

RIVER VALLEY PLANNING MODERNIZATION

Ribbon of Green & River Valley ARP

RENEWING THE RIVER VALLEY AREA REDEVELOPMENT PLAN

AN OVERVIEW OF THE APPROACH AND
PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE PLAN

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OVERVIEW

The Role of the River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan

The River Valley Area Redevelopment Plan (ARP) provides the standards and rules that guide the City in evaluating proposed River Valley projects, and potential impacts. It is the City's main tool for regulating development within the River Valley, and its primary goal is to ensure the protection of the river valley and ravine system over the long term.

The Impetus for Renewal

The [current River Valley ARP](#) has not been substantially updated since it was adopted in 1985. Since that time, the City has grown, our approach to planning, engagement and environmental protection has evolved, and new challenges, such as climate change, have emerged. The ARP is no longer well-aligned with other City policies and strategic goals. This has led to a lack of clear guidance, as well as inconsistency, in how decision makers evaluate and prioritize land use proposals - especially when it comes to understanding tradeoffs, competing priorities and the cumulative impacts of River Valley development projects.

As part of the River Valley Planning Modernization project, the River Valley ARP will be updated, or "modernized," to reflect today's planning context. The City Plan and the updated Ribbon of Green strategic plan give us a clear sense of the planning priorities

for our city, and how the River Valley fits into that future. The updated ARP will support better decision-making to help us achieve that future.

OUR APPROACH TO THE RENEWAL OF THE ARP

Our focus through River Valley ARP renewal was on:

1. Clarifying its purpose and bringing the plan content into alignment

The River Valley ARP currently in effect was written and adopted in 1985, before even the original Ribbon of Green was prepared in the 1990s, meaning that the ARP played a role in guiding detailed design considerations and other aspects of land use planning that are now housed in the Ribbon of Green. The direction in the current draft of the Ribbon of Green better reflects modern environmental conservation principles and practices, and how Edmonton has evolved as a city, since the 1985 ARP.

Going forward, we intend for the document to be focused on providing high level land use policy, with a focus on development and development proposals, and smaller emphasis on detailed design and environmental planning considerations. This better aligns with the structure and function of area redevelopment plans, which are a type of statutory geographic land use plan enabled by the Municipal Government Act.

Note: We do not address activities and behaviours in the ARP, as these are better addressed through other City plans and policies, such as the Ribbon of Green Strategic Plan, the Public Spaces Bylaw, operational plans, and administrative procedural documents.

2. Improving our ability to adapt quickly

In the 40 years since the original ARP was approved, our planning context and practice have evolved substantially, and some of the direction that was in the original plan has created interpretive and implementation challenges (e.g. potentially requiring City Council approval for minor infrastructure such as a new picnic shelter or bench in the River Valley). In addition, the City's experience and expertise with regard to ecological network planning, urban ecology, environmental impact assessment, and, more recently, climate change adaptation and mitigation, have grown substantially since 1985.

The renewed plan proposes updated definitions and decision-making processes that better reflect existing City practices, provide clarity on Council approval requirements,

or implement new ways of approaching River Valley planning that better reflect emerging opportunities and challenges.

The draft document also reflects a policy and evaluation framework that connects directly to the Ribbon of Green and supports the development of detailed procedures, technical standards, and interpretation guides. These supporting documents will be kept up-to-date and revisited on a more regular basis than the statutory plan itself. This will allow the documents to keep pace with changes to the City processes and procedures, conservation and land use planning best practices, and technological improvements (e.g., virtual engagement practices; technical expertise and ability to assess environmental conditions and potential impacts based on things like satellite imagery and scientific models using contemporary scientific knowledge and technology).

PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE RIVER VALLEY ARP

Some fundamental guidance included in the current ARP will not change. The majority of the plan area is still designated for open space use, and developments on lands designated for River Valley Open Space are limited to those that are compatible with environmental protection, recreation, and cultural heritage, or provide critical transportation or utility services.

However, there are some changes being proposed through the ARP renewal. The changes are outlined here; the following sections offer a deeper dive into key changes.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CHANGES

- **Connection to the Ribbon of Green:** The maps in the ARP identify current and future lands in the River Valley and Ravine System as “River Valley Open Space” (previously “Metropolitan Recreational Use and Environmental Protection”) and refer directly to the Ribbon of Green for more detailed planning guidance for those lands. When the original ARP was created in 1985, the Ribbon of Green did not exist. Now, the Ribbon of Green is an important “sister” plan to the ARP, providing more detailed planning guidance and policy.
- **Clearer limits on intensive or high impact uses,** including prohibiting natural resource extraction (in alignment with the City Plan) and residential development (with the exception of existing River Valley neighbourhoods) in the River Valley; and placing limits on intensive open space facilities, intensive utility infrastructure, and intensive transportation infrastructure.

- **Updated assessment requirements** for development proposals in the river valley, including:
 - A **Strategic Assessment**, which will outline the rationale and benefits of a project, the reasons for its proposed location, its alignment with the strategic direction in the Ribbon of Green and other City policy documents, and an early indication of potential environmental impacts and how they might be mitigated; and
 - An **Environmental Assessment**, for which existing requirements will be carried forward, with the addition of a section on climate adaptation and mitigation. Supporting documentation will be created to guide proponents, and the assessment requirements will be scaled to the project scope and anticipated impacts.
- **Updated triggers for when a proposal might require City Council approval**, including: new or significantly expanded intensive utility facilities, intensive transportation facilities and intensive open space facilities
- An expectation that due consideration be given to **Indigenous and public engagement**, including reference to the City's Indigenous Framework and Public Engagement Policy and Framework
- A policy to adopt and apply the **mitigation hierarchy** to development in the River Valley. The mitigation hierarchy involves:
 1. avoiding project impacts wherever possible (e.g. through changes to scope, site, timing);
 2. minimizing impacts that cannot be avoided;
 3. restoring impacted areas; and
 4. as a last resort, offsetting permanent losses to native ecosystems through restoration or protection of ecosystems elsewhere.

A DEEPER DIVE INTO KEY CHANGES

Direction for Public Engagement

While the original (1985) River Valley ARP specifically highlighted public hearings as an opportunity to provide feedback, the new plan will reference the City's Public Engagement Policy and Public Engagement Framework (updated every four years). The public hearing process will still apply for formal plan amendments, as directed by provincial legislation (the Municipal Government Act). However, there will be an additional expectation that individual development proposals, including those that don't require a plan amendment or City Council approval, will be subject to the City's public

engagement policy. This will allow for different kinds of opportunities for public engagement on a project-by-project basis to make sure there is meaningful engagement on various City projects. This approach formalizes City practices that have been in place for a number of years, and which are subject to continuous improvement.

Direction for Indigenous Engagement

The renewed ARP recognizes the significant historical and traditional connections of Indigenous peoples to the River Valley and Ravine System. Updated policy language in the ARP reflects the importance of Indigenous engagement for proposed development in the River Valley, and directs Indigenous engagement to be completed in alignment with the direction of The City Plan.

Feedback received through Indigenous engagement completed over the course of the River Valley Planning Modernization project suggests that individual Nations and communities have varying levels of interest and capacity with regard to providing feedback on future proposed River Valley development. Further dialogue between the City of Edmonton and Nations and communities will be critical in exploring the different ways in which Indigenous Nations and communities would prefer to participate in engagement and decision-making.

The Council Approval Process for Development in the River Valley

The previous definition of “major facility” that was used to determine if Council approval would be required has been updated. The draft River Valley ARP proposes that intensive open space facilities, intensive utility infrastructure, and intensive transportation infrastructure require Council approval. The draft River Valley ARP also contains a draft policy to allow the City’s open space planners to request that Council approval be sought by the proponent if the proposed development poses risk of permanent, adverse impacts that can’t be mitigated, as evaluated by open space planners, including ecological planners.

As part of the proposed process, City Council would be asked to review and approve a strategic assessment, and in doing so, consider whether the proposed development aligns well with the City’s strategic and policy goals, including the Ribbon of Green; whether the proposed project requires a River Valley location; and, whether the proposed project is in the public interest. Proponents would seek Council approval relatively early, before all the decisions about a project have been made. This would allow any significant concerns to be flagged early and for changes to a project (including the option of not proceeding with a project at all) to be considered by Council and

Administration before significant time and financial resources were dedicated to the project. If the details of the proposed development or its impacts were to substantially change following further design work, the proponent would be asked to return to Council to seek approval again.

Requirements for Environmental Impact Assessment

The environmental impact assessment has been renamed to just “environmental assessment” to reduce confusion with provincial and federal environmental impact assessment requirements, which are mandated under provincial and federal legislation, apply to only specific types of projects (i.e., those that trigger provincial and federal regulatory requirements), and are generally considered separate from the City of Edmonton’s environmental assessment process.

Appendix 1 of the draft River Valley ARP replaces the previous Schedule D, and lists the key environmental categories that have to be evaluated when completing an environmental assessment. More detailed information on how to complete the assessment, including technical guidance intended for proponents and environmental professionals, will be provided outside of the River Valley ARP itself. This will make it possible to update the guidance more frequently, meaning that it can better keep pace with technological improvements, survey and study methodologies, conservation best practices, mitigation best practices, design and engineering standards, and changes in City procedures. These more detailed procedures, which will not form part of the River Valley ARP itself, are under development, and will be available publicly in late 2024 or early 2025.

Evaluation of the Cumulative Impacts of Development in the River Valley

Evaluating the combined impacts of different types of human development and activity is a challenging, but critical, component of protecting the natural environment of the River Valley. By evaluating development proposals in isolation, we risk not seeing the “big picture” with regard to the combined environmental impacts of human use.

In order for a cumulative impact assessment approach to be truly successful in the River Valley, an understanding of system-wide baseline conditions and ecosystem-based targets, as well as a framework for ongoing monitoring and associated management actions, must be in place. To date, resources to complete this work have not been available.

NEXT STEPS

Through Phase 4 engagement, input on the draft River Valley ARP and the key changes proposed will be invited. Following engagement, the project team will make adjustments to the plan. December 2024 is being targeted for the public hearing process, which will include opportunities for members of the public to speak at City Council about the proposed River Valley ARP.