

CALGARY RIVER ACCESS STRATEGY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Bow and Elbow rivers are integral to our city and provide extensive opportunities to promote social, economic, and environmental well-being in Calgary. In response to NM2016-20, Calgary Parks has worked with internal and external partners to develop a Calgary River Access Strategy (the Strategy) included in Attachment 1. The Strategy focuses on four priority areas: criteria for identification of key river access points, environmental impact considerations, and educational and economic opportunities. The goal of the Strategy is to improve opportunities for recreation, environmental education, and economic endeavours on Calgary's rivers, while ensuring public safety and the protection of riparian habitats. High priority sites and initiatives along with the associated capital costs have been identified and are summarized in Attachment 2; however the implementation plan is currently unfunded. With Council's direction, Administration will prepare a business case for the top five high priority river access sites for consideration as part of the Infrastructure Calgary Investment Plan process.

ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDATION(S)

That the SPC on Community and Protective Services recommend that Council:

1. Receive the Calgary River Access Strategy (Attachment 1) for information; and
2. Direct Administration to forward a business case for the top high priority river access sites (Attachment 2) for consideration as part of the Investment Plan being brought forward by Infrastructure Calgary in Q1 or Q2 2017.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL DIRECTION / POLICY

On 2016 June 30, Council approved NM2016-20 "River Access Strategy" directing Administration to prepare a policy report and implementation plan to address a Calgary river access strategy, to engage with commercial river users for discussions on river access issues in the short term, and present to SPC on Community & Protective Service no later than Q1 of 2017.

BACKGROUND

The Bow and Elbow rivers are vital to the physical make-up and sense of place in Calgary and are important to the individuals, groups, and businesses that use the rivers for sport and recreation, including canoeing, kayaking, rafting and fishing. Many of these activities can occur with carry-in or hand launch sites while some require drive-in, formal boat ramps. Unlike many other major recreational facilities, river-related activities require minimal capital and operating investment, yet provide a variety of opportunities for a healthy and active lifestyle.

The 2013 flood significantly impacted the river environments and contributed to changes to existing launch sites and the creation of gravel bars which have the potential to be misused. Groups including the Calgary Rivers Users Alliance (CRUA), the Alberta Whitewater Association (AWA), Paddle Alberta and the fishing community have recently expressed concern with the lack of formal access to Calgary's rivers. Further considerations are the provincial and federal legislation that cover portions of the rivers within city limits as well as the need to protect certain access points for emergency services (Calgary Fire Department and Calgary Police).

In response to these factors, NM2016-20 (Calgary River Access Strategy) was approved by Council on 2016 June 30. A multi-disciplinary internal project team (Calgary Community

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Standards, Calgary Fire Department, Calgary Parks, Calgary Recreation, Water Resources, Water Services and Law) was formed and engagement included a public survey and meetings with external stakeholders.

INVESTIGATION: ALTERNATIVES AND ANALYSIS

Analysis of required bylaw amendments has been completed. While there are a number of provisions in the Parks and Pathway Bylaw 20M2003 which may impede river access, the Strategy can be executed without bylaw amendments as the Director of Calgary Parks is able to permit these activities. To provide clarity, potential revisions to the applicable clauses of the Parks and Pathway Bylaw should be considered during the next Bylaw review.

The Strategy is intended to guide the easy, safe, and legal access of the Bow and Elbow Rivers, and the Glenmore Reservoir while also considering environmental impacts; it contains four priority areas as summarized below:

1. Identification of River Access Sites

This priority area contains criteria used to identify appropriate river access locations that can safely accommodate a variety of users. The criteria was developed based on considerations including land ownership/stewardship, environmental conditions, road/transit access, site slope (less than 8%), pathway interface, user conflict (ie: off-leash areas), potential for amenities (ie: washroom facilities, parking, garbage, seating, signage, etc), and past usage. All sites can be used to hand launch crafts such as kayaks, canoes, and rafts. Drive-in sites can also accommodate crafts that require a vehicle launch such as drift boats. The latter sites will tend to be bigger with expanded amenities such as parking and permanent washrooms.

Public safety is a priority; each site must be designed to reduce conflict with Calgary Fire Department emergency operations and must adhere to provincial and federal approvals and regulations. While a team of internal subject matter experts has done a preliminary feedback on the feasibility and environmental impact of any of these sites, many of these sites will require further impact studies and detailed design work before proceeding to construction.

The Strategy proposes a total of 24 river access points on the Bow River; 10 that will allow both drive-in trailer and hand launching (including the provincial site at Fish Creek Park) and 14 sites that only allow for hand launch. Three wading (or swimming) sites have also been identified on the Bow River. Four hand launch sites are proposed on the Elbow River, and the Strategy captures the three existing hand launches on the Glenmore Reservoir.

Site locations will be reviewed and updated regularly as river conditions and user needs change. A detailed description and proposal for all sites is included in Attachment 1. Top priority sites along with a proposal for city-wide educational signage have also been identified, with a more detailed description including budget estimates provided in Attachment 2.

2. Environment Protection

The Calgary River Access Strategy aligns with the existing Riparian Strategy and Riparian Action Program. This priority area outlines the need to reduce impacts to sensitive riparian habitats by concentrating users into designated river access sites. Enhanced amenities,

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including waste and recycling receptacles and washrooms, will also benefit the surrounding environment. Any development on the river, including boat launch construction, must meet all Provincial and Federal approvals. This process includes consideration of fish habitat health within and adjacent to the river.

3. Education

As river access points are formally designated and opened, they will be listed publically on calgary.ca. Up to date information, including maps, advisories and warnings, will also be made available and investigation into a mobile app is underway. The Strategy details how signage needs will be considered for each river access site and may include maps, directional signage, advisories and environmental information. Additional signage along the river may be installed to ensure river users are aware of exit locations as well as any safety issues.

Education programs are outlined in the Strategy, including a River Use Ambassador program, modeled after The City's Off Leash Ambassador program. The Strategy also reiterates the education programs that are contained within the Riparian Action Program. Community activities such as river clean ups, or tree wrapping programs, will promote positive use of river areas and serve to rehabilitate areas of the river.

4. Economic Opportunities

In addition to ensuring access for commercial fishing guides, the strategy recommends fostering business opportunities such as shuttle providers, or vendors related to river use such as equipment rental or shuttle services. The strategy also encourages working with partners to potentially leverage funding or sponsorship opportunities.

Stakeholder Engagement, Research and Communication

The Strategy has been well received and letters of support from the community are included in Attachment 3. The City reached out to external stakeholders through an online engagement program in the fall of 2016. A summary of external engagement is included on page 9 of the Strategy, and The City will continue to work with the river user community as sites are further developed. In addition, engagement occurred with internal business units and stakeholder groups through a series of meetings and workshops. Consultation with Alberta Environment and Parks has revealed that the Province is also undertaking a Bow River Access Plan which may have alignments with the Calgary River Access Strategy. The Province has expressed interest in partnerships with The City where appropriate.

Strategic Alignment

The River Access Strategy aligns with Action Plan under A Healthy and Green City:

- H8: Continue to invest in indoor and outdoor recreation facilities that address the changing needs of Calgarians
- H9: Optimize the existing parks network to ensure Calgarians have access to nature and healthy and active lifestyles
- H3: Manage the interrelationships between flood protection, water quality and quantity, and land use
- H6: Continue to build public awareness and understanding of our shared responsibility to conserve and protect the environment

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The Calgary River Access Strategy aligns with the four cornerstones of the Riparian Strategy approved by Council in 2013. These include protecting riparian health, connecting Calgarians in their appreciation for the river, recognizing economic value of the river, and aligning all corporate activities related to the river.

Social, Environmental, Economic (External)

Social

Calgary's rivers provide Calgarians with a variety of sport and recreation opportunities. River activities encourage active living, and enjoyment of natural environments. Further, the rivers provide historical context and are integral to Calgarians' sense of community

Environmental

By providing policies, guidelines, and most of all education, this strategy can help ensure the protection of the river and banks as it will encourage appropriate river use. In addition, promotion of river use can foster an appreciation for the river environment which will likely in turn result in responsible behaviours.

Economic (External)

As a key icon in the Calgary community, the river contributes to a vibrant city which attracts tourists, employees, and future businesses. Tourism Calgary indicates that sport tourism contributes over \$5.2 billion annually to the Canadian economy and the 2014 Statistics Canada report estimates over \$100 million is spent by overnight visitors enjoying boating, canoeing, kayaking and fishing in the Calgary area. Further, the Calgary River Users Alliance estimates that as much as \$50 million is brought to the Calgary economy each year through river tourism and access.

Additional river access points could result in economic benefits, as more river tours, paddle sports, equipment and shuttle services, and sport fishing companies are better able to operate. Tourism Calgary's upcoming 'Destination Strategy' calls out the need to enhance sport infrastructure of all kinds within our city.

Financial Capacity

Current and Future Operating Budget:

If the Calgary River Access Strategy is fully implemented, the annual operating budget has been estimated at approximately \$500,000 per year, including implementation of educational programs such as the River Ambassador program. Administration will bring forward an operating budget request through the next Action Plan budget cycle or as appropriate.

Current and Future Capital Budget:

All components of the Calgary River Access Strategy are currently unfunded, including costs for environmental studies and consultants required for regulatory approvals.

A Class 5 estimate of \$7.66 million is required to implement the full Calgary River Access Strategy. While minor improvements can be made to some sites within current budgets (ie: portable toilets), additional funding of \$1.69 million is required for the high priority sites as outlined in Attachment 2. The remaining \$5.97 million will be brought forward for consideration

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as part of the next Action Plan cycle. Page 28 of Attachment 1 contains implementation and budget details for all river access sites, and Attachment 2 includes details for the high priority sites.

Risk Assessment

The Strategy was presented to Alberta Environment and Parks who indicated that if designed properly, new river access points do not lead to further degradation of riparian vegetation or riparian areas, and provision of basic amenities (ie: garbage, washrooms) can lead to positive environmental outcomes. The province did raise concerns around the potential negative impacts on fish populations with further increases in angler activity. While each site will require regulatory approval, there is no mechanism to regulate the cumulative effects of increased fishing activity on the Bow River. If overall fish populations begin to suffer, further actions by fisheries managers may need to be implemented such as catch and release regulations, gear restrictions, seasonal restriction or even temporary angling closures. With The City's commitment to review sites on a regular basis, fish populations will need to be considered and some sites may need to be decommissioned if it appears fish populations are declining to an extent that fisheries managers may need to implement severe restrictions.

The funding model proposed in Attachment 2 relies on community grants, likely obtained by various community groups, such as those belonging to the Calgary River Users Alliance. However, it is possible that it may be difficult for groups to raise funds as many groups lack time and expertise, or are not formally registered as non-profit organizations. The City would lend support to these groups, as well as work with funding agencies and corporate sponsors, to work through challenges (possibly allowing groups to apply under the name of The City or the Parks Foundation Calgary).

There is a monetary risk in constructing boat launches that could later be damaged by flood. Where possible, sites are chosen which are not prone to flooding and inexpensive concrete tied mats are used to minimize potential loss.

It is important to note that implementing this relatively low-cost strategy allows The City to mitigate a very real financial risk to fishing tour operators who have experienced declining revenues due a lack of river access. These operators contribute to the tourism, sport and recreation sectors in an economic climate when it is important to support diverse businesses.

REASON(S) FOR RECOMMENDATION(S):

The Calgary River Use Access Strategy allows for promotion of safe and convenient river recreation while protecting the environment. The strategy has carefully considered river access locations, protecting the environment, promotion and education of river access, and fostering economic opportunities.

ATTACHMENT(S)

1. Calgary River Access Strategy
2. Priority Sites and Proposed Funding
3. Letters of Support