



NATURAL AREAS POLICY: CURRENT STATE SUMMARY

Background for the Natural Areas Policy and Process Project

December, 2023



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Purpose

This summary outlines the City of Saskatoon’s (City) current approach to natural areas identification and regulation. It is intended to act as a primer and to inform future steps in refining policies and processes to better achieve goals of the [Green Infrastructure Strategy](#) and the City’s overall long term vision.

1 PLANNING FRAMEWORK

To understand the current state of the City’s natural areas policies and processes, it is important to acknowledge the larger planning framework, within which this work can take place.

1.1 *Planning & Development Act, 2007*

The [Planning & Development Act](#) (Act) is the provincial legislative document which governs planning in the province of Saskatchewan. Under the authority of *the Act*, the City is required to adopt and maintain an official community plan.

1.2 **Official Community Plan & Zoning Bylaw**

The City’s [Bylaw No. 9700, the Official Community Plan Bylaw, 2020](#) (OCP), is a statutory document required by law, which provides a comprehensive policy framework for achieving the community that Saskatoon residents collectively envision and desire. It guides the physical, environmental, economic, social and cultural development of our community, through a broad set of goals, objectives and policies. These inform all planning, decision-making and priority-setting for the City.

[Bylaw No. 8770, the Zoning Bylaw, 2009](#) (Zoning Bylaw), is a regulatory document which facilitates implementation of the City’s OCP. All land in Saskatoon is assigned a zoning district and subject to development standards associated with that district.

1.3 City Policies

In addition to *the Act*, OCP and the Zoning Bylaw, City Council has adopted various civic strategies and policies which direct the way land is developed and managed in and around natural areas. In 2020, City Council adopted Saskatoon's [Green Infrastructure Strategy](#), which takes a nature-based approach, by outlining a vision for Saskatoon's Green Network. The Green Infrastructure Strategy is accompanied by the [Pathways for an Integrated Green Network](#), an implementation plan guiding the City's work through five implementation phases, which help to address risks to these assets.

At this time, the City's most significant policy, which guides planning and development of areas that include natural assets, is [Council Policy C09-041, the Wetland Policy, \(Wetland Policy\)](#), which was adopted in 2013, and outlines the City's approach to avoidance, minimizing impact and compensation related to wetlands. The City has adopted several other policies which provide further support for both natural areas and, more generally, sustainability. The Triple Bottom Line framework is a process guided by [Council Policy C08-001, the Triple Bottom Line Policy](#), which reviews projects for sustainable outcomes, and [Council Policy C07-031, the Corporate Asset Management Policy, \(Corporate Asset Management Policy\)](#) includes green assets. In addition, the City's [Administrative Policy A10-017, the Park Development Guidelines Policy](#) (Park Development Guidelines Policy), and the upcoming Tree Protection Bylaw, which is currently being developed, provide valuable direction and insight related to natural areas.

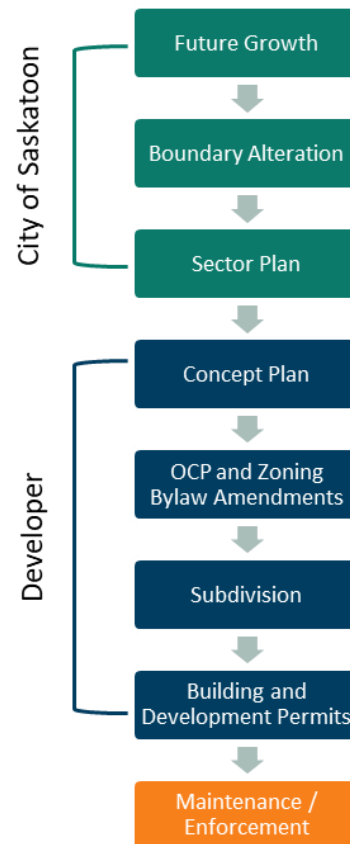


Figure 1 Development Process Overview

2 NATURAL AREAS IN THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Natural areas are best accounted for when identified and studied early in the development process, however, best management practices occur throughout. The following section outlines when and how natural areas are currently integrated into the City's development process.

2.1 Future Growth Studies

Future growth studies are the first step in the development process and are used to identify land needed to accommodate projected growth. These studies inform municipal boundary alteration as well as prioritization and phasing of planned development areas. There are several factors that go into these decisions; however, one of the most significant considerations is the location and direction of how existing infrastructure is extended to service new areas. Leveraging existing major infrastructure like storm, sewer, water and roads, while ensuring development is compact and contiguous, is a financially sustainable growth model for the City. While this model has been effective, in many cases it can be viewed as though the City prioritizes infrastructure planning over the conservation of natural areas.

2.2 Sector Plans

Based on direction provided from future growth studies and the existing policy framework, sector plans are created to provide a framework for development in an individual sector (see Map 7 in Saskatoon's [OCP](#) for each sector's boundaries). A sector plan is a high-level planning document and does not identify specific, detailed boundaries or buffers for individual land uses or areas, including natural areas. Any boundaries shown are intended to be general and require further study at the concept plan stage.

When drafting sector plans, planners must balance various competing civic priorities, including environmental sustainability. Direction is used from the OCP and other policy documents, when evaluating competing interests, but there is no standardized procedure for prioritizing these different goals and objectives when they conflict. Each scenario is reviewed on a case-by-case basis, as no two ecologically sensitive areas are the same. All new sector plans and sector plan amendments are required to go through the City's Triple Bottom-Line Review, as outlined in Council Policy C08-001, the Triple Bottom Line Policy.

A desktop natural area screening (NAS) takes place as part of the sector planning process. Additional field studies may be undertaken based on these findings; however, there is no standardized procedure for when such a study would be triggered at this stage. Ecologically significant areas, which include natural areas and wetlands, may be identified through sector plans. The delineation of these areas is still subject to change through detailed design; however, significant changes would require an amendment to the sector plan and approval by Council. Under the current approach, at the sector plan level, Administration may make recommendations for conservation areas, Municipal Reserve, Environmental Reserve or the consideration of other legal tools for protecting various natural areas. However, these recommendations would be refined through a more detailed design of subsequent concept plans, as more study occurs.

2.3 Concept Plans

At the concept planning stage, the planning process changes from being Administration-led to developer-led, with Administration acting as the regulating body, ensuring plans comply with City policies, bylaws and provincial regulations.

A concept plan is a land use plan and policy document which guides development of a new neighbourhood-scale area in Saskatoon. It outlines the land uses, densities, transportation network, grey and green infrastructure services, parks systems and community facilities intended for a development area as it grows. While more detailed than a sector plan, concept plans still do not include detailed design of individual lots; however, to ensure lot requirements fit and land is being efficiently used in their plan, most developers will consider lot size and type of zoning they may want. This means there is a reasonable degree of certainty when it comes to amount and size of park spaces, natural assets and integrated assets, such as storm ponds.

As part of the concept plan process, a NAS is required specific to the development area. This NAS includes a field screening of the development area, including any sensitive areas identified through a previous sector plan-level NAS. The information collected at this stage provides updates to information obtained previously, as well as providing a more detailed, on the ground assessment of existing natural areas. The intention is for applicants to use the information in both the sector NAS and concept NAS to inform the design of their development proposal. The proponent is required to justify any departure from the recommendations outlined in the screenings.

On at least two occasions, the City has identified significant natural areas through the sector planning process. This resulted in Administration planning for these areas concurrently with adjacent concept plans being prepared by developers. Examples of this approach include sections of the Northeast Swale as well as Hyde Park in Rosewood. These areas are managed as naturalized parks, offering additional amenities for residents, and increasing market values for developers by offering homes near a naturalized park.

While a concept plan study area might end at the boundaries for these natural and naturalized areas, the City's policy framework provides general direction that development of adjacent concept plans should be complementary to natural areas.

It is important to note, in situations like this, where natural areas are identified as being outside of a concept plan area, there is not currently a defined process for the development of a plan for these natural areas. In the case of the Northeast Swale, Meewasin took the initiative to develop a Northeast Swale Master Plan. In the case of Hyde Park, planning for this area was coordinated between the City, Meewasin and Ducks Unlimited.

2.4 Subdivision and Zoning

Once Council has approved the concept plan, subdivision in the neighbourhood will begin. This is where frontages are calculated, levies or service fees are paid and Municipal Reserve and utility parcels are dedicated. This is also the stage in which the Environmental Reserve would be dedicated if the City begins to use this tool.

Natural areas, like all other land in Saskatoon, will have a zoning district which dictates standards for development and permitted land uses. Parks are listed as a permitted land use in several residential, agricultural and future urban development districts. The most common zoning district applied to parks and naturalized areas is a residential zoning district. There are currently no zoning districts for the sole purpose and intent of parks or natural areas. The Zoning Bylaw regulates setbacks; landscaping requirements within required front, back and side yards; as well as building minimums and maximums. As mentioned above, parks are a permitted use within several zoning districts; therefore, development standards for parks have been established. The Zoning Bylaw does not regulate the design of park areas or landscaping outside of required setbacks. This design work is regulated by the Park Development Guidelines Policy and under [the List of Standard Construction Specifications: Parks \(2023\)](#).

During the development process for a new neighbourhood area, the Zoning Bylaw requires property owners or developers to obtain a development permit for excavation, stripping and grading of land and modification of wetlands. In cases of large development applications, this could result in the requirement of a NAS report. Where modification of a wetland is being proposed, the Wetland Policy is triggered, and applicants are required to comply with that policy for the approval of their permit.

The Zoning Bylaw also has conditions for the approval of a Pre-Development Permit, which entitles a landowner to begin certain elements of site work prior to the approval of a concept plan or development permit. In these cases, the property-owner must legally indemnify themselves as solely responsible for cost and restoration of any excavation, stripping and grading that was completed if their development application is not approved.

In the event of an application for pre-development being received for an area where there is no approved concept plan, the Zoning Bylaw outlines the proponent may have to complete a NAS. In these cases, a concept plan application must be currently under review at the City for a pre-development permit to be considered.

2.5 Maintenance and Enforcement

Following the subdivision of land, any publicly owned parks, Municipal Reserve or naturalized areas will be managed and maintained by the City's Parks Department and programmed through the Recreation and Community Development Department. Specialized management plans have been developed for certain areas, and the City is currently working towards standardizing a process for developing natural area management plans. The City also coordinates management and maintenance efforts with Meewasin in certain areas.

2.6 Natural Areas and Infill Development

While natural areas in greenfield developments have been in the spotlight in recent years, it is important to note there are natural and naturalized areas identified within established neighbourhoods of Saskatoon. Some examples of natural areas in an established neighbourhood are the Gabriel Dumont Park, the area adjacent to the weir, as well as the area around Nutrien Wonder Hub, all of which are along the river valley. In recent years, there has been a shift towards prioritizing infill development. As a result, Saskatoon is seeing a greater number of large-scale infill developments and re-development of land. As the City develops plans for areas such as the University Sector Plan and future Corridor Area Plans, there is a growing opportunity to identify and protect ecologically significant assets within these areas. Currently, there are few processes in place for identifying, managing or acquiring natural assets in infill growth areas. While there are some provisions in place for City-owned trees and park areas, services gaps do exist, and there are few policies or bylaws in place which require natural assets on private property to be maintained.

2.7 Regional Growth

2.7.1 Saskatoon North Partnership for Growth

Natural areas extend beyond municipal boundaries, which is why it is important for the City to work with surrounding municipalities and maintain planning processes at a regional level. The principal regional planning partnership for the City is the Saskatoon North Partnership for Growth (P4G). The P4G is a regional collaboration of five partnering municipalities, including the Rural Municipality of Corman Park No. 344; the Town of Osler; and the Cities of Martensville, Saskatoon and Warman.

The P4G was formed to develop and implement a regional planning framework to sustain economic prosperity, support a high quality of life and protect the region's natural beauty, ecology and heritage.

The Green Network Study Area (GNSA), included as part of the P4G Plan, represents sensitive ecological areas where development is to be avoided or managed. The GNSA is identified on the District OCP land use map. The network primarily consists of water drainage and flow courses through the P4G area. It is worth noting, while this study provides valuable information on flooding implications, it does not typically incorporate other natural areas.

Where development is enabled within the GNSA, the proponent is required to provide supporting evidence, prepared by a qualified professional, to demonstrate natural areas are not adversely affected. For sites located outside of the designated GNSA, Corman Park has authority to request additional screenings and studies at its discretion.

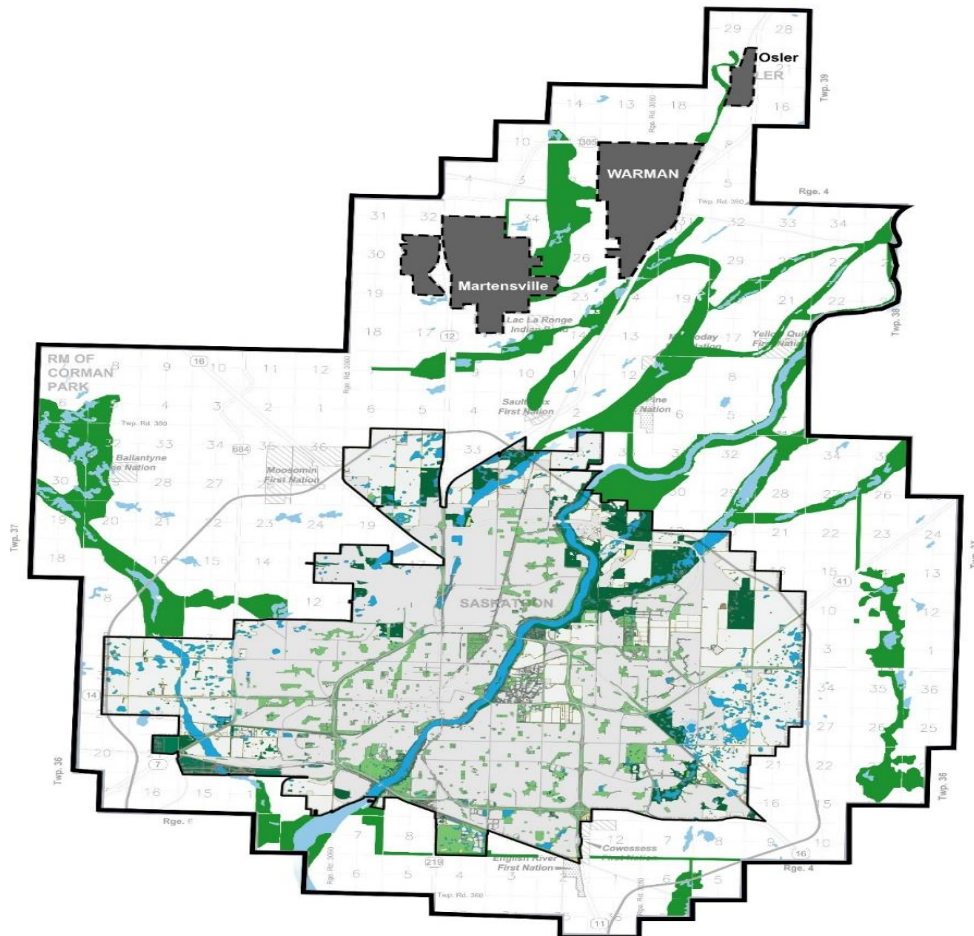


Figure 2: Combined Green Network Study Area and City of Saskatoon Natural Areas Inventory Map

2.1.1 Meewasin Conservation Area

The Meewasin Conservation Area has its own development review process and policy, which regulates development in addition to the City’s regulations. When the City receives a development permit application for a site in the conservation area, the application is referred to the Meewasin Development Review Board, who must respond to the application within 60 days.

Meewasin operates several other processes which support natural areas under their jurisdiction, both in and around Saskatoon. These include resource management plans, baseline inventories, master plans and monitoring. The City and Meewasin have a long-standing partnership when it comes to natural areas and work together often when considering new development proposals, policies and sharing information.

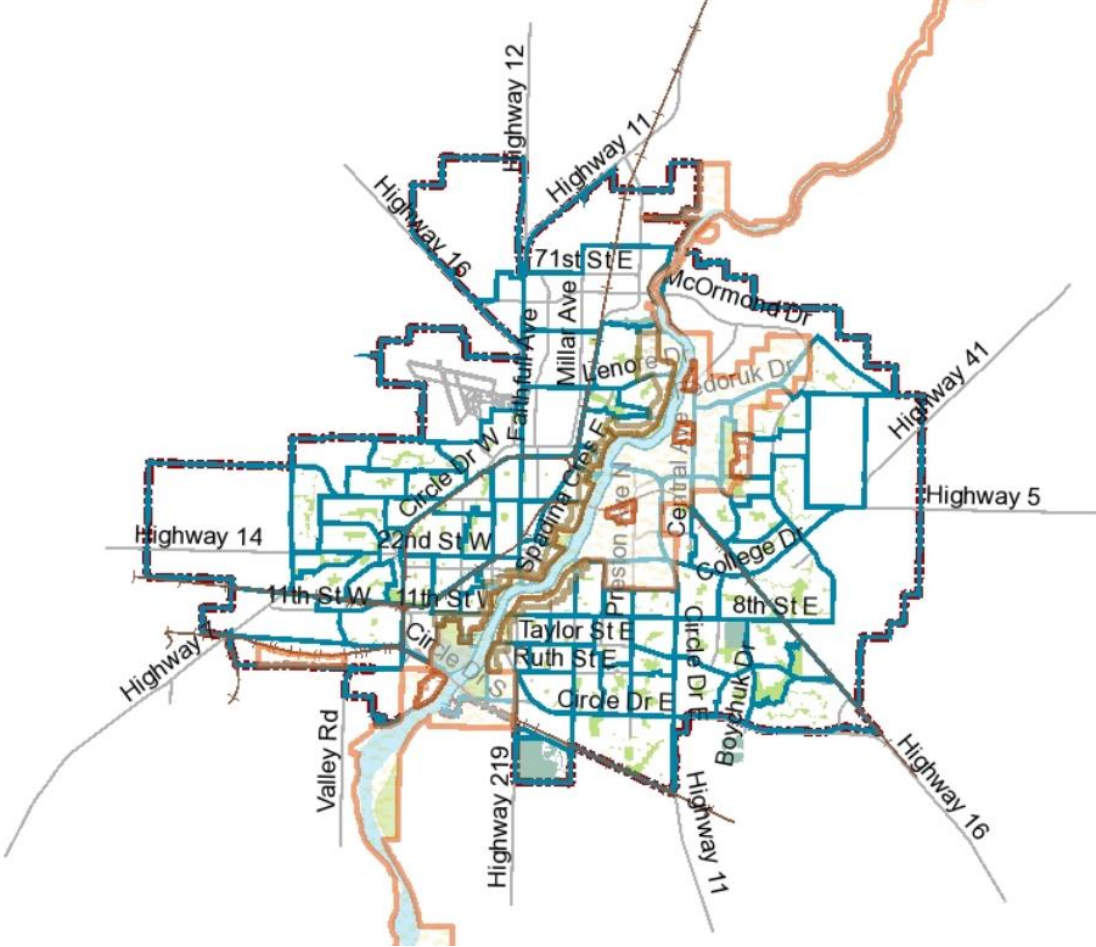


Figure 3 Meewasin Valley Conservation Area Highlighted in Red

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3. PLANNING TOOLS: POLICY AND PROCESSES

The City has several policies, guidelines and standards related to natural areas, which provide varying degrees of direction. While there are several documents which provide support to both natural areas and the overall green network, the focus of this section is on those documents with a direct impact on the planning and development process for natural areas. These include Natural Area Screenings, Natural Area Standards, the Wetland Policy and the Design and Development Standards and Specifications.

3.1 Natural Area Screening

A NAS is a study intended to identify natural assets using available sources, including, but not limited to, aerial imagery, the Saskatchewan Conservation Data Centre, the Meewasin Natural Areas Inventory and the City's Wetland Inventory. A NAS is required at both the sector planning and concept planning stage, as well as for major infill development, site works or maintenance, as deemed necessary by Administration. At the sector level, Administration engages a qualified consultant to undertake a desktop study. Field studies may be an option if funding is available and any known unique features will be included within the study area. During the concept plan stage and for some smaller scale projects, a field study is required. Project proponents are required to hire a qualified consultant to perform the NAS and submit findings in a detailed report to the Planning & Development Department, as part of the development review process.

Findings in the NAS inform the design and planning of these developments. The findings are used by Administration to determine appropriate regulatory requirements and policy interpretations. That said, many findings from the NAS are recommended best practices and are not regulatory requirements. As a result, proponents may propose alternatives to the recommendations. Other infrastructure or services required for a development can often be seen as having priority over avoiding and mitigating impacts to natural areas. This is partly due to a lack of sound valuation practices around the services offered by natural resources and the cost of losing these services not being consistently built into the analysis of infrastructure service planning. Currently, there is no policy requirement for the recommendations within a NAS to be treated as requirements, further contributing to a lack of enforceability.

3.2 Natural Area Standards

The Natural Area Standards is a draft document intended to guide project proponents through the development process as it relates to natural areas. Once complete and approved, this document will highlight the required submissions, best practices for developing in and around natural areas as well as complimentary land uses which can be used to inform project planning and design.

This document is currently set up to principally act as a guideline document, and as such, there may be challenges requiring use of the standards by external project proponents, as seen with the NAS, Wetland Policy and Contractor Environmental Guidelines. It is worth noting that generic, or one size fits all, regulations for natural areas are difficult and often not recommended as every ecosystem is different. For this reason, standards are intended to operate as a standardized process. The City is piloting an asset management approach to meet individual needs of these areas. Further work is being completed to determine which best practices are suited to become requirements or regulations.

3.3 Wetland Policy

The City's Wetland Policy is the principal means for implementing wetland conservation and mitigation. The Wetland Policy was developed to provide guidance to landowners, developers and City staff on achieving responsible integration of wetlands into the urban environment.

The Wetland Policy identifies criteria for wetland classification, based on a standard assessment method. The Wetland Policy formalizes the City's responsibility to maintain an inventory of wetlands and identifies criteria for when a functional assessment should occur. This assessment identifies the form and function of a wetland, based on the above-noted classification system. The latter part of the Wetland Policy focuses on criteria for when a wetland mitigation plan is required and timing of when this plan is needed in relation to the City's existing development process.

Further work has been underway regarding the standards and practices required to implement the Wetland Policy in a more comprehensive manner. The process for mitigation, which developers are intended to follow, is to avoid where possible, minimize impact if avoidance is not possible and, finally, replace or compensate loss of a wetland area if impacts could not be minimized appropriately. Typically, a wetland mitigation plan is done to either restore wetlands or replace lost wetlands in another location, through a payment-in-lieu fee on a per hectare basis. Since 2013, there have only been two wetland mitigation plans which resulted in compensation, two interchanges and a small agreement in Brighton. There has been very little compensation for wetlands due to the compensation portion of the Wetland Policy being a new initiative with limited precedent in Saskatoon and region. Supporting administrative procedures and development standards may be helpful in providing a consistent framework for this policy's implementation. The Sustainability Department is currently leading a review for improvements to the Wetland Policy, to bring greater awareness to this part of the policy and to bring considerations forward to Council to strengthen its enforceability.

The [Wetland Design Guidelines](#) are a requirement of the Wetland Policy and provide a basic set of guidelines for treatment of wetlands. These guidelines do not currently outline practices for the naturalization of wetlands. Administration intends to update these guidelines, along with the other Wetland Policy Improvements.

3.4 Asset Management Policy

In 2020, City Council adopted the [Corporate Asset Management Policy](#), which includes not only grey infrastructure but also natural assets. The Asset Management strategy and framework complement existing initiatives at the City, while providing additional focus to asset management principles. In the Corporate Asset Management Policy, there are seven principles which should be incorporated into planning decisions around natural assets. These seven principles can be reviewed in greater detail in the Corporate Asset Management Policy, and have only been summarized below:

1. Holistic – an integrated approach that considers the impact of the entire asset life cycle and service level;
2. Service Focused – defines and documents the needs and expectations of customers and residents;
3. Risk-Based – Focuses resources, expenditures, and priorities based upon risk assessments and the corresponding cost/benefit analyses;
4. Innovative – continuous improvements in the City’s Asset Management approach;
5. Value-Based/Affordable – Identification of practices, interventions and operations that aim at reducing the life cycle cost of asset ownership, while maintaining levels of service;
6. Sustainable – Assessment of Asset Management decisions using a Triple Bottom Line sustainability approach with respect to the environment, social equity, and economic responsibility; and
7. Regulatory and legal requirements – To comply with legislation and regulatory requirements enacted by the federal, provincial and the municipal government.

3.5 Design and Development Standards and Specifications

The Design & Development Standards Manual provides process and design details to interested parties who require information about new subdivision developments, infill development and redevelopment of properties in Saskatoon. The standards and specifications laid out in this document are required for approval of major development plans. Under these documents, there is currently very little guidance related to natural areas.

In recent years, Saskatoon has seen a growing willingness from the development community to increase the integration of both green and grey infrastructure. Infrastructure assets, which combine both green and grey infrastructure services, such as naturalized storm ponds, can provide functional, aesthetic and ecological value to a development area. However, while the City has specifications related to storm water drainage through natural courses, they do not include specifications for the riparian area around the pond, which is required for the successful naturalization of an area.

Under the [City's Standard Specifications, Division 1 – General Requirements, Section 01035 Environmental Protection](#), there are requirements for environmental protection, including appropriate recycling, reuse and disposal for waste, surface and groundwater management, fill, spills, environmentally sensitive lands, tree protection and other relevant best practices as they relate to the environment. These specifications deal with management practices during the construction period and do not include requirements for design or planning in and around environmentally significant areas. One of the more significant gaps, related to this, is a lack of guidance for proponents on how to develop or naturalize riparian areas or plan appropriate buffers. Through the Wetland Policy, Administration may ask for this work to be completed; however, there are currently no standards or clear expectations on how this should be achieved.

4. PLANNING TOOLS: DEDICATIONS, DESIGNATIONS, AND REGULATIONS

Land use dedications and designations will be applied to land throughout the development process. Dedications, such as Municipal Reserve or Environmental Reserve, utility parcels and easements, will be planned for during the sector and concept planning stages and implemented during subdivision. The City is not required to pay the landowner for the dedication of these lands. Designations, which dictate appropriate land uses in an area, will be applied throughout; beginning at a high-level, to guide development at the Sector Plan, and increasing in detail as the development process moves through the concept plan stage and zoning.

By the time an individual site development is completed, that site will have, at a minimum, an OCP land use designation and a corresponding zoning district. A park area dedicated as Municipal Reserve will also have an OCP designation and a zoning district. The “stacking” of these various tools is a result of the planning and development process, as required by *the Act*, with each level of the process increasing the level of detail for requirements and expected development conditions of a site. This section will highlight the City’s current practices when applying these tools.



Figure 4 Patricia Row Park in Stonebridge Neighbourhood is shown with all planning regulatory tools currently applied to the site

4.1 Dedications

4.1.1 Municipal Reserve

When land is developed in Saskatoon, in accordance with [Bylaw No. 6537, the Subdivision Bylaw, 1985](#), and *The Act*, the City requires Municipal Reserve to be dedicated as part of that subdivision. The City requires 10% dedication on residential subdivisions, such as neighbourhoods, and 5% dedication for commercial subdivisions, such as

business parks and employment areas. Although Municipal Reserve is not officially dedicated until subdivision, the location and size of the Municipal Reserve sites are planned for during the concept plan stage. This allows for park space to be identified and ensures any remaining dedication is either deferred to future development areas or addressed through money-in-lieu.

The Municipal Reserve may consist of programmable and manicured park area, sport fields and recreational amenity area or naturalized park area. It has become a trend for many new developments to utilize the Municipal Reserve for smaller scale passive opportunities, including linear corridors to accommodate pathways and/or integrated stormwater management areas. This is in addition to having the required core parks with sport fields and other programmable spaces. However, in some cases, this trend has made it challenging to provide sufficient park space for the programming needs, expected by residents.



Figure 5: Hyde Park, Trounce Pond, and Donna L. Birkmaier Parks are shown on the map in Green while the areas dedicated as Municipal Reserve areas are outlined in red.

Since many natural areas are not compatible with many active recreation activities, they are typically not desirable for the Parks Department to accept as part of the Municipal Reserve requirement. Accepting natural areas as Municipal Reserve can result in a deficit of spaces appropriate for sport fields, community facilities and other amenities. For this reason, it may be preferred that naturalized parks are designated as utility parcels or dedicated as an Environmental Reserve, where appropriate, to ensure Saskatoon's growing recreational needs are met in new development areas. Currently, the examples of naturalized park areas within Saskatoon, including Hyde Park and the Northeast Swale, are not dedicated through subdivision, instead are identified as naturalized park areas through the Sector Plan.

It is important to note, however, not all parks are dedicated as Municipal Reserve. A utility parcel may look and function like a park, but not be dedicated as Municipal Reserve. Other buffers or open spaces may be treated in the same way. If a project proponent or the City were to consider removal of a park area, or a significant change of land use, there are steps in place to ensure a public process takes place, and any decisions to remove a park area, once it has been established, is made by City Council at a Public Hearing. If a park area is dedicated Municipal Reserve, *the Act* provides required steps to remove the Municipal Reserve designation. When a park area acts like a Municipal Reserve, Administration follows the same process, treating that area the same way, regardless of dedication.

Details of specific types of parks as well as their requirements and intended function can be found in Saskatoon's [Park Development Guidelines Policy](#), intended to be replaced with new [Park Development Standards](#), which are currently under development.

4.1.2 Environmental Reserve

Under *The Act*, the City can dedicate lands as Environmental Reserve. This can include natural drainage courses, wildlife habitats, significant natural features, land that abuts the bed and shore of any body of water as well as land prone to flooding or instability. The Environmental Reserve does not count towards the amount of Municipal Reserve dedication in a subdivision and does not contribute to the land used to calculate that requirement. To date, the City has never used this dedication and there is currently no procedure for how to identify and prioritize areas that could be suitable for this dedication. In the Park Development Guidelines Policy, Appendices C and D provide some high-level recommendations for what could be considered for Environmental Reserve and how it can fit into the larger distribution of park areas.

4.1.3 Buffers / Utility Parcels

Municipal Utility Parcels are lands provided to the City for the purpose of locating a public work or public utilities. A Municipal Utility Parcel may have a secondary function as park space and may be integrated with Environmental Reserve and/or Municipal Reserve.

Buffer dedications are intended by *The Act* to provide land for a buffer where the use of land is not compatible with use of the subdivision. *The Act* does not require a minimum number of buffers or a minimum size for buffer parcels when they are dedicated. Buffer strips do not count toward Municipal Reserve calculations or dedications; however, the public often perceives these buffer areas to be part of the City's green network and even as an extension of a natural area, in some cases. Under the Park Development Guidelines Policy, storm ponds, right of way and other utility services that may need to run through public lands are recommended to be placed on a buffer or utility parcel and not through Municipal Reserve. This is to ensure programming of Municipal Reserve is never compromised for extended periods of time. As a guideline document, this recommendation currently lacks necessary enforceability to ensure this is a standard practice.

4.2 Conservation Easements

A Conservation Easement is a legal agreement between a grantor (the landowner) and a holder (government agencies, conservation organizations or municipalities) that is registered on title with the objective of protecting and preserving the biological, physical and cultural attributes of the land. This can be an effective tool to use on privately owned land, which contains significant natural areas. Currently the City does not have any conservation easements registered on the title of any other property owner.

4.3 Official Community Plan Land Use Designations

Land uses within the OCP can be used to distinguish natural areas and prevent certain types of development or incompatible land uses from locating within that designated area. This includes the designations of Park, Conservation Area, Utility Area, Special Use Area and Urban Holding. Each of these terms have been defined in the OCP and transcribed below. It is worth noting, to date, both the Park and Conservation Area land designations have not been implemented in practice; however, work is currently underway to align sector plans and concept plans with the new land designations in the OCP. Prior to adding these additional land use designations to the OCP in 2020, parks and natural areas would typically be identified on a land use map as either residential or urban holding areas.

Park

Land designated as “Park” has the potential for greenspace that includes active and/or passive recreation and are further subcategorized and defined in accordance with the Park Development Guidelines Policy.

Conservation Area

Land designated as “Conservation Area” has the potential for the conservation or development of natural areas, naturalized areas, wetlands, and constructed wetlands in accordance with the Park Development Guidelines Policy.

Utility Area

Land designated as “Utility Area” has the potential for parcels or corridors of land to be reserved for above or below ground utility installations and infrastructure and may form part of the green network.

Special Use Area

Land designated as “Special Use Area” has the potential for post-secondary education facilities, airports, cemeteries, railyards, significant open spaces, and major utility installations.

Urban Holding

Land is designated as “Urban Holding” where future land use and/or timing of greenfield development are yet to be established, where existing uses may continue and interim uses may be established.

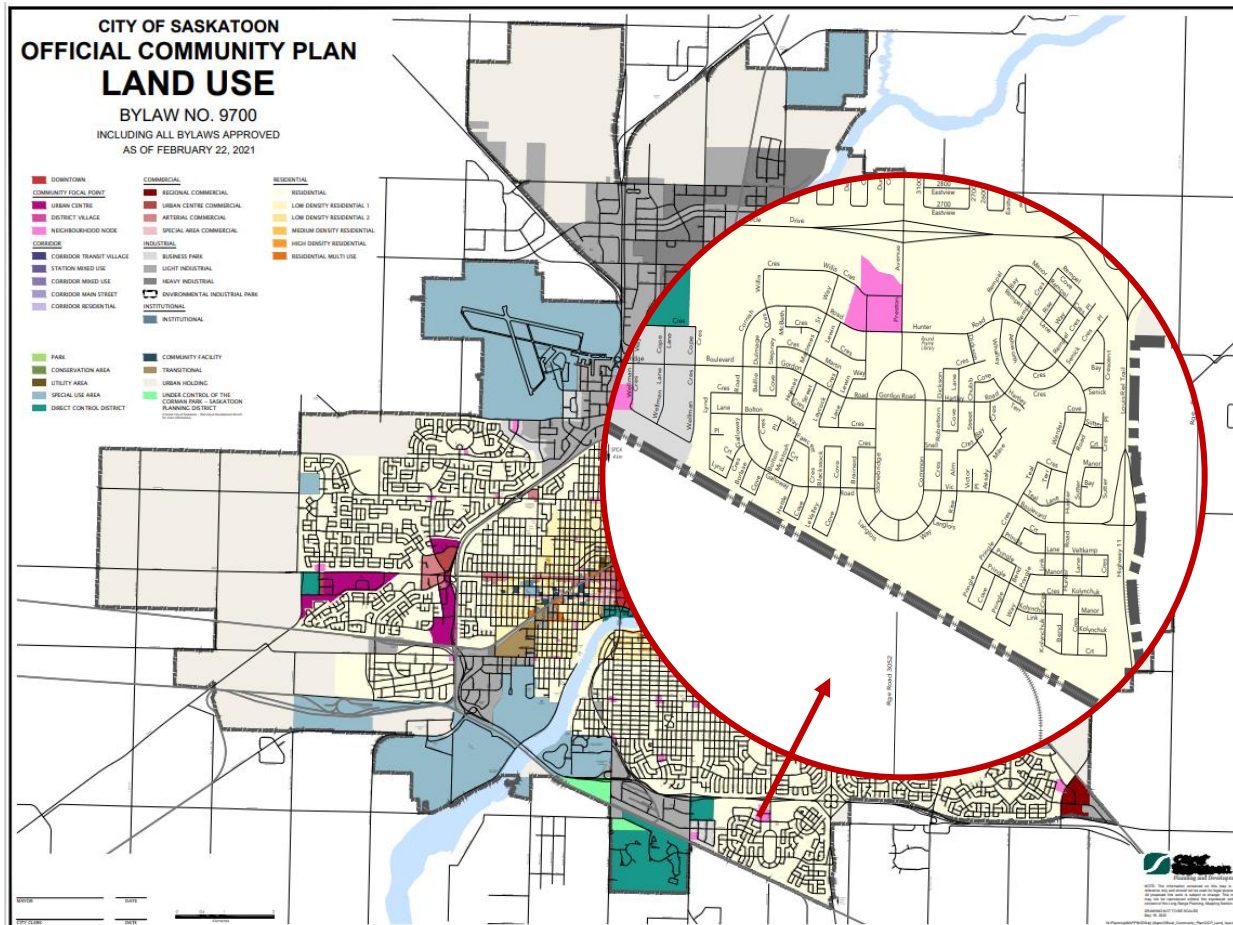


Figure 6 Saskatoon's OCP Land Use Map, parks located in the Stonebridge Neighbourhood are all identified as residential areas.

4.4 Zoning Designations

As part of the development process, natural areas are assigned to a zoning district. The City's Zoning Bylaw does not have a zoning district for parks or conservation areas, rather parks are a land use which can be included in other zoning districts. Natural areas are often designated as residential, future urban development or agricultural zoning which permit parks as a land use. When land is owned by the City, this can result in minimal conflicts as Administration can still create management plans, designate district naturalized parks and work with partners, like Meewasin, to conserve these areas, regardless of the zoning district. In the past, the City has received criticism of this practice due to the perceived lack of protection offered by these zoning districts, in particular, for natural areas and parks that have not been dedicated as Municipal Reserve or Environmental Reserve.

For land not owned by the City, there are no regulations to maintain natural assets on private property. A property owner is allowed to make changes to their site, including removal of trees or other natural assets, provided any new development complies with requirements of the Zoning Bylaw.

4.5 Park Classifications

The City's [Park Development Guidelines](#) Policy is an administrative policy, used to guide the implementation of the OCP concerning the development of parks and recreation open spaces. Parks in Saskatoon can include Municipal Reserve or Environmental Reserve dedicated lands; however, they do not need to be dedicated. In fact, many older parks in Saskatoon are not dedicated. Parks can consist of any publicly owned land the City has chosen to manage as a programmable open space, under the categories outlined in the Park Development Guidelines Policy. Under this policy, natural areas can be included as part of any park category. At this time, the City manages six parks as natural or naturalized areas. These designations as a natural park area do not offer any legal protection and are identified at an administrative level only for operational purposes.

It would be extremely rare for the City to choose to change an area, being operated as a park, into a development site. If changes were proposed to an area acting as Municipal Reserve, Administration would outline the justification for any changes, complete public engagement and bring the request forward to Council at a public hearing.

The following identifies the park categories which are required during the sector and concept plan stages. While detailed design is not completed until later, the required minimum lands for Municipal Reserve will be identified during the concept plan stage. More information on the appropriate size and details for these park categories can be found in the Park Development Guidelines Policy.

Neighbourhood level Parks

Parks which use 61% of the required Municipal Reserve dedication in new development areas can consist of Pocket Parks, Core Parks, Linear Parks and a Village Square Park.

District Parks

Parks which use 36% of the required Municipal Reserve dedication in new development areas are intended to serve the active and passive recreational needs of residents in multiple neighbourhoods, with an emphasis on structured sports. Structured sports typically include support for athletic needs of high school students and young adults, including large sport fields and associated infrastructure.

Multi-District

Parks which use the remaining 3% of the required Municipal Reserve dedication for new development areas accommodate Saskatoon-wide use and require sport fields to be suitable for international levels of competition, in addition to serving specialized leisure requirements and amenities, which are otherwise not served in smaller scaled parks and open spaces.

Natural (or Naturalized) Park Areas

Parks which may be incorporated into any of the above park categories of neighbourhood, district or multi-district, as deemed necessary, during review of new development areas. Typically, naturalized park areas will be identified at a high-level during the concept planning stage, and detailed design and management planning will take place as the area is built out in accordance with the Park Development Guidelines Policy. The following is a list of existing naturalized parks in Saskatoon, and the category of park they help to make up:

- Donna Birkmaier – District Park (Rosewood);
- Hyde Park – District Park (Rosewood);
- Lakewood – Multi-District Park (Lakewood);
- Heritage Park – Multi-District Park (Lakewood);
- Patricia Roe – Neighbourhood Park (Stonebridge); and
- Mark Thompson – Neighbourhood Park (Stonebridge).

Park Area Suitability Matrix				
Park Classifications	Neighbourhood	District Village	Suburban Centre	Industrial Area
Neighbourhood Core	Required	Permitted	Not Permitted	Not Permitted
Pocket	If Necessary	Not Permitted	Not Permitted	Not Permitted
Village Square	Permitted	Permitted	Permitted	Not Permitted
District	Under Special Circumstances	Permitted	Permitted	Under Special Circumstances
Multi-District	Under Special Circumstances	Under Special Circumstances	Permitted	Under Special Circumstances
Natural	If Necessary			
Special Use	Under Special Circumstances			

Figure 7 Excerpt table from the Park Development Guidelines Administrative Policy

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5. GAPS

During the scan of existing policies and processes related to natural areas, several gaps were identified. Throughout the current state summary, gaps have been identified within specific processes and how they relate to natural areas. This section of the report will focus on system-wide gaps which exist at a higher-level and often across processes and work groups. Further gaps to highlight challenges and opportunities will likely be identified as work continues with internal and external stakeholders. Some initial system gaps include:

5.1 Terminology

An initial scan of several civic documents revealed some inconsistency with key terms related to natural areas and how they are defined. Inconsistencies were also noted across different internal departments when reviewing and commenting on development plans. This can result in miscommunication between work groups, resulting in one department having the understanding their conditions have been satisfied, while in practice, the condition is not being adequately met. For example, to some, preservation of a wetland may mean there will be a wetland or storm pond at the end of development from an infrastructure perspective. For others, it would mean a wetland will remain undisturbed throughout the development process. This inconsistency of interpretation can result in drastically different outcomes and a lack of clarity in civic policies. As part of the Green Infrastructure Strategy Implementation Plan, a more comprehensive review of existing terminology is underway, which will consider application of various terms in regulatory and policy documents as well as plain language for communication and public awareness.

5.2 Timing, Coordination, and Prioritization

When a NAS is completed at the sector and concept plan level, some consideration has already been put into the long-term infrastructure development for Saskatoon. As previously noted, planning for future growth along existing major infrastructure results in a more financially sustainable growth model. However, this practice has not always accounted for situations where those major infrastructure lines may intersect with natural areas which have not been adequately studied. By the time reasonable baseline data is available through the screenings, many staff resources may have already been placed into planning of future drainage, storm water, water and sewer trunks, as well as major transportation connections. Budgetary, real estate or planning decisions may have been made which assume the general alignment, shown in a sector plan or other plan, is a confirmed final location. If this happens prior to a more detailed study of the area, it can result in challenges regarding final alignments or design details and how competing priorities are considered.

As further work is completed on the natural areas management pilot projects, additional consideration will need to be placed on how those management plans both inform and are informed by sector and concept planning. Clarifying the timing, scope and process for all projects which may impact natural areas or assets, will be important.

5.3 Valuation

In recent years, Administration has been working to value various natural areas within the Saskatoon Natural Areas Inventory and the services they provide, including carbon sequestration, recreational opportunities, habitats, storm water drainage and more. However, challenges still exist at the development level. Administration is frequently challenged by project proponents on the loss of developable area, in exchange for the preservation or mitigation of natural areas and therefore the loss of earning potential within a development area. While awareness of the benefits natural areas provide has improved, more work could be done to bridge the gap between the perceived loss of developable land and the increase in both market value and quality of life, through the preservation and integration of natural assets in new development areas. Finding a way to better communicate how natural areas benefit all of us and could help provide greater incentive for all parties to consider natural areas in a more comprehensive way during the planning and design process of new projects.

5.4 Enforcement

Planning and designing a development project in and around natural areas doesn't typically work in a one-size-fits-all regulatory approach. As a result, much of the City's wording is around recommendations and best practices, leaving uncertainty on how policy or recommendations may be interpreted by Administration as well as private developers and community members. This lack of concrete policy and regulation can result in some decisions or interpretations being left to the developer to either follow through with or justify alternatives. This is in part due to the City not having a natural areas specific bylaw, which regulates enforcement, and partially due to the nature of diverse ecosystems requiring a level of interpretation and flexibility not typically conducive for setting consistent requirements. As a result of this approach, some natural areas are at a greater risk where loss of developable area or redirection of major infrastructure results in an unappealing cost to the project proponent, as it is easier to trade-off the natural area where many preservation and mitigation tactics are only recommendations and not required.

5.5 Resiliency and Climate Change

Through the City's [Strategic Plan](#), [Climate Action Plan](#) and OCP, Council has recognized the increasing need for the City to improve its long-term resilience, ensuring the City is prepared to mitigate current and future contributions to climate change.

The [Climate Projections and Possible Impacts](#) report outlines possible scenarios for climate impacts in Saskatoon. The [Corporate Climate Adaptation Strategy](#) and the [Natural Capital Asset Valuation](#) report recognizes the role of green infrastructure and natural areas in climate adaptation, such as carbon sequestration. However, detailed information about the contribution of specific assets to climate adaptation is not currently available, and current processes do not have a standardized method of considering climate adaptation as it relates to land development. Tools, such as climate forecasting, are emerging and can help predict what new development areas could look like in the future, when considering threats such as drought or flooding, and can allow for the modelling of different scenarios to determine potential impacts. Natural asset management planning also considers climate risks as part of its methodology. The linkages between climate adaptation and natural assets may be explored further in future stages of the Natural Areas Program. As these tools continue to improve, the City may want to explore these options further to be a leader in resiliency and to better protect civic investments in infrastructure and development against significant climate events.

Conclusion

To Saskatoon and its residents, natural areas have always held a place of importance and provide a great deal of enjoyment and aesthetic value. In recent years, expectations from the community have changed, as has the knowledge of the value natural areas can provide to cities. The City's current approach to identifying and legally protecting natural areas has been criticized as being reactive. Concurrently, there has been an increased demand for transparency and predictability, regarding how the City plans for natural areas and how they are integrated into the urban fabric. As Saskatoon continues to grow, so does the need to formalize and document processes to ensure natural areas are appropriately considered through a transparent, predictable process.

This current state report has highlighted the key components of the development process as it relates to natural areas and the planning tools, designations and dedications the City currently employs, while acknowledging gaps that exist throughout. As part of the implementation of the Green Infrastructure Strategy, the Natural Area Policy and Process project is intended to review, refine and formalize the City's approach to the conservation and management of natural areas, through policy development and process improvements, aiming to close some of these gaps. This work is currently underway and is anticipated to conclude with a policy framework and recommendations in Quarter Four of 2024.