

Portfolios for Natural and Naturalized Areas

ISSUE

Natural and naturalized areas deliver essential municipal services such as storm water management, flood prevention, and carbon storage; provide multiple benefits to residents such as recreation and access to nature; and often require fewer resources to maintain than conventional landscaping.

The development of two interconnected portfolios of work is underway to better support natural and naturalized areas. This report provides an update on both portfolios and summarizes funding available to support this work.

BACKGROUND

At its regular business meeting on June 27, 2022, City Council received the [Green Infrastructure 10-Year Implementation Plan](#) report and unanimously resolved: “That Pathways for an Integrated Green Network, an implementation plan for the Green Infrastructure Strategy, be approved in principle.” High priorities in the implementation plan include actions to support healthy, thriving natural areas and connected, enhanced green spaces:

- 1.1: Protect prioritized natural areas through policies and processes
- 1.2: Manage and restore natural areas through Natural Area Management Plans
- 1.3: Create partnerships to support Indigenous land management
- 1.4: Integrate natural assets into the City’s asset management system
- 1.5: Expand the naturalized park program
- 2.3: Naturalize and restore non-park green spaces

At the 2022/2023 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget Deliberations, the Natural Area Management Plan – Templates and Pilots, and Natural Areas Policy and Process Development projects were presented as a [combined Business Plan Option](#) and received funding to proceed in 2022-2023. Both projects then [received funding](#) to proceed to the next phases at the 2024/2025 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget Deliberations.

At the Governance and Priorities Committee meeting on August 16, 2023, the committee received the [2024 – 2035 Major Capital Funding Plan](#) report and resolved: “That the Governance and Priorities Committee approve in principle the 2024-2035 Major Capital Funding Plan as presented (Option 1).” The Plan included a recommended allocation of \$3M in 2026 and \$3M in 2027, towards the Green Network – Natural Areas Program.

The 2023 Climate Action Progress Report [EUCS2024-1201] was presented to City Council as information on December 10, 2024. The [report](#) includes information on the Green Network, through an inventory and Green Pathways report card. The implementation and quantification of nature-based climate solutions will be key to

achieving the City’s net-zero emissions target and will play a critical role in preparing the community for a changing climate.

Direction to support natural areas and naturalization are further supported through the City of Saskatoon’s (City) [Official Community Plan Bylaw 9700](#) (2020), [Pathways to a Sustainable Urban Forest](#) (2022), and [Water Conservation Strategy](#) (2022).

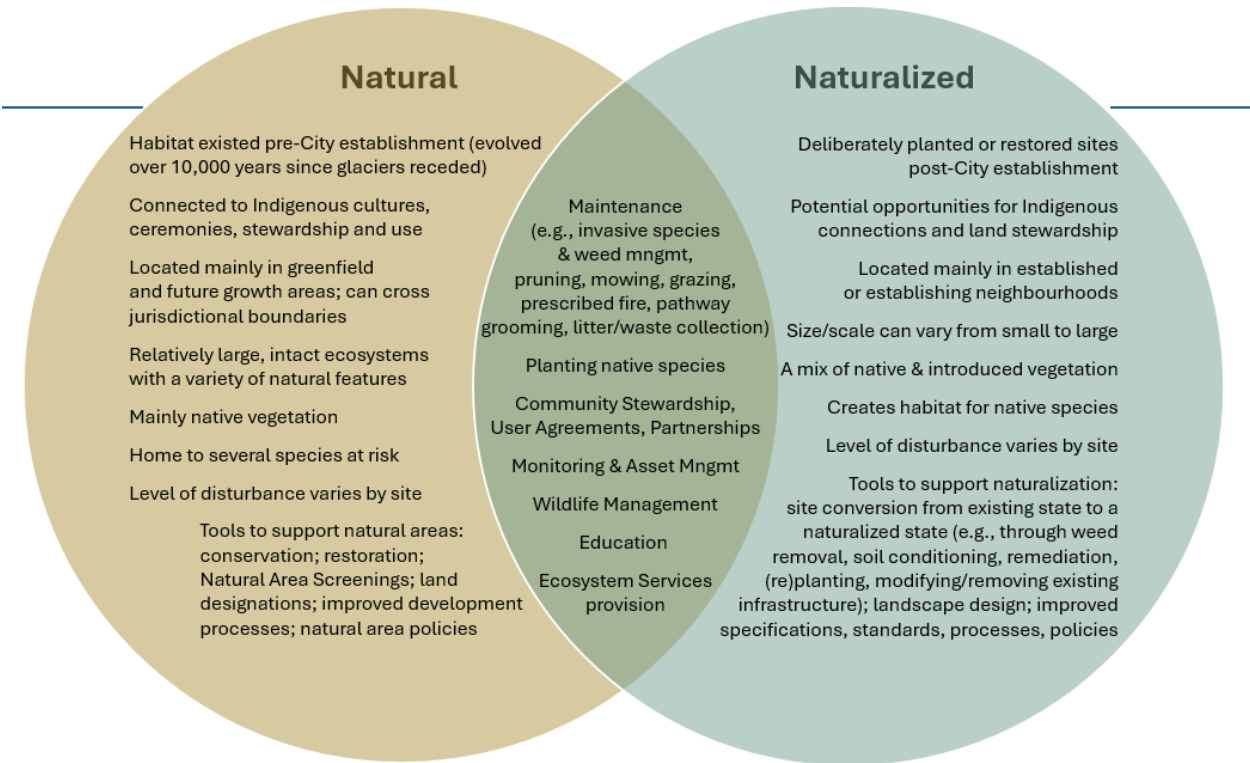
A summary of public engagement results related to Natural and Naturalized Areas is included in Appendix 1.

CURRENT STATUS

Natural areas are ecosystems that existed prior to the City’s establishment. They include the South Saskatchewan River, wetlands and grasslands such as those found in the Northeast Swale, and forests. Naturalized areas are sites deliberately developed with predominantly native vegetation through plantings or natural regeneration. They include sites like Donna Birkmaier and Hyde Park. In 2019, Meewasin completed a [Natural Areas Inventory](#) for the City, which describes the types, extent, and health of natural and naturalized areas in Saskatoon.

While there are distinctions between natural and naturalized areas, they share several interconnected priorities and can benefit from similar planning and operational approaches. The figure below provides a summary of the distinctions and similarities.

Figure 1: The Interconnections Between Natural and Naturalized Areas



Natural and naturalized areas provide substantial benefits to the City and community, as documented in a [Natural Capital Asset Valuation](#) pilot project that was presented to City Council in 2020.

Multiple City initiatives are underway that aim to improve the identification, conservation, and management of natural and naturalized areas. These include:

- In 2023, the City established a Green Network Program to support implementation of the City's [Green Infrastructure Strategy](#) and its implementation plan, [Green Pathways](#).
- In 2024, City Council approved in principle [Natural Area Management and Master Plans](#) (NAMPs) for the Small Swale and Richard St Barbe Baker Afforestation Area (RSBBAA). Discussions are underway with City staff and Meewasin on options and resources for management at these sites. Additional [priority sites](#) in need of NAMPs have also been identified. Administration is also preparing a Natural Asset Framework, which defines how natural assets can be integrated into the City's asset management system.
- The City adopted the [Wetland Policy \(C09-041\)](#) in 2013. This policy provides direction for the City to maintain an inventory of wetlands and requires that wetland mitigation plans be developed during the neighbourhood concept plan process. It also establishes requirements to avoid, minimize, and compensate for wetlands that may be impacted during development. Since 2021, work has been underway to develop recommendations for policy updates and improvements.
- Administration has prepared a Natural Area Policy Framework, which defines the processes needed to identify, prioritize, conserve, and manage natural areas and assets. The policy framework was [presented in an information report](#) to the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development, and Community Services in January 2024. The report includes a [Current State Summary](#), which outlines the City's current approach to natural areas identification and regulation. It also includes a summary of [Natural Area Policy Tools](#) that could be explored further. Several of the policy tools identified are currently being explored, including: a natural area policy, Natural Area Screening improvements, natural areas mapping and prioritization tool, and design and development standards.
- Supported by the federal [Natural Infrastructure Fund \(NIF\)](#), several City projects are proceeding with activities that support natural areas, including RSBBAA, as well as naturalization through land development and green space enhancements. The City's NIF projects are nearing completion.
- The Parks department leads coordination, delivery, and management of the Naturalized Parks Program. As of 2025, the City has 17 Naturalized Parks (12 City managed and 5 City-Meewasin managed), which make up approximately 11% of the Parks inventory.
- The Indigenous Land Use Foundations (Foundations) project is identifying options for the City to support Indigenous land uses and cultural spaces. Specific recommendations will be brought forward in early 2026 and could be coordinated with the implementation of natural and naturalized projects.

- Through the [Water Conservation Strategy](#), administration is seeking additional opportunities to upgrade irrigation equipment and automate manually irrigated parks to optimize watering and reduce costs, while maintaining healthy vegetation. A near-term priority includes working towards transitioning 5% of current irrigated park area to a naturalized state to reduce long-term maintenance, increase biodiversity, and improved habitat connectivity.

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS

The initiatives outlined above seek to protect, manage, and restore natural assets and ecosystems in the Green Network, while also supporting community activities such as recreation, education, and cultural uses. Natural and naturalized sites can provide essential balance and livability to urban growth and enhance resilience for urban areas from the impacts of climate change.

While natural and naturalized areas provide substantial benefits to Saskatoon and residents, they face threats (described in Appendix 2) that limit their service delivery. Initiatives that are currently underway are beginning to address these issues but are limited in scope and breadth.

By improving the health and resilience of ecosystems through protection, restoration, and management of natural and naturalized areas, outcomes can be achieved such as reducing flood risk, decreasing emissions and other pollution, improving climate resilience, enhancing community access to nature, and protecting biodiversity. This report outlines an initiative involving two interconnected portfolios of work for Saskatoon's natural and naturalized areas (the Portfolios), which have been developed to support these important outcomes. It details the scope of the Portfolios that was introduced in the 2024/2025 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget and is now proposed for funding through the 2026-2027 Major Capital Funding Plan.

Deliverables

The Portfolios initiative deliverables will:

- Identify goals, targets, and priorities related to natural areas and naturalization to establish clear objectives for the City.
- Improve planning, design, construction, establishment, maintenance, and capital renewal processes.
- Examine/audit site conditions to identify priority sites and opportunities for restoration or naturalization.
- Update or create standards, specifications, policies, guidelines, and procedures to better support natural and naturalized areas.
- Determine a process to transition suitable green spaces to the City's Naturalized Parks Program.
- Identify levels of service, asset management, and operating implications of this work.
- Complete engagement, design, and on-the-ground enhancements at key sites.
- Identify ways to better enable community stewardship (e.g. planting, watering, invasive species removal, harvesting, education, etc.) within the green network.

- Enhance capacity building and education for key stakeholders.

While delivery of these outcomes will be coordinated by the Sustainability department, several departments will help lead and/or be engaged in this work including Parks, Planning & Development, Recreation & Community Development, Indigenous Initiatives, and Communications & Public Engagement.

Major Capital Funding

To progress this work and support tangible and on-the-ground outcomes, a capital project valued at \$6 million (\$3 million in 2026 and \$3 million in 2027) is proposed through the [2024–2035 Major Capital Funding Plan](#) (Option 1: Green Network – Natural Areas Program).

Implementing the Portfolios through a single, financed initiative will ensure that interdepartmental collaboration is supported; and construction and maintenance activities, process improvements, and asset management are coordinated. This will also maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of funding and staff time, as multiple phases and a broad spectrum of the Portfolios can be planned and executed together. Since natural and naturalized areas share several interconnected priorities and can benefit from similar planning and operational approaches, this Major Capital initiative will support activities that progress the Portfolios by addressing the unique needs of each while also finding efficiencies and coordination through overlapping goals and needs.

The Portfolios initiative will focus on the following areas:

1. **Natural Areas:** Roll-out policies, procedures, and asset management approaches to effectively conserve, restore, and manage priority natural areas.
2. **Naturalization:** Improve processes to support naturalized green spaces throughout the City.
3. **On the Ground Projects:** Implement on-the-ground natural and naturalized area improvements to see tangible benefits.
4. **Community Stewardship:** Create a formalized approach to accommodate community-led stewardship within natural and naturalized areas.
5. **Nature-Friendly Initiatives:** Explore opportunities to embed nature-friendly policies into the City's processes, which may include instruments such as Bird-Friendly Measures, Dark Sky Policy, and wildlife monitoring initiatives.

Rationale

The proposed work will result in multiple benefits (see Appendix 2); and will also address gaps in the City's approach to natural areas and naturalization, thereby mitigating risks to these distinct areas.

Natural Areas: Natural areas currently account for about 14% of the City's footprint, and many of these areas are degraded and unmanaged. While the City's role in natural area and green space stewardship is broadly defined in the [Official Community Plan](#), there is limited detail on how to identify, prioritize, and integrate natural areas within the

City's footprint sensitively, effectively, and comprehensively. Moreover, there are few standards, policies, or procedures for staff, developers, or contractors to follow in project planning, design, procurement, construction, establishment, maintenance, monitoring, or enforcement related to natural areas.

Identifying and maintaining, or restoring, high priority natural areas and bringing these sites under formal stewardship through effective policy, processes, and asset management will maximize ecosystem services, improve consistency and coordination between departments, enable staff and developers to follow clear processes, and improve efficiency in project planning and neighbourhood development.

Naturalization: There is currently no clear approach for City staff, developers, or contractors to follow when planning, designing, constructing, establishing, maintaining, or monitoring naturalized green spaces. This has led to knowledge gaps, insufficient resourcing, inconsistent Levels of Service, and unmanaged or under-managed sites.

While the City's Parks Department does operate a Naturalized Parks Program, the program does not currently address the full scope of parks, green spaces, and storm ponds that are (or could be) naturalized, and it does not currently have resourcing to take on additional management or sites. Improving processes to broadly support naturalization could improve the state of existing naturalized areas and provide guidance - from project planning to maintenance - when establishing new naturalized areas or bringing new sites under City management.

On the Ground Projects: Natural area restoration projects and naturalization enhancements require different design, construction, and maintenance approaches than conventional park upgrades and landscaping. Restoration and enhancements of sites will increase service provision, maximize public benefits, and reduce operational costs over the long-term. Building the City's experience through on-the-ground projects will also build capacity, skills, knowledge, and a deeper understanding of how to improve the City's processes, specifications, and policies for natural and naturalized sites.

Community Stewardship: The City receives requests from residents, community organizations, user groups, and schools to plant and maintain City-owned land such as parks, natural areas, naturalized parks, and informal green spaces. However, these fall outside of the City's existing programs and, as such, cannot always be accommodated. Formalizing the City's approach to stewardship programs will provide guidance for staff and community members to follow and better enable public participation in caring for our green network. This will also help to enable volunteer organizations to take on a stewardship role in cases where the City does not have a level of service.

Nature-friendly Initiatives: Embedding standards into development processes such as bird-friendly buildings and dark-sky compliant lighting can support wildlife habitat and connectivity outside of natural and naturalized areas and reduce ecosystem stress. Stakeholders have requested that the City progress this type of work on multiple occasions, but no dedicated resourcing has been received to progress this work.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Funding required to deliver the Portfolios is estimated at \$3 million in 2026 and \$3 million in 2027. A submission will be included as part of the 2026/2027 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget Deliberations under Capital Project P.10093, Natural Area Protection.

External Funding Opportunities:

Capital funding can be used to leverage external grants, which often have a matching requirement for the City and funder to split costs. Over the years, there have been increasingly more external funding opportunities to support environmental initiatives, natural infrastructure, climate adaptation, tree planting, and infrastructure improvements for which the Natural Areas Portfolio and Naturalization Portfolio are well suited. External funding opportunities will be explored should funding for the Portfolios be approved.

OTHER IMPLICATIONS

Environmental implications:

See Appendix 2 – Benefits of and Risks to Natural and Naturalized Areas.

Asset Management:

This work is being coordinated with the Corporate Asset Management reporting approach. Natural assets will be included in a “State of Report” which will come forward later this year.

NEXT STEPS

If funding is approved through the 2026/2027 Multi-Year Business Plan and Budget Deliberations, work will commence in 2026 to support the deliverables outlined in this report.

APPENDICES

1. Engagement Summary
2. Benefits of and Risks to Natural and Naturalized Areas

Report Approval

Written by:	Jessie Best, Project Manager (Green Network) Shannon Dyck, Sustainability Specialist (Green Network)
Reviewed by:	Twyla Yobb, Environmental Protection Manager Gabriella James, Senior Financial Business Partner Jeanna South, Director of Sustainability Thai Hoang, Director of Parks
Approved by:	Angela Gardiner, General Manager, Utilities and Environment