

River Access Strategy

Project Start-Up: Facilitated Sessions Overview

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Background

Edmonton's North Saskatchewan River, and the surrounding river valley, is North America's largest urban park, covering more than 18 000 acres. The City of Edmonton has several initiatives underway right now that aim to provide more access for Edmontonians to the river valley and to the river itself. While these initiatives will provide exciting new opportunities for recreation, and nature appreciation, the increased use of the river raises a number of questions regarding how that use should be governed.

In December 2013, and January 2014, the Community Strategies and Development branch engaged with stakeholders, user groups, City of Edmonton staff, and representatives of the Provincial and Federal government in conversations aimed at understanding how these groups imagined the river in the medium-term future. Participants were also asked what key principles they would like to see guide decision-making on river access and use. This report represents a summary of the discussions held on three occasions with internal and external stakeholders. Themes and issues were identified by the participants, and this summary record will be used to inform the next phase of the development of the draft River Access Strategy.

Government Staff Session

On December 15, 2013, 67 City of Edmonton staff and two provincial government employees gathered at the Stanley A. Milner Library to discuss the future of the Edmonton's North Saskatchewan River. City of Edmonton staff participating in the workshop were from:

- Sustainable Development (Urban Planning and Environment and Current Planning);
- Community Services (Community and Recreation Facilities, Community Strategies and Development, Neighbourhood Parks and Community Recreation, and Community Standards);
- the Office of the City Manager (Corporate Communications);
- Corporate Services (Law);
- Transportation (Transportation Services); and
- Financial Services and Utilities (Drainage).

Three questions guided their discussions:

- What does the river look like in 2020? Is it busier? Is it full of boats, or families swimming? Are there fishing holes and water taxis?
- If the river that you imagine is to become reality, what factors must be considered? (E.g. Safety issues, environmental impact, etc.)
- What policies need to be considered to address those factors previously mentioned? (E.g. under Safety, a consideration might be that there would need to be a river safety warning system developed for Edmontonians in order that citizens could make an informed decision about their recreation activities on or near the water.)

The following is a summary of the key issues and themes identified by the participants during their discussions.

The River in 2020

Almost all of the participants saw the number of Edmontonians using the river increasing, as more recreational areas are developed, and access is improved. They saw this as an exciting opportunity for Edmonton, but stressed the importance of preserving the natural state of the river and valley.

By 2020, they envisioned a river valley with more events, more opportunities, improved signage, more meeting places, cafes, and greater use of the water by people, boats, and dogs.

Participants in the session saw many benefits to increasing use of and access to the river: They felt it could connect more Edmontonians than ever before to nature within their city, year round.

During the discussion about the river in 2020, session facilitators recorded the most commonly used words and phrases, and input them into a word-cloud generator. Below is the resulting graphic. The larger the word, the more frequently it was used.



Figure 1: Word Cloud

The two most commonly used phrases were "access" and "environmental protection". These two phrases accurately sum up the underlying themes of almost all the discussions during the session: Participants wanted to increase access to the river and valley for all Edmontonians while preserving the beauty and ecological integrity of the environment. The factors and policies that may need to be considered as the City plans for this future have been captured below.

Safety and Enforcement

Many of the conversations focused on potential safety issues that may arise from the increased use of the river. These issues generally fell into two categories: Water-based risks (contaminants, water level, waves, etc) and human based risks (boating safety, etc).

Participants talked at length about ways to mitigate risk on the river and in the valley, and came up with a number of suggestions, including:

- **Signage and way-finding:** Increase the prevalence of signage (both on the river, and in the valley) to assist people in navigation, and mark known hazards. Participants suggested that all signs employ standardized symbols to allow their use by non-English speakers. They stressed that signage will need to be consistent and identify acceptable uses (e.g. label an area as appropriate for year-round activity or only for the summer, etc.).
- **Adequate levels of nighttime lighting:** Although use of the river valley at night is not encouraged, participants highlighted the need to maintain a basic level of lighting in order to ensure safety of the valley after dark.
- **Increased peace officer presence:** As more people use the river and the surrounding areas, peace officer patrols will have to be increased to ensure all applicable laws are being observed, and to improve personal safety. Participants noted that increased boating activity on the river would also require enforcement by water-based officers.
- **River monitoring:** Increased use will also require the City to monitor the flow rate, water level of the river, and stability of the riverbank. This information should be easily accessible by river users.
- **Public Education:** Part of managing increased use of the river and river valley will be educating the public on potential hazards and safety procedures. This could be accomplished by leveraging new technology (websites/social media) and traditional methods (signs, pamphlets, etc.).

Ultimately, participants said that the City must define acceptable levels of risk as all uses of the river carry risk. Once this standard has been defined, individual activities can be evaluated on a case-by-case basis to determine how best to mitigate their specific risks.

Environment

Participants were particularly concerned about the impact of greater river use on the environment. They identified a number of areas the City will need to consider as it moves forward in expanding access to the river. These included:

- **Balancing development with Environmental Protection:** Participants felt that an integral part of what makes the river valley special is its natural, undeveloped state. They believed that an increase in use and development of the river must be balanced with large, clean, quiet, and unspoiled spaces. Not only would this preserve the wilderness for users, it would also ensure that wildlife remains relatively undisturbed, and able to continue flourishing.

- **Environmental Monitoring:** Greater use of the river will require more environmental monitoring in order to understand the impact of human activity on the river’s ecosystem. The City may need to track the levels of pollution, fish spawning habitat, monitor drainage, and wildlife wellbeing, and implement policies to manage human impact. These policies must be mindful that Edmonton’s river valley is embedded in an environment that goes beyond the City’s jurisdiction.

Participants suggested these policies should be informed by input from subject-matter experts, and that to accomplish this, greater integration between all three levels of government is required.

Access

Boosting access to the river was the central theme of the day’s conversations. The group articulated the following suggestions and concerns about making it easier for users to get to, from, and across the water:

- **Motor Vehicle Access:** In order to manage potential disturbance of area residents, and help reduce the environmental impact of increased usage, participants suggested limiting motor vehicle access to the river and river valley. They suggested this could be done with public transit to and from key areas in the river valley, and the possible creation of a water taxi that could be integrated with ETS.
- **Emergency Access:** Increased use of the river and surrounding area increases the risk of emergencies. When planning access routes into the area, the City will have to ensure that emergency services personnel and equipment can be accommodated.
- **Provision of basic services:** One potential barrier to increased use of the river and river valley is a perceived lack of basic services. Participants said that in order to encourage year-round use, the City should provide for timely snow removal and year-round public washrooms (more of these may need construction if access increases in the ways participants imagined).
- **Swimming Access:** Participants had split opinions on increasing access to the river for swimmers. Some felt it was a desirable goal to create a swimming area, while others had serious concerns about the risks associated with such an initiative. One suggested compromise was to construct a swimming area that stops the flow of the water – e.g. a bay or a pool near the river. (Note: the City does not encourage swimming in the North Saskatchewan River.)
- **Boating Access:** Participants were also split on increasing the use of motorboats on the river. Many people expressed concerns about the increased noise, pollution, and erosion from boat wakes on sensitive habitats. Participants were much more enthusiastic about increasing access to the river for unmotorized boating activities (canoeing, kayaking, rowing, etc)

Development

As mentioned previously, conversation focused heavily on how to balance the development of the river and river valley, while preserving its natural beauty. Participants suggested several ways to approach this issue, including:

- **Limits to Commercial Development:** Commercial development was a contentious point among participants. If commercial development is approved, they said it must be regulated in a way that enhances the valley – not

exploits it. To maintain the overall “wilderness” feel of the valley, the City may want to limit development to specific “nodes”, leaving the majority of the river and valley in its natural state.

- **Carefully Plan Development:** Participants advised the City take a holistic approach to planning development of the river. They said to consider the whole space, from the top of the river bank to the water itself, and do so in full knowledge that rivers flood from time to time – new buildings will need to account for flooding or not be built. Development regulations should also identify an acceptable level of overall development, and maintain current scenic vistas.

Education and Programming

More people and groups using the river and river valley will drive more demand for City programs, recreational opportunities and educational initiatives. Participants had several suggestions for how to manage this demand, and ideas on how to expand upon the City’s current offerings. They included:

- **Education Programs:** Participants suggested that education programs be targeted to users, interested citizens, and school groups. They suggested these programs could focus on the river’s geology, ecology, and anthropological history.
- **Leverage New Technology:** In order to publicize river programs, and to make them more widely accessible, participants suggested that where possible, to leverage new technology (e.g. mobile apps, websites etc.).
- **Recreational Programming:** Increased recreational programming can help draw people into the river valley and onto the water. However, participants noted the City will need to manage conflicts between users with competing requirements (e.g. motor boaters and paddlers). They also said that not all types of recreational programming are acceptable for the river and valley.
- **Achieving Balance:** Facilitators were cautioned that new programs must be mindful of the fact that Edmonton already has a rich festival and community event agenda, and to not over-program the valley. Some participants expressed concerns about balancing programming with preservation (both of the natural environment and of the public infrastructure already in place), enforcing the City’s rules, and making sure the valley stays a public place.

Regulatory Issues

Currently, the North Saskatchewan River and the River Valley are subject to rules and regulations at all three levels of government. This poses challenges when planning for future development. To mitigate these challenges, participants suggested the following ideas:

- **Intergovernmental Cooperation:** Participants expressed concerns over the bureaucratic challenges of dealing with three levels of government. In order to reduce inefficiencies, participants suggested formalizing a cooperative framework on river issues.

- **Consolidate Regulations:** One common complaint among participants was the difficulty in navigating all the applicable laws and regulations that apply to the river and the river valley. To improve this, participants suggested consolidating all applicable legislation and regulation into one, easy-to-access format.

Funding & Partnerships

Participants recognized that their envisioned future for the river and river valley requires both funding and appropriate partnerships with key stakeholders. When addressing these issues, participants discussed:

- **Funding:** Participants had many questions over the funding for potential developments including infrastructure maintenance, operation, and enforcement as well as capital costs. The discussion took a skeptical view of private funding, and touched on establishing standards for whatever commercial partnerships do take place.
- **Partnerships:** Partnerships and cooperation with key stakeholder groups will be critical to ensure that future development meets the needs of all users. Participants particularly wanted to strengthen partnerships with First Nations. They also noted the need for a clearly defined relationship with the River Valley Alliance.

Stakeholder Engagement Sessions

After the workshop with public sector staff, the City of Edmonton engaged with a number of stakeholder organizations including environmental groups, recreational clubs, and community-based organizations. Focus group invitations were extended to:

- Nature Alberta ,
- The Sierra Club,
- The Edmonton Rowing Club,
- Haskin Canoe,
- Make Something Edmonton,
- The North Saskatchewan River Conservation Society,
- Northwest Voyageurs Canoe and Kayak Club,
- Black Gold River Tours,
- Klondike Jet Boats,
- North Saskatchewan River Keeper,
- University of Alberta environmental and outdoor education specialists,
- Mistaya Paddling Club,
- Ceyana Canoe Club,
- Edmonton Whitewater Paddlers,
- RiverWatch,
- Edmonton Dragon Boat Festival Association,
- Edmonton Dragon Boat Racing Club,

- Canoeheads,
- Edmonton Outrigger Canoe Club,
- Edmonton Canoe,
- Alberta Water Council,
- Greater Edmonton Racing Canoe Kayak Club,
- Edmonton Paddling Centre, and
- Paddle Alberta.

Two separate sessions were held, with 25 participants in total: one on January 15, 2014, and the other on January 20, 2014.

During these sessions, facilitators gave a short presentation on the context of the project, and the work done to date on the river access initiative. Attendees were then asked two questions: First, what priorities did they feel were most important when discussing river access and the river valley? Second, they were asked to add their perspective and thoughts on the five key themes identified from the workshop with government staff (education, safety and enforcement, access, environmental preservation, and development), and identify what was missing.

Priorities

When asked about their group's main priorities with regards to the river and river valley, many participants identified several key areas of importance to their members. These included:

- **Bylaw 7188:** Some participants expressed concerns over the ability of an activity (mining, industrial activity, etc) to be "deemed essential", thus allowing the "ribbon of green" in the river valley to be broken. They suggested the bylaw be reviewed to strengthen the environmental protection of the river and river valley.
- **Boat access:** Boating groups wanted to see the number of boat launching points increased, thus allowing easier access to the river. They said that bridges are easy to develop as access points, as they are already disturbed areas, and they offer the space required for maintenance activities. However, some other users opposed this idea, and felt that motorized use of the river should be discouraged due to noise, environmental, and intensity-of-use concerns.
- **Understanding current conditions:** Participants felt that the City should compile an inventory of river use statistics and land ownership (that is, statistics on the amount of privately owned land backing onto the river valley). These statistics would be useful when developing a river access strategy.

What's missing from the five key themes?

Before beginning their exploration of the five key themes, participants were asked what themes might have been missed in the initial discussion with government staff. Most of the feedback from the group reinforced the selection of the themes, suggesting their resonance with those parts of the general public interested in the river. Again, many participants highlighted the importance of a balance between access to the river and environmental preservation. Education was also seen as an extremely important theme, as even excellent access infrastructure

will be wasted without awareness of it and demand to use it. A few areas that were identified as missing from the key themes were:

- **Marketing opportunities:** Participants did feel the key themes did not capture the marketing potential of the river. Several people suggested that the river and its wilderness represent a “spectacular” feature that could be used to advertise Edmonton as a travel destination.
- **Aboriginal Involvement:** The river and river valley have played an important part in the history and development of local aboriginal populations. Participants felt the river access initiative should be developed in cooperation with local First Nations.

Safety and Enforcement

When asked to identify safety and enforcement issues that would need to be addressed as use of the river and river valley increased, and what strategies could be used to mitigate them, participants said:

- **Visible enforcement is important:** Participants were in favour of more visible enforcement efforts in the river valley, and said that increased access will create more opportunity for criminal activity. However they were not keen on increasing the level of policing across the entire valley. Instead, they thought that park rangers needed a higher level of visibility to deter unlawful activities.
- **On-river enforcement is needed:** As higher numbers of users begin accessing the water itself, more on-river enforcement will be required. This should include ensuring that boaters are in compliance with noise bylaws.
- **Track enforcement statistics:** By tracking the times and locations of enforcement actions, the City will have the information required to more effectively deploy limited enforcement resources.
- **Educate people about risks:** The river and river valley contain a wide variety of different hazards, including river conditions and unstable banks. Participants stressed the need for public education campaigns to raise awareness of these risks. Where possible, natural hazards should be marked with high visibility signage. As well, participants suggested using the City’s 311 service to provide real-time river condition reports. The group also suggested establishing some kind of one-stop-shop online for information about the river, collating all of the information currently dispersed on various sites.

Environment

The river and the river valley are an ecological corridor, and as such, environmental considerations were top-of-mind for the participants in both sessions. Key discussion themes included:

- **Limiting motorized use on the river:** The prospect of more motor boaters on the water concerned the group. Suggestions included limiting the total number of motorboats allowed on the river and limiting areas where motorboats use is authorized.
- **Preserving the river valley:** Participants emphasized the importance of the river valley’s natural, undisturbed state. They noted that valley’s tranquility is unparalleled in an urban environment. As well,

they highlighted the fact the river valley and the river are important ecosystems for various wildlife, which deserve protection.

- **Minimizing the impact of development:** The group stressed the need to balance preserving the environment and promoting activities in it. This is a delicate balance to achieve, and any new policies and programs will need to be mindful of it.
- **Ensuring riparian areas are protected:** The group suggested that the City needed to broaden the scope of its plans to include the riparian areas (i.e. the banks of the river) and the river's tributaries.
- **Water quality:** Many of the access initiatives that are being discussed rely heavily on water quality (swimming, fishing, etc). As such, it will be important to maintain a high standard of water quality in the river.

Access

When discussing access, participants discussed current barriers, as well as opportunities to improve access to the river for the general public. These discussions focused on areas including;

- **Difficult approval process:** Some participants believe the current approval process creates barriers when trying to improve access to the river. They suggested streamlining the process by identifying one person or department to be the lead point of contact for river access initiatives.
- **Loss of access points:** The group expressed some concern about limitations to water access imposed in recent years, particularly in Whitemud Park and Rafters Landing. The City's strategy could halt or rescind these restrictions.
- **Consider all Edmontonians:** Participants wanted all Edmontonians to be welcome in the river valley, and noted that different user groups have different requirements of the river valley. Several suggestions were made regarding equitable access:
 - Ensure adequate transit into the river valley so that individuals and families without cars can enjoy what it has to offer.
 - Collaborate with the disabled community to ensure that people of varying physical abilities can access the river valley.
 - Plan access with the needs of varying users in mind – do not prejudice certain types of use at the expense of others.
- **Increase signage:** Participants noted that navigation to many river access locations like docks is difficult right now, and said that improved signage is required.
- **Different levels of access:** In order to help mitigate environmental impact, and to appeal to the different needs of user groups, participants said that not all access points need to be the same. Different levels of access can help contain different uses to certain areas – useful when trying to preserve the ecological

integrity of the river. The group also stressed that future access should be dispersed. Concentrating access in one area privileges residents of that area, and places greater stress on the surrounding environment.

Development

Increased access to the river and the river valley will necessitate new development to meet the demands of users.

Recognizing this, participants made the following suggestions;

- **Build public storage facilities:** Representatives suggested that public storage facilities would help facilitate different activities (e.g. boating).
- **Access directly to the water at parks:** One participant remarked, "Our parks are designed like they are afraid of the water". To draw people to the water's edge, the group suggested developing beach and picnic areas on or near the water.
- **Consider how design influences use:** Some participants noted that design has a strong influence on how people interact with a space. They suggested using passive design features to contain human activity, and help separate environmentally sensitive areas.

Education

Stakeholders stressed the importance of educational programs in helping raise awareness about river access opportunities, and in bringing Edmontonians closer to the water. They made several suggestions to improve and enhance current educational offerings, including;

- **Connect with schools:** Participants noted the value of getting students in the K-12 school system into the river valley, but believed that current programs can be cost prohibitive to some schools. They suggested finding more ways of connecting students with the river to highlight an important aspect of the city.
- **Join the Canadian Heritage River System:** Members of the group suggested making the river or a portion of it part of the federal Canadian Heritage Rivers System, which might give the river higher profile in general and create more demand for education.
- **Leverage new technology:** Participants pointed out that numerous guides to the river and valley currently exist in print. They suggested investigating if these resources could be published in an online tool or mobile app for broader exposure.
- **Make use of informal programming:** Not all educational programs have to be formal. Participants suggested the use of static displays, and self-guided tours as a way of providing broadly appealing and low-cost learning opportunities.
- **Highlight Successes:** Many current initiatives are very successful, and should be given greater prominence. For example, participants were impressed with the River Watch geology tours, which

currently take over 6000 people a year through the river valley. They suggested this program could be adopted or expanded by the City.

Conclusion

Edmonton has an incredible opportunity right now to enhance its already renowned river valley. Doing this well, as these conversations surveyed in this report demonstrate, will mean striking a delicate balance between increased development and environmental preservation. Boosting access to the North Saskatchewan River Valley in the right way will not be easy, but these consultations provide glimpses of the path to success.

In the coming weeks, the City of Edmonton will continue to further refine ideas under the five key themes. These will be incorporated into the final product – a strategic framework that will guide development of the North Saskatchewan River – which will be brought back to the community upon completion.