

Mechanized River Valley Access

Public Engagement Report

April 2015



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Background

The North Saskatchewan River Valley is North America's largest urban park with a total area of more than 7,200 hectares (approximately 18,000 acres). With more than 160 kilometres of maintained pathways and 20 major parks, the River Valley offers citizens unparalleled opportunities to connect to nature, get outside and to go play. The City of Edmonton has partnered with the River Valley Alliance (RVA) on *River Valley Connections*, which is the next significant step in creating a world-class, connected river valley park. Once complete, the project will increase access to and connectivity throughout the river valley.

River Valley Alliance

The River Valley Alliance (RVA) is a non-profit group formed by the seven Alberta Capital Region municipalities bordering the North Saskatchewan River. Their mission is to protect, preserve and enhance the river valley park system from Devon to Fort Saskatchewan.

A 16-member board of directors governs the RVA with representatives from each member municipality. Its three primary goals are:

- To coordinate river valley planning and development within the seven member municipalities.
- Ensure plans respond to and balance the social, recreational, environmental, and economic needs of Capital Region residents.
- Raise funds to bring these plans to reality.

In 2012, the RVA announced \$90 million in capital funding for 18 capital region projects to improve public access to, and connectivity within the regional river valley park system. Of the total amount, \$72.9 million has been allocated by the RVA for projects within Edmonton.

Funding breakdown

The River Valley Alliance (RVA) provides \$48.6 million in funding to the City of Edmonton for River Valley Capital Projects. The RVA funds are sourced from the Government of Canada (\$24.3 million) and the Government of Alberta (\$24.3 million). The Government of Alberta provided an additional \$22.6 million and the City of Edmonton contributed \$1.7 million to the projects.¹

River Valley Connections

In total, \$72.9 million in funding has been allocated towards a number of projects, which are grouped into five initiatives. The five initiatives are:

- 1. Terwillegar Park Footbridge:** This 262-metre long footbridge link Terwillegar Park in the southwest to River Valley Oleskiw on the north side of the river.
- 2. West End Trails:** This initiative will add approximately five kilometres of primary (paved) and secondary (gravel) trails to the river valley main spine trail in Terwillegar Park and River Valley Oleskiw.
- 3. East End Trails:** This initiative will develop approximately 16 kilometers of trails in east Edmonton.
- 4. Boat Launches and Docks:** Three boat launches and seven docks will be added throughout the river valley for public use.
- 5. Mechanized River Valley Access and Touch the Water:** These two initiatives will help increase access to the river valley from the downtown core and will enhance connections to the trail system and the North Saskatchewan River.

¹ Revised document August 2015- clarified information on funding.

Mechanized River Valley Access

Since 2012, several options have been discussed with City Council to determine how best to implement a mechanized access feature into the river valley.

The City has been studying the feasibility for a mechanized access project that will connect the downtown core to the North Saskatchewan River valley. Based on this study, the City is recommending the construction of a funicular.

Funiculars are cable-propelled systems that haul a car over an inclined track. In addition to the funicular, the project will include an outdoor elevator, an innovative urban staircase and other design features including viewpoints and lookouts. The project will allow people to walk from our vibrant downtown to connect with nature within minutes.

The funicular was selected from among a number of types of mechanized systems that have been built in urban environments to transport people between higher and lower elevations.

Funiculars:

- Safely transport groups of wheelchairs, cyclists, pedestrians and others up and down the river valley bank.
- Have less maintenance and operational requirements than outdoor escalators and gondolas.
- Are not susceptible to strong winds.
- Have a smaller footprint, which allows them to fit in the limited space at the top of the bank.
- Provide full accessibility, unlike chairlifts and escalators.
- Are more economical than other fully accessible systems.

The total budget for the Mechanized River Valley Access project is \$24 million.

Stakeholder Consultation

A public open house was held at City Hall on April 8, 2015, between 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. and between 4:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. City of Edmonton staff and project contractors were available to answer questions from members of the public. The open house was attended by approximately 200 people. Display boards and comment forms were available in City Hall from April 7 to April 10, 2015.

An online survey was also conducted to obtain feedback. The survey was available from April 7 to April 26, 2015. Both the open house and the online survey were advertised through a public service announcement, online ads, print publications, and through the City of Edmonton's social media accounts and website. Additionally, a road sign was placed near the existing staircase at the proposed project site to further promote the online survey. Five hundred and thirty nine (539) responses were received from both the open house and online survey.

What We Heard

Participants of the open house and the online survey were asked a single, open-ended question about the project:

“The Mechanized River Valley Access initiative aims to connect Edmonton’s downtown to the existing river valley trail system. The project will include innovative urban design that will facilitate access to the river valley and allow people to travel from our vibrant downtown to connect with nature within minutes.

The City has been studying the feasibility for a mechanized access project that will connect the downtown to the river. Two alignments have been explored. The City’s consultants are recommending the east alignment. What are your thoughts?”

Although the responses received were diverse, several key themes emerged from the completed questionnaires. These were:

Overall support for the initiative

A majority (approximately 2/3) of the 539 responses indicated support for the initiative.

Edmontonians are passionate about the river valley and many of those who participated in the survey were pleased to see the City taking initiatives to assist individuals of all abilities to access and enjoy Edmonton's river valley. Several commenters identified themselves as wheelchair users, bicyclists, or parents with strollers who believe the mechanized access would increase their ability to use and enjoy the amenities within the river valley.

Many commenters also felt the funicular could act as a destination point and potential tourist attraction in the river valley. Several respondents made reference to their positive experiences with funiculars in other cities around the world.

Concern about costs

Although most of the feedback was supportive, a number of comments objected to construction of the project due to the estimated construction costs, even despite the available grant money. These respondents feel that if returned to the funding partners, the money could be reallocated to areas they believe to be of greater importance, such as street maintenance, debt reduction or lowering taxes.

A number of comments from those opposed to the project also raised concerns about the ongoing maintenance and operational costs associated with the funicular. They believe these costs could be quite high, and may ultimately be higher than the initial construction costs. Some believe that users could be charged a nominal fee for using the funicular as a way to recoup these operating costs.

Preference for the east alignment

Of the respondents that expressed a preference between the two proposed alignments, a strong majority is in favour of the east alignment. This preference is based on two main factors:

A preferred destination: Most of the comments in favour of the east alignment cited a preference for this alignment because the urban staircase and outdoor elevator would terminate in the river valley and would allow users immediate access to the trail system.

Preferential viewpoints: Respondents also expressed preference for the views and viewpoints offered by the east alignment rather than those offered by the west alignment.

A small number of individuals indicated a preference for the west alignment. These respondents felt the destination point in the traffic circle would allow for an easier connection to the transit system as well as to the pedestrian river crossing.

It is important to note that many of the commenters that expressed a preference for an alignment did not necessarily support the overall initiative. Many respondents believe the initiative will ultimately be built and thus provided their preference.

Maintain access to the existing staircase during construction

Several comments asked the City to ensure access to the existing staircase during the construction period.

Safety concerns

A number of individuals expressed safety concerns about the alignments. It was noted that the landing area of the east alignment will be quite dark during the winter months, potentially creating a safety hazard. Concerns were also raised about the proximity of the west alignment to a major roadway.

Other responses expressed concern about the possibility for vandalism and the prevalence of drug use in the river valley.

Desire to ensure accessibility

Many commenters were very positive about the impact of the funicular on accessibility to the river valley. However, they noted that currently, neither of the proposed destination points are used or accessed by people with reduced mobility. They asked the City not to ignore the accessibility of the area surrounding the funicular.

A desire to preserve the natural look of the river valley

A small number of commenters expressed concern about the impact of the project on the natural aspects of the river valley. The concerns generally fell into two categories: concerns about the environmental impact of building the mechanized access and concerns about the impact on the natural “look and feel” of the river valley.

Parking concerns

A number of respondents raised concerns about the availability of parking near the site of the proposed funicular. These respondents believe that a lack of parking could lead either to congestion near the funicular or low user numbers due to restricted access to the area.

A desire for commercial development near the Mechanized River Valley Access

A number of individuals asked the City to consider allowing the development of a small-scale, locally-owned and non-chain restaurant or coffee shop. While several of the comments recognized that part of the river valley’s charm lies in its undeveloped nature, the proximity to the downtown core and the relatively high level of disturbance in this area of the river valley are factors that would lend well to this type of development in this location.

Conclusion

On the whole, Edmontonians are quite supportive of the Mechanized River Valley Access initiative and many are excited about the prospect of this unique addition to the amenities available in the river valley. They believe that a funicular would help to increase access to the river valley for people of all abilities as well as cyclists, parents

with strollers and others who can't use the existing staircase. They also strongly prefer the proposed east alignment to the proposed west alignment due to its destination along the river valley trail system rather than near the Grierson Hill road interchange.

The input received from this public engagement will help inform and guide the design of the project. The City anticipates that additional public and stakeholder engagement activities will occur at later stages of the project. More information on the status of this project, as well as the other *River Valley Connections* initiatives can be found online at edmonton.ca/rivervalleyprojects.

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