

Approval of Site Enhancement Design and Construction for Richard St Barbe Baker Afforestation Area

ISSUE

Site enhancements at Richard St Barbe Baker Afforestation Area (RSBBAA) are planned as part of the City of Saskatoon's (City) Natural Infrastructure Fund (NIF) Green Network Project. This report seeks approval to proceed with the 2024 RSBBAA Site Enhancement Project (the Project) as described in this report. The scope for design and construction of the Project has been defined by available resources and time constraints of the NIF funding agreement.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Standing Policy Committee on Environment, Utilities, and Corporate Services recommend to City Council that the design and construction of the 2024 RSBBAA Site Enhancement Project be approved.

BACKGROUND

At its regular business meeting on December 19, 2022, City Council received the [Natural Areas Management Pilots - Small Swale and Richard St Barbe Baker Afforestation Area](#) report and approved that Administration proceed with the development of pilots at the Small Swale and RSBBAA. The pilots include the preparation of Natural Area Management Plans and Conceptual Master Plans for each site.

At its regular business meeting on April 26, 2023, City Council received the [Natural Infrastructure Fund Budget Adjustment](#) report and approved, in part, that the capital projects outlined in the report be increased to include funding from NIF. This includes a recommended allocation of \$697,500 towards the Natural Areas Management Pilots project, listed as Activity 1.2.1 in Appendix 1 of the report. As part of the NIF funding, the pilots are required to complete site enhancements at one or both pilot sites.

Engagement Results

Administration has engaged with Meewasin, RSBBAA user groups, and environmental organizations on the Project. These stakeholders are supportive of the Project and discussions with them have informed the location and design of the proposed enhancements.

From June to December 2023, Administration also engaged with stakeholders and the community on the pilots at RSBBAA and the Small Swale. A full engagement report will be provided with the final report on these pilot projects.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Site Enhancement Project, NAMP, and Conceptual Master Plan

While preparing the NIF funding application, an opportunity was identified to carry out site enhancements as a go-early project generated from the development of Natural Area Management Plan (NAMP) Pilots and the Conceptual Master Plans (Plans) for RSBBA and the Small Swale. The Plans identify built elements, drainage, planting, and an establishment plan for each site and go-early opportunities for site enhancements that could be pursued in the short-term, subject to funding.

The go-early opportunities for both sites were reviewed for their potential eligibility under the NIF grant criteria. Eligible NIF projects must:

- Primarily be intended to create, expand, restore, improve, or enhance tangible natural infrastructure or hybrid infrastructure that is primarily of public use or benefit;
- Be substantially completed by December 31, 2024; and
- Be competitively tendered.

Once the NIF eligible improvements were identified, each improvement was assessed for the feasibility to complete the work on time and on budget, the level of risk, ongoing operational impacts, and the alignment with [Green Pathways](#).

Select improvements at RSBBA are recommended for the NIF funded go-early project. Enhancements at the Small Swale were also considered but, after consultation with internal and external stakeholders, improvements at this site are not recommended at this time. Development of a Concept Plan for the University Heights Neighbourhood #3 is underway, and the Small Swale still has active disturbances such as the Central Avenue Snow Storage Facility. As a result, it is not considered feasible to proceed with a NIF funded initiative at the Small Swale. Other opportunities to complete work at the Small Swale could be pursued in the future.

RSBBA Site Enhancement Project Description

This report recommends site enhancements in the eastern portion of RSBBA (Appendix 1), including:

- Five new tree beds comprising approximately 1,800 native trees and shrubs;
- Upgrade of a 940-meter-long dirt trail to a crusher dust trail;
- Two new waste bins located at two parking lot entrances; and
- A swing gate at the southeast parking lot.

The Project is anticipated to have several benefits and address site challenges. The new tree beds will increase tree cover in exposed and windy areas. The existing dirt trail is degraded and uneven, creating access challenges. Upgrading the trail to crusher dust will create a more level surface that is more easily accessed, including by people who use mobility devices and strollers. The addition of two waste bins will encourage proper waste management. The swing gate will discourage unauthorized vehicle access into the site while still allowing maintenance vehicles through.

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Portions of the Project construction will occur within or adjacent to SaskPower and TransGas Easements, and as such, will be subject to approval of these companies prior to construction commencing. Specific conditions of these approval processes may result in minor adjustments to the Project design but are not anticipated to result in changes to the overall scope or cost.

The Project has been reviewed by the City's CPTED Review Committee, which recommended that the fenced planting areas be a minimum of 1 meter away from the edge of the new trail; and that the fencing around the planting areas be visually permeable. Both recommendations have been addressed in the Project design.

Project Schedule

Subject to approval, construction of the Project would occur in 2024, followed by a three-year warranty period in 2025-2027. The Project will be turned over to the Parks and Facilities Departments for operations and maintenance beginning in the spring of 2028.

Risks

The short timeframe and parameters of the NIF Funding create risks for the implementation of this Project. These risks and their mitigation measures are outlined in the table below.

Risk	Mitigation
Projects funded under NIF must be substantially complete by December 31, 2024, which is a short timeframe to complete a construction contract of this type.	The Project design emphasizes work that can be feasibly completed within the required timeframe.
Implementing the Project prior to the approval of the RSBBA Conceptual Master Plan creates a risk that the Project will not be aligned with the overall vision for the area.	The Project design is aligned with the draft Conceptual Master Plan. Key stakeholders have reviewed both the Project design and the draft Conceptual Master Plan and are supportive of the proposed work.
Implementing the Project prior to a level of service being approved for RSBBA creates a risk that the City is investing in assets that cannot be maintained long-term.	The Project has been designed to "stand alone" and does not require additional site work to be successful. The Project has been designed to minimize operating impacts. Operating impacts of the work will be brought forward for consideration in future budget deliberations.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The total capital cost to complete the Project is estimated to be \$430,500. Of this, the City's contribution to the Project is \$195,600, while the total NIF contribution is \$234,900. Funding is available in capital project P.02390.18 – Green Infrastructure Strategy (Natural Areas Management – Pilots and Policy Development).

In 2028, an operating impact of the Project for the Parks and Facilities Departments is estimated to be \$19,600.

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

There are no privacy or legal implications identified.

Meewasin

Since the Project site is within Meewasin's Conservation Zone it is subject to their development review process and will be submitted in Q1 for consideration. Feedback or approval conditions may result in minor changes to the Project detailed design.

Conversations with Meewasin are ongoing regarding a potential role in natural area site management, and the alignment of the Project and the Natural Area Management Plan pilots with Meewasin's exploration of a potential National Urban Park.

Triple Bottom Line Considerations

The Project has undergone a Triple Bottom Line review to identify sustainability considerations, which were incorporated into the Project design. Some of these are listed below.

- Since there is no water access on site, the Project will reduce water use during tree establishment by planting drought-hardy tree species and using weed mats that conserve water.
- Environmental surveys and tree protection measures will be completed prior to the trail enhancements to ensure there is no damage or disruption to existing trees or sensitive species.
- The crusher dust trail will enhance accessibility to the site, including for people who use mobility devices and strollers.

Other RSBBA Partners

The Project is expected to have positive or neutral impacts to the existing site users. Two of the formal RSBBA user groups, Friends of the Saskatoon Afforestation Areas Inc. and the Fatlanders Fat Tire Brigade Inc., actively collaborated with the City on the Project design and are supportive of the proposed enhancements. The third formal user group, Cedar Villa Bicycle Trails Inc., has been consulted on the Project and has informed the City that the Project will have minimal impacts on their designated skills biking area, which is located on the west side of RSBBA.

Users of the nearby Southwest Off-Leash Recreation Area (SWOLRA) are anticipated to see a moderate benefit through the addition of a waste bin at the SWOLRA parking lot, and improved access for those accessing the SWOLRA from the southeast parking lot. Additional site users with no formal user agreements are expected to be positively impacted, especially from the trail improvements, which will improve the condition of the current trail and widen it, thereby reducing conflicts between trail users.

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During trail construction, users will experience a short-term disruption and will be redirected to alternate site entrances and trails. Site users will be informed of the disruption through a communications plan, which will include on-site signage.

NEXT STEPS

Subject to approval by City Council and Meewasin, an open competition to secure a contractor will be conducted in Q1 2024. Construction of the project will proceed in Q2, and will be substantially completed by December 31, 2024, per the NIF funding timelines.

A communication plan will be developed, considering the specific needs and interests of stakeholders, community members, and user groups, including those consulted during the engagement process. This list includes community associations, environmental advocacy groups, and Meewasin. Any closures or access restrictions due to construction will be communicated proactively.

The Natural Area Management Plans and Conceptual Master Plans for RSBBA and the Small Swale are being finalized and will be brought forward to Council in Q1-2 2024. The Natural Area Management Plan pilots for both sites will inform an operations and maintenance plan, including operations and maintenance needs, desired level of service, and roles and responsibilities for these sites.

APPENDICES

1. RSBBA Site Enhancement Project – Detailed Design

Report Approval

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