

National Urban Park Exploration 2024 – 2025 Update

ISSUE

The City of Saskatoon (City) has been working with project lead Meewasin Valley Authority (Meewasin), Parks Canada (program leader and project partner), rightsholders, Indigenous organizations and key stakeholders in the exploration of a potential National Urban Park (NUP) designation. This report provides an update on work underway exploring the feasibility of a NUP within Saskatoon and area, and further information on the Indigenous Cultural Spaces project that is being delivered as part of the NUP by the City.

BACKGROUND

On August 4, 2021, a joint public announcement was made regarding funding from the Federal Government for Meewasin to lead a regional project to undertake a feasibility study to explore potential models for the formalization of an Urban Park in Saskatoon and region.

City Council, at its Regular Business meeting on August 30, 2021, approved in part:

- “2. That the City of Saskatoon be an active partner in collaboration with Meewasin on the recently announced feasibility study for an Urban Park model in Saskatoon.”

The Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services at its meeting on September 12, 2022, received a presentation from Laurel Carlton (Parks Canada) and Mike Velonas (Meewasin) providing an update on the NUP Exploration work. The Committee made the following resolution:

“That the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services request Administration work with the Meewasin Valley Authority and other partners involved in the National Urban Park Exploration on the potential of including a table of elected representatives to be included in the governance process, and report back.”

The Governance and Priorities Committee, at its meeting on June 12, 2024, received the report titled National Urban Park Exploration – Update ([Report, Append 1](#)). Parks Canada and Meewasin attended the meeting.

The Government of Canada’s [Interim National Urban Parks Policy](#) became effective July 22, 2024. The policy enables Parks Canada to designate NUPs and set parameters for their development. [Supplemental program information](#) on creating new national parks, process, and governance is also available from Parks Canada.

The NUP Model could progress [Saskatoon’s Official Community Plan, Bylaw 9700. NUP](#) aligns with City Council’s [2022-2025 Strategic Plan](#) in the following ways:

- Reconciliation, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion outcome: “There is an increased community awareness and understanding of systemic racism and a commitment to redress past harms” with a key action being “Create spaces where all community members feel safe and welcomed to ensure cultural identities and living experiences are reflected in the community.
- Recreation, Sport and Leisure outcome: “Recreation, parks, sport, cultural facilities and programs are accessible, inclusive and meet changing community needs.
- Environmental Sustainability outcome, where “the green network is integrated, managed and enhanced to protect land, air and water resources”.
- In the Quality of Life and Public Safety outcome: NUP advances “welcoming and inclusive public infrastructure, space and natural assets that bring people together”.

CURRENT STATUS

National Urban Park Policy Framework

The Government of Canada defines NUP as places of natural or historical significance to the nation, located in or near a major city in Canada, that are managed in ways that contribute to three core objectives: conserving nature; connecting people with nature; and advancing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. They are typically large, predominantly natural areas that may consist of existing natural areas or areas that are being restored to a more natural condition. A NUP may be one large area or a group of smaller areas that do not need to be physically connected to each other.

Parks Canada is studying candidate NUPs in consultation with collaborators, such as Indigenous governments, municipalities, provinces, and federal organizations. The core objectives guide the creation and management of a network of NUPs across Canada. The proposed network of NUPs across Canada includes Meewasin, the greater Edmonton area, Halifax, St. John’s, Victoria, Windsor, and Winnipeg.

The network of NUPs would include areas managed under a range of flexible governance models, including federally administered places, third party administered places, and partnership models. The Meewasin Valley Authority model of governance, and its mandate to balance conservation of habitat with public access to natural spaces and carefully managed development, acts as a precedent for the network.

National Urban Park Exploration Roles

With Parks Canada as the sponsor and Meewasin as the project leader, the NUP Exploration for Saskatoon and Area has also been guided by a broadly representative Steering Committee including:

- City of Saskatoon;
- Government of Saskatchewan;
- Meewasin Valley Authority;
- Metis Nation Saskatchewan, Western Region IIA;

- Parks Canada;
- RM of Corman Park;
- Saskatchewan North Partnership for Growth (P4G);
- Saskatoon Tribal Council;
- University of Saskatchewan; and
- Wanuskewin Heritage Park.

The City of Saskatoon is both a governing partner with Meewasin and is a key stakeholder / steering committee member in this NUP work. City Administration subject matter experts have been supporting the work through involvement from the following departments: Indigenous Initiatives, Sustainability, Parks, Planning and Development, Recreation and Community Development, Transportation, Facilities Management, Communications and Public Engagement, Saskatoon Fire, Finance and Solicitors.

Steps Toward National Urban Park Designation

There are four steps defined in the process to reach operation as a NUP. Appendix 1 in report: National Urban Park Exploration – Update ([Report, Append 1](#)) provides a full summary overview of the activities, outcomes and deliverables throughout the process and highlights the four steps of: 1) Pre-Feasibility; 2) Planning; 3) Designation; and 4) Implementation.

Study Area

Boundaries in this context of the NUP for Saskatoon and area would be a policy designation and would not change ownership of the land. Discussions related to potential boundaries for a NUP in the Saskatoon area have focused on some key issues as follows:

- 1) The boundary needs to be feasible for potential designation, targeting early 2026;
- 2) The NUP is to be focused on urban and near-urban areas; and
- 3) Parks Canada anticipates that certain kinds of land-use will not be included in NUPs (e.g., residential areas, commercial developments).

Why Pursue a National Urban Park Designation?

The NUP initiative is significant and could allow Meewasin resources to work with many partners and the public to shape and improve urban open spaces into the future and within the fast-paced growth of the Saskatoon region. An expanded NUP model has potential for positive implications for the environment in and around Saskatoon, for the region, and for Saskatchewan. NUPs have great promise to:

- Conserve and restore nature in cities;
- Foster economic activity and improve natural capital asset valuation;
- Help cities manage climate change risks and impacts such as floods and heat waves;
- Improve access to nature and connections to the land for people living in cities;
- Conserve and share cultural heritage;
- Improve quality of life and benefit health; and
- Advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

Phase 1: Pre-Feasibility

Pre-Feasibility is the initial stage of the NUP Exploration, with work in this phase considering the opportunities and requirements of a formalized and expanded urban park area. This phase was completed in July 2024, with the delivery of [the Pre-Feasibility Report](#).

The Pre-Feasibility Report proposes that the NUP in the Saskatoon region would build on the strengths and success of the Meewasin's experience in operating a local urban park over the last 45 years. As a collaborative, registered charitable organization that spans multiple jurisdictions, Meewasin has many established partnerships and is well positioned to manage an enhanced NUP. In the Saskatoon region, the NUP would not be a federally governed or administered park, according to the Pre-Feasibility Report. The Meewasin Valley Authority would act as the lead partner, or site manager, and the model under consideration, which suggests that Meewasin would coordinate park operations with partners. The report identifies that a designated NUP would be governed under the existing *Meewasin Valley Authority Act*.

The Pre-feasibility Report identifies how the Saskatoon and Area exploration aligns with three core objectives of the NUP Program: conserving nature; connecting people with nature; and advancing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

- *Conservation of nature:* The Meewasin Valley is an area with high quality biodiversity and considerable areas of native prairie grasslands, one of the most ecologically valuable and threatened ecosystems in the world. Other ecosystems such as wetlands and forest/shrublands are also present. The Meewasin Valley is home to a highly diverse environment with a high variety of plant species and bird species, and numerous mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and insects.
- *Connecting people with nature:* More than a third of the population of Saskatchewan resides within 15km of the Meewasin Valley Corridor. Over 325 classrooms are educated annually in the study area and there are over 107km of trails. There are multiple public and active transit routes that connect with the Meewasin Valley, with additional opportunities for enhancements for those that live further away. The study area averages over 2 million visits per year, with usage doubling during the pandemic.
- *Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples:* The Meewasin Valley includes areas of significant historical and cultural value to First Nations and Métis people, including archaeological sites as well as places that continue to be used for cultural practices today. Culturally significant areas will be explored further as this project continues. Parks Canada and Meewasin Valley Authority are in ongoing dialogue with Saskatoon Tribal Council member First Nations, the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan, Western Region 2A to explore opportunities for First Nations and Métis communities to access and reconnect with the lands and waters in the Meewasin Valley.

Other key considerations for the Saskatoon region identified in the Pre-Feasibility Report include, having a boundary that creates a connected corridor, ensuring a willing buyer, willing seller approach for any potential future land securement, no new or additional federal regulations, and establishing sustainable, long-term federal funding.

Parks Canada has confirmed that the Saskatoon region candidate completed the Pre-Feasibility Phase of the NUP process and has allowed the project to shift to the next step in the NUPs' designation process, the Planning Phase.

Phase 2: The Planning Phase

The work of the NUP Planning Phase is underway and includes: refinement of the vision, governance and boundaries; planning to define and prioritize capital investments and operational needs; and stakeholder engagement.

In March 2024, Lord Cultural Resources, duToit Allsopp Hillier and Environmental Dynamics Ltd. commenced work on a Draft Conceptual Capital and Operating Plan (C&O Plan). The C&O Plan is founded on the development to date of the vision, boundaries and governance work completed for the Feasibility Study (refer to Appendix 1). The goal for the C&O Plan is to assess current aspects of Meewasin and understand the gaps that would need to be bridged with further investment if the decision is made to pursue a NUP designation for the Saskatoon region.

For this exploration, a staged approach has been taken to first consider the boundary area with the greatest feasibility at the time of designation, and then review expansion opportunities post-designation. For the initial phase of the boundary designation, the focus has been on lands within the Meewasin Valley jurisdiction, with the area of interest having a land area of 6700ha. Parks Canada has been working with partners to determine which areas of the Meewasin jurisdiction should be included within the NUP, and to identify any additional areas of natural or cultural significance that could be considered for inclusion within a potential park boundary.

The C&O Plan includes four strategy areas which work collectively to propose an ideal future state for the potential NUP, based on partnership and collaboration. The intent is that Truth and Reconciliation actions are woven through each strategy. The four strategies are:

- Visitor Experience: a visitor-centric approach to how visitors encounter and experience Meewasin.
- Access: Key updates to the 2014 Trail Study to reflect changes of the last ten years, incorporate new best practices, and to support the visitor experience strategy.
- Conservation: Clarifies the Meewasin's definition of conservation and prioritizes conservation goals and targets.
- Administration: Assess Meewasin's current operations and outlines what changes would be necessary for Meewasin to have an operational capacity to implement the recommendations outlined in the strategies.

The C&O Plan is currently at the draft state and is being used to generate content in the planning and development of engagement for the community, stakeholders, and rightsholders. At the time of the preparation of this report, Meewasin was leading the procurement of consultant services for engagement planning and delivery. Meewasin anticipates that an engagement plan will be developed within Q2, and engagement events will be held between June and September 2025, with an engagement report to follow.

City Administration's Letter of Continued Support

From January-March 2025, Meewasin and Parks Canada were working on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for continued work on the NUP. The City Administration provided a letter of support, restating the City's commitment to assist Meewasin as it leads this next phase of work and in Meewasin's delivery of planning tasks including:

- Execution of a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Meewasin and Parks Canada that expresses the work completed so far on the proposed NUP project and outlines a shared vision and a framework to continue to negotiate designation under the National Urban Parks Policy;
- Conducting stakeholder, Indigenous, and public engagement and delivery of a summary of this engagement;
- Progressing budget and investment planning; and
- Other work needed to progress the proposal for NUP designation.

The City has based this support on the following shared understanding:

- A NUP in the Saskatoon region would not be federally administered.
- Designation will not impose new or additional federal regulations.
- Critical path steps to designation will be shared with partners.
- A proposal will be developed that details: finalized vision, boundaries and governance; how Parks Canada funding can enhance the park; how program objectives will be met; budget; and investment priorities.
- Parks Canada and Meewasin have confirmed that current funding partners will not need to contribute any additional money over and above their current funding arrangements to fulfill the steps to get to a designation agreement by March 31, 2026.
- The project is subject to Parks Canada securing ongoing sustainable, long-term federal funding.
- Roles and responsibilities of each partner in the governance model will be discussed and agreed upon prior to designation.
- Plan for public engagement will be developed and shared with partners.
- Plan for First Nations and Métis engagement will be developed with First Nation and Métis partners.
- All risks and responsibilities associated with managing lands within the proposed park boundary remain with the landowner.

The Government of Canada and the NUP initiative has set the project deliverables for the Planning phase as: budget and investment plan prepared in draft; MOU signed between Parks Canada and the proponent (Meewasin); summary of stakeholder and public engagement published; and agreement to proceed to negotiation. Meewasin and Parks Canada anticipate that the project will move to the Designation phase after public engagement is concluded in Q4 2025.

The Indigenous Cultural Spaces Project

The City along with partner organizations Meewasin, Wanuskewin Heritage Park, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan Health Authority, Saskatoon Police Service and the Saskatchewan Indigenous Cultural Centre (Partnership Circle) are working together to create spaces with guidance from Knowledge Keepers that allow for teaching, learning and cultural revitalization while also supporting mental, physical, spiritual and emotional well-being.

In March of 2023 a Gathering was hosted by the group of partners committed to the common goal of improving quality of life of Indigenous people. Clear direction was provided at this Gathering for the Partnership Circle to investigate and plot a course to develop a suitable space, or spaces, dedicated to cultural practices within or close to the Saskatoon urban footprint.

In October of 2023, another Gathering was hosted in conjunction with a fire ceremony hosted by Meewasin. The Gathering was organized around 4 main themes: Urban Cultural Spaces, Traditional Knowledge and Stories, Traditional Plants and Uses and Natural Areas and Green Spaces.

Youth have been an integral part of the Gatherings, serving, listening, reflecting and presenting. A specific youth engagement was also held at the end of March 2025.

Some initial work has been developed such as an environmental scan of existing cultural spaces, and a bylaw and barrier scan.

Another Gathering was held in May 2025, where the dialogue continued, intergenerational knowledge was shared, and the vision, governance and site considerations for the urban cultural space(s) were discussed. Participants included Knowledge Keepers, resource people and representatives from rightsholders and Indigenous organizations and youth.

Following the Gathering, a clearer path forward will be developed setting out project management, a business case and a funding plan, site analysis, a master plan, public engagement, design, construction and operations. Reports to Council will be completed at the appropriate stages.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The Government of Canada has committed funding to the City of Saskatoon for work to support and progress the NUP exploration. Funding received from the Government of Canada from September 2023 to March 2025 for research, analysis, communications, Indigenous Cultural Spaces planning and support, and administration totalled

\$220,899.71. The City expects to receive approximately \$215,000 in additional funding from the Government of Canada for work between April 2025 and March 2026.

Parks Canada and Meewasin have confirmed that current funding partners will not need to contribute any additional money over and above their current funding arrangements to fulfill the steps to get to a designation agreement by March 31, 2026. Costs for future park priorities and enhancements beyond designation would be discussed and agreed upon. Any additional funding from the City would require Council approval.

Further project work is required to develop a proposal that details how Parks Canada funding can enhance the park; how program objectives will be met; governance; budget and investment priorities. Work will continue throughout 2025 to define the full scope, phases and the financial implications for the NUP.

As stated in the support letter, implementation of the project is subject to Parks Canada securing ongoing sustainable long-term federal funding.

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Economic

The Meewasin Valley plays a significant role in attracting and retaining residents and businesses to Saskatoon. The Saskatoon Regional Economic Development Authority's (SREDA) estimate of the economic value of Meewasin Valley's natural Capital in 2017 is \$182 million. Natural capital assets occupy 14% of the City's current footprint and offer a wide range of benefits to the community in the form of supporting, regulating, cultural and provisioning ecosystem services. A NUP could further support promotion of tourism, contributing to the municipal economy. Furthermore, managed natural areas and park space also positively contribute to the land value of areas and neighbourhoods near the amenity.

Environmental

Designation of NUP sites would have notable environmental benefits including the long-term protection of significant natural areas in the city and the preservation of critical remaining habitat. Critical habitat in Saskatoon is currently under threat from urban development, fragmentation and invasive species. The phased approach could support the designation of habitat corridors to connect natural areas and improve the viability of the sites. Restoration of key sites and connectivity through an Urban Park reduces habitat threats. Additionally, the protection and restoration of natural areas would have significant climate adaptation benefits, such as carbon sequestration and mitigation of climate related risks such as wildfires, droughts and overland flooding.

Social

Social distancing measures related to COVID-19 highlighted the importance of residents' connection to nature for mental and physical health. The designation of an interconnected Urban Park would help ensure all residents of Saskatoon have access to natural space and improve overall equity and access to Saskatoon's green infrastructure. Additionally, there are significant opportunities to work in partnership with

Indigenous rights-holders; both to acknowledge and support their long-term relationship and stewardship of this land and to determine ways that ongoing Indigenous stewardship of natural areas can be fully supported.

There are no privacy or legal implications with this report. As work on this NUP Exploration continues, future reporting will identify any implications and/or decision points for the City.

NEXT STEPS

The NUP in the Saskatoon area is still in the exploratory phase and no decisions have been made at this time. The City continues to be an active member on the NUP Steering Committee and staff from across several departments continue to be involved in this exploration work. Planning is progressing for engagement on the NUP with the Community, First Nations, and Metis, to be carried out through Q2-Q3 2025. There is currently a targeted timeline of March 2026 for potential NUP designation and many activities between now and then will continue to be worked through.

As progress continues, Administration will bring further reports to this committee for updates and when there is a requirement for any City approvals.

APPENDICES

1. Vision, Boundaries and Governance

Report Approval

Written by:	Jeanna South, Director of Sustainability
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Approved by:	Jeff Jorgenson, City Manager

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