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Presented by: Christian Benson, Manager, Environment

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Date	Ver.	Action By	Action	Result
11/21/2016	1	City Council	approved	

Natural Areas Assessment and Management Plan
Presented by: Christian Benson, Manager, Environment

RECOMMENDATION(S)

That the "St. Albert Natural Areas Assessment - 2015 Update" and the "St. Albert Natural Area Conservation and Management Plan", provided as attachments to the November 21, 2016 Agenda Report entitled "Natural Areas Assessment and Management Plan", be received as information.

That Administration be authorized to utilize the reports entitled "St. Albert Natural Areas Assessment - 2015 Update" and the "St. Albert Natural Area Conservation and Management Plan", provided as attachments to the November 21, 2016 Agenda Report entitled "Natural Areas Assessment and Management Plan", to guide operational activities and for planning purposes.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of the report is to share with Council the update to the City's Natural Areas Assessment and the complementary Natural Area Conservation and Management Plan that was developed as a foundational document to assist Administration in devising appropriate strategies and activities to protect and preserve the City's natural areas.

COUNCIL DIRECTION

On March 18, 2013 Council passed the following motion:

C102-2013

That the following newly approved business cases for 2013 be funded from the 2012 operating surplus:

- Information Technology Long Term Service Plan for \$75,000
- Spirit of St. Albert Society - Family Day Event for \$10,000

- Natural Areas Assessment for \$121,000
For a total of \$206,000

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION

The Natural Areas Assessment project was completed in 2015 and will provide foundational information for the City's approach to natural area conservation and management. Previous natural area inventories were completed in 1999 and 2007. The project also included the development of St. Albert's first formal City-wide Natural Areas Conservation and Management Plan that outlines policy and planning process changes and improvements in the operational management of natural areas to maximize conservation and sustainability.

Two complementary reports were produced as the outputs this project: *Natural Areas Assessment - 2015 Update* and *Natural Area Conservation and Management Plan 2015* (attached). Also attached is a Summary- Natural Areas Conservation and Management Recommendations document which highlights the status or next steps in response to the recommendations.

Natural Areas Assessment

A copy of the Natural Areas Assessment has been provided as an attachment. The *Natural Areas Assessment* provides a detailed inventory of the City of St. Albert's natural areas including areas 3 km North, East and West of its boundaries. This was called the Overall Study Area (OAS) and included inventory work conducted by adjacent municipalities, including the City of Edmonton, Parkland County and Sturgeon County where information was available. A more detailed assessment was conducted for the Sturgeon River valley and Carrot Creek flood plains and called the Detailed Study Area (DSA). This additional detail was conducted to provide more valuable information in areas that are: a) environmental sensitive and b) most likely exposed to current and future development pressures.

The primary objectives of this report were to:

1. Update the City's natural area inventory to reflect natural area changes (losses/partial losses/ expansions) that have occurred since 1999 and 2007 and compile basic statistics for the 2015 inventory and consider natural area losses.
2. Map natural areas in the OS).
3. Assess ecological connectivity within the OSA.
4. Identify possible priority restoration areas in the OSA.
5. Provide more detailed, land unit based information for a DSA that is incorporated into the City's Geographic Information Systems (GIS) database.

Key findings of this report include:

- In 1999, the previous complete city-wide natural area inventory documented 230 natural areas having a combined total area of 406 ha. The updated in 2015 suggests that 85 sites (37%) have been completely lost and 50 sites (22%) have experienced partial loss, largely as a result of rapid urban, residential development;
- In 2007, as a result of annexation, the City expanded its boundaries and the number of natural areas grew. As such, additional natural areas are now within St. Albert corporate limits. The 2015 inventory update identified a total of 193 natural areas having a combined

total area of 491 ha within the City limits;

- As of August 2015, a total of 25 natural areas (totaling a combined area of 19.4 ha) are planned for loss, according to approved ASPs for five developing neighbourhoods: Riverside, Jensen Lakes, South Riel, Erin Ridge North and Range Road 260. Those 25 natural areas are not identified as MR, ER, or natural area in the ASPs;
- Numerous Significant Natural Areas and Environmental Sensitive Areas are located in Sturgeon County and the City of Edmonton immediately adjacent to St. Albert. Of particular note are the numerous wetlands north of St. Albert and the ecological stepping stones North and West as well as River Lot 56 east of St. Albert.
- The ecological connectivity assessment revealed 21 sites as priority restoration areas. Although many of these opportunities are outside of St. Albert's corporate limits, these areas are key to restoring/maintaining ecological corridors for flora and fauna movement through the St. Albert region.

Natural Areas Conservation and Management Plan

A copy of the *St. Albert Natural Area Conservation and Management Plan* has been provided as an attachment. This document is part of the City's ongoing efforts to strengthen our commitment to conserving and managing St. Albert's natural areas. It is intended to serve two purposes:

1. Collate, describe and build upon the means and methods available to the City to achieve future natural area conservation in advance of, or as part of, the urban development planning process.
2. Serve as a city-wide natural area management plan that includes management actions to be implemented within and surrounding City-owned natural areas, to maximize their sustainability.

The *Natural Areas Conservation and Management Plan* outlines the best practices that are recommended to be employed to conserve and protect natural areas and manage already protected natural areas in a sustainable manner.

Recommendations in this plan have been separated into two subject areas: Conservation (recommendations are largely policy and planning process changes) and Management (recommendations for service/scope of work adjustment for Public Works). Examples of recommendations for policy/process changes include:

- Update the natural area protection policy such that conventional parks are no longer explicitly prioritized over natural areas conservation.
- Discourage locating stormwater ponds on poorly drained, flood prone soils.
- Require proponents to prepare pre- and post-development ecological connectivity mapping as part of ASP technical reports.
- Require the preparation of ECO Plans for all construction works to be undertaken within and adjacent to natural areas.
- Develop, monitor and report natural area conservation performance metrics (e.g., total tree canopy lost and gained).

Recommendations for the improved management of conserved natural areas are grouped in the following categories:

- Vegetation Management (e.g., retain cut or downed woody debris)

- Wildlife and Habitat (e.g., improvements to integrated pest management plan)
- Hydrology (e.g., discourage or limit use of fertilizer within 30 m of natural water bodies)
- Naturalized stormwater management facilities (e.g., restrict mowing to specified areas with detailed mow plans)
- Human Use and Safety (e.g., Discourage use of informal trails through natural areas with blocking)

The recommendations from the Natural Areas Reports will be used for planning purposes and will be incorporated into key processes and documents as appropriate moving forward.

Also provided to Council is an attachment "Summary- Natural Areas Conservation and Management Recommendations" which is intended to provide Council Members with context on what Administration is, or is proposing, to do in response to the recommendations.

STAKEHOLDER COMMUNICATIONS OR ENGAGEMENT

The management plan outlines recommended actions the City can take to improve the conservation and sustainability of its natural areas. Some of the recommended actions have already been (or are soon to be) implemented as part of existing service levels and policy frameworks; however, some of the recommendations require further evaluation, stakeholder consultation, and the assessment of possible resource impacts before being implemented.

The project to develop these documents included a cross departmental project team with representation from Environment, Recreation and Parks, Engineering, Planning and Development, Corporate Geographic Information Systems (GIS) team and Public Works. The technical work was conducted by Spencer Environmental Consultants between 2014-2015.

IMPLICATIONS OF RECOMMENDATION(S)

Financial:

Implementation of the Natural Areas Management Plan may have financial impacts to Public Works as the service levels currently set for the management of natural areas may require improvements to meet the suggestions in the management plan. In addition, some recommendations for policy changes and planning process improvements suggest tools (e.g. Eco-Plans for all construction projects within or adjacent to natural areas) may have cost impacts on St. Albert infrastructure projects as well as for developers but are aligned with best management practices already used in the Edmonton region. Any financial impacts will be identified either as part of the budgeting process or as policy changes are presented to Council.

Legal / Risk:

Changes to the *Municipal Government Act* (MGA) are being considered by the Province of Alberta that could alter the rules around the designation of reserve land to include a designation of 'Conservation Reserve'. 'Environmental Reserve' is essentially undevelopable land provided by the developer to the City without compensation. Owner/developers are also required to dedicate to the City, at no cost, a percentage of the developable land as 'Municipal Reserve'. However, the setting

aside and designation of 'Conservation Reserve' under this proposed legislation would require a municipality to compensate the owner/developer for the 'Conservation Reserve' lands. The Regulations currently being drafted will clarify the effect of Conservation Reserves on 'Municipal Reserve' calculations. If the amendments to the MGA are adopted, the City could potentially have another strategy to protect and preserve natural areas. This strategy was not contemplated in the proposed plans and would need to be evaluated.

Program or Service:

As detailed in the Financial impact section, there are possible impacts to Infrastructure Services and the planning process to meet the suggested changes within the management plan.

Organizational:

Establishment of a short-term implementation committee consisting of Environment, Recreation and Parks, Engineering, Planning and Development, Corporate GIS, Utilities and Public Works may be required.

ALTERNATIVES AND IMPLICATIONS CONSIDERED

If Council does not wish to support the recommendation, the following alternatives could be considered:

1. Provide Administration with specific feedback regarding the Natural Areas Assessment and Natural Area Conservation and Management Plan.
2. Direct Administration to cease work on the Natural Areas Assessment and Natural Area Conservation and Management Plan.

STRATEGIC CONNECTIONS

Council's Strategic Outcomes and Priorities (See Policy C-CG-02)

- **NATURAL ENVIRONMENT:** We protect, embrace and treasure our deeply-rooted connections with the natural environment through championing environmental action.
- **BUILT ENVIRONMENT:** We build our community towards the future to sustain balanced development, with a reverent eye to the past, honouring our unique settlement history and distinct identity.

Long Term Plans (e.g. MDP, Social Master Plan, Cultural Master Plan, etc.)

- Municipal Development Plan (2012)
- Environmental Master Plan (2014)
- Recreation Master Plan (2012)

Corporate Objectives (See Corporate Business Plan)

- Deliver programs and services that meet or exceed our standards

Council Policies

- Environmental Sustainability (C-EUS-01)

Other Plans or Initiatives (Business Plans, Implementation Strategies, etc.)

- Urban Forest Management Plan (2016)
- Red Willow Park Master Plan (1999)
- Red Willow Park West Master Plan (2003)
- Parks and Open Spaces Management Plan (2003)

Attachment(s)

1. St. Albert Natural Areas Assessment - 2015 Update
2. St. Albert Natural Areas Conservation and Management Plan 2015
3. Summary-Natural Areas Conservation and Management Recommendations

Report Date (Council Meeting Date): November 21, 2016

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