to the river and activities associated with the river. Adherence to these guiding principles will secure the success of the River Access Strategy and its implementation plan.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE STRATEGIES

Through the development of guiding principles a number of strategies were identified. These strategies were further refined and developed through internal consultation.

An online survey was designed to obtain public feedback on these strategies. Respondents were asked to indicate the importance of the 29 strategies that were developed for the seven principles, and as well were provided an opportunity for comments and to identify any gaps. The survey was open for a one month in late spring 2015 and received over 700 responses. Generally the strategies were strongly supported. The majority of respondents ranked all 29 strategies as being important.

"These are really great principles and capture the variety of needs of the river…"

Further engagement was done with our key stakeholders. Feedback was requested on the strategies as well as the draft implementation actions needed to support these strategies. Again, the strategies were strongly supported. Feedback received stressed the need for public awareness and education as it pertains to river safety and safe boating practices.

"Congrats on a great set of strategies that encompass a big picture of our river and river valley!"

STRATEGIES

The following strategies will inform the final River Access Strategy report and its implementation plan. For the purpose of this table, the strategies haven been grouped under their 'primary' guiding principle however many of these strategies pertain to more than one principle.

Principle #1 **Ensure public access** *to the river and riverside infrastructure as public domain*

1. Develop processes and plans to ensure provision of public access to and along the river.
2. Ensure current and new lease agreements accommodate public access.

Principle #2 **Value and protect the unique character and environment in the river valley** *by stewarding, protecting, conserving and restoring the integrity of the river.*

3. Identify protection zones for environmentally sensitive areas.
4. Identify appropriate river-side uses and their locations (types of use, intensity of use, etc.).
5. Ensure river-side amenities are accessible, aesthetically pleasing, environmentally sensitive, and appropriate.
6. Continue to ensure long-term environmental impacts are minimized through review processes.
7. Develop and utilize operations and maintenance standards that are environmentally sensitive and socially responsible.
8. Ensure restoration is undertaken through projects and practices to ensure the integrity of the natural system.
9. Measure and monitor changes and impacts to the river.
10. Promote awareness and good practices for water quality protection.

Principle #3. **Educate and engage Edmontonians** *to build life-long skills and an appreciation of the river and its natural surroundings in order nurture stewardship of a valued resource.*

11. Involve the public and stakeholders in the planning and decision making processes.
12. Promote awareness of the river and its unique attributes.
13. Develop and continue to support interpretive elements and programs to learn about the river.
14. Coordinate communications related to the river and river activities.
15. Create one point of contact for all things related to the river (e.g. River Office)

Principle #4 **Foster collaboration and partnerships** *so that infrastructure and facilities are shared and programming is coordinated.*

16. City to continue to maintain an inventory of partners and build relationships and opportunities with partners.
17. City and partners work collaboratively to ensure facilities and infrastructure are shared and optimized.
18. Support conservation of the river through collaboration, partnerships and programs.
19. Collaborate with commercial enterprises that use the river.

Principle #5 **Promote public safety and responsible use** *to communicate safe water recreation behaviors, emergency response and bylaw enforcement.*

20. Support emergency response by ensuring appropriate measures are in place (e.g. infrastructure, communication protocols).
21. Explore opportunities to expand the roles of Community Standards Park Rangers to enable enforcement on the river.
22. Develop, promote and implement a program to ensure safe and responsible use of the river.
23. Monitor use and behavior on the river.
24. Manage, monitor and develop programs with partners to provide river experiences.

Principle #6 **Provide and support a range of river recreation opportunities** *to enhance Edmonton's unique quality of life.*

25. Provide river-based infrastructure and opportunities for the public to use and enjoy the river.
26. Support opportunities for drop-in or spontaneous use (e.g. canoe or boat rentals).
27. Protect and conserve significant historical, cultural and social resources of the river.

Principle #7. Celebrate the cultural, historical and social role of the river in our city *to build awareness and appreciation of our river*

28. Explore opportunities to offer culturally significant river-based experiences.

29. Tell the story of the river's history and use.

NEXT STEPS

To complete the Strategy, the following work will need to be undertaken:

- Site Criteria and Development Guidelines
- River Use Plan - indicating appropriate locations, uses and intensity of use for river-related activities for existing river valley parkland.
- Develop an Implementation Plan - including priority ranking, resource requirements and timeframes

Several implementation actions, already identified through work done to date, will need to be undertaken in the near future. Anticipated key implementation actions include development of the following:

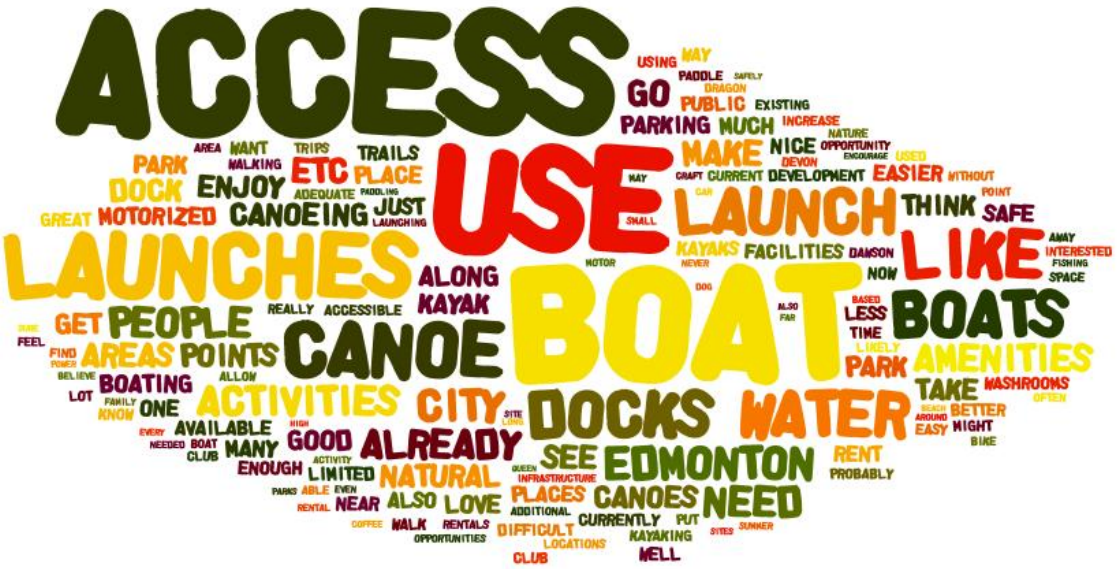
- River Access Partnership Model*
- Operational Guidelines
- Communication Plan (web-based and river-side); and
- Shared/Safe Use Program

**A workshop was held with partners in early 2015. The objective was to use partner expertise to help develop a model from which future planning decisions can be made, focusing on the development of criteria needed to ensure a successful partnership and public access. Two of the guiding principles were a focal point of the session: ensure public access and foster collaboration and partnerships.*

"The principles identified are thoughtful and promise to bring continual watch for an environment that is rich with history. I think that the basis of the strategies are sound. Bringing them to life will be a fluid and challenging effort, but very well worth it."

IN CONCLUSION

The River Access Strategy will provide much needed guidance to decision-makers as the City works towards enhancing and protecting the river and its use. The in-depth discussions and consultations undertaken in the development of these guiding principles and strategies have created the foundation upon which the Strategy can be developed and fulfilled. The River Access Strategy is anticipated to be completed in 2016.



APPENDIX 1

Relevant Provincial Acts and Regulations

Alberta Water Act, Alberta Water Act Codes of Practice, Alberta Wetlands Policy, Alberta Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, Alberta Public Lands Act, Historical Resources Act, Wildlife Act, Weed Control Act.

Relevant Federal Acts and Regulations

Fisheries Act, Canada Shipping Act, Navigable Waters Protection Act, Migratory Birds Convention Act, Species At Risk Act, Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, and the Federal Policy on Wetland Conservation.