Connect: Calgary's Parks Plan
What We Did

Report Back: WWHR & WWDR

Project overview

By 2025, The City of Calgary will have developed and presented Connect: Calgary's Parks Plan (hereinafter referred to as Connect) to Council for approval. Connect will replace the Open Space Plan approved by Council in 2003, providing up-to-date policy and operational actions to guide the planning, (re)development and management of the park system for the next 20 years. The intent of Connect is to ensure the park system serves the social, recreational and environmental needs of all Calgarians in a manner that makes those spaces resilient, accessible and inclusive.

Engagement overview

Connect has been developed using multiple inputs. Through an extensive and in-depth engagement and research program, Calgarians provided guidance to inform the development of Connect by identifying what they valued, what is working and what could be improved in the city's park system.

Critical to the success of creating a modern parks plan that resonates with and serves Calgarians well, was to ensure that all members of the community had the opportunity to be heard in relation to what they valued and what challenges they face in using the park system. To this end, a concerted effort was made to reach Calgarians of all walks of life, including those traditionally overlooked or excluded.

Equity-deserving Calgarians (including Racialized groups, Indigenous people, English language learners, persons with disabilities, seniors, the 2SLGBTQ+ community, young adults, people living with low-incomes and unhoused individuals) experience increased barriers to accessing the city's park system. The voices of equity-deserving Calgarians are often not included as part of engagement even though they can be those who benefit the most from access to parks.

Ensuring that equity-deserving Calgarians voices were heard, and their input was included in the direction and implementation of the new policy, allows Connect to meet its vision to connect all Calgarians to parks. Applying an equity lens to engagement required specific tactics which focused on working with leaders from representative community groups, attending school events to specifically connect with youth, providing in-person and online opportunities through various media avenues and in-person pop ups in parks.

Three distinct engagement phases were held in Spring 2023, Fall 2023 and Fall 2024. Engagement was specifically designed to offer a range of methods and tactics, both traditional and non-traditional, to reach as many individuals and interested groups as possible.

Phase 1 of engagement took place from April to June 2023, and focused on three key benefit areas the park system provides: Connecting You to Nature, Wellness, and Culture. This phase aimed to gather participants' views on the benefits, concerns, and opportunities for improvement in these areas. Participants also provided feedback on economic sustainability, equity in parks, and draft guiding principles.

Phase 2 of engagement occurred from October to November 2023 to gather feedback on potential policy directions for Connect. Based on input from phase 1, four goals were developed: Protect and Enhance, Connect and Grow, Include and Support, and Manage and Maintain. Participants rated these goals and provided insights for policy development. They also shared feedback on the 10 Guiding Principles, ranking them by importance.

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Phase 1: What we heard, what we did

Feedback from participants during phase 1 revealed clear, consistent themes about what respondents' value about the parks system and what improvements they want to see made to it. Regardless of age, gender, race, ability, or income, the following themes emerged consistently throughout this phase of engagement.

PRESERVATION, CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY: Participants shared the importance of creating more parks spaces, growing Calgary's tree canopy, and prioritizing conservation and supporting biodiversity for both flora and fauna.

SAFETY AND SECURITY: Addressing safety and security concerns, as well as the management of user conflicts between dogs, cyclists, and pedestrians, was a common theme among respondents.

AMENITIES AND INFRASTRUCTURE: This included, but is not limited to, improved maintenance to keep parks beautiful, clean, and functional, as well as the addition and improvement of amenities and infrastructure to improve user experience.

PLACEMAKING/GATHERING SPACES: Participants emphasized the importance of creating multi-use, intergenerational, accessible, and diverse park spaces. They envision parks as places to foster community, promote social unity, and generate economic opportunities for small businesses.

EDUCATION AND ENFORCEMENT: Increased learning surrounding the environmental, cultural and historical landscapes of Calgary parks was a common theme. As well as education about the appropriate use of parks such as littering, staying on designated pathways and the protection of flora and fauna.

ACCESSIBILITY AND CONNECTIVITY: Increasing equitable access to parks through park distribution and public transportation was important to respondents, as well as year-round access to parks and pathways to support both mental and physical accessibility. Participants also shared the importance of increasing connectivity between parks to improve transportation networks and wildlife corridors.

EQUITY CONCERNS: While the above themes were commonly shared by engagement respondents, there were a few notable instances of inequity that emerged from the feedback. These include but are not limited to the following:

- **Accessibility -** Concerns regarding the lack of accessibility to, and in parks, were common amongst seniors and respondents experiencing disabilities.
- **Racism -** Racialized and newcomer participants shared they have directly experienced or have witnessed instances of direct racism in Calgary parks.
- **Communication -** Racialized and newcomer participants shared that there is a lack of information and communication in their preferred language.
- **Access -** Lack of access to nearby parks and availability of diverse activities in parks was noted among respondents living in the northeast of the city.

Calgarians were asked to provide feedback on five guiding principles and the foundational pillars for Connect. The following themes and subthemes were gathered via sticky notes from a series of five Connect events, four open-houses and twelve pop-ups. These themes and subthemes contributed to the development of the four key actions that Connect needed to address, that were then presented back to the public during Phase 2 engagement. The four actions are: Protect and Enhance, Connect and Grow, Include and Support, and Manage and Maintain.

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Theme	Subtheme	City Response and Details
Accessibility and Connectivity	Ability Affordability Location Parks network	The theme of *Accessibility & Connectivity*, along with its subthemes were captured in the creation of the actions: *Include and Support* and *Connect and Grow*. These actions summarize the need to improve physical accessibility in parks and improve how accessible the system is not just in relation to distance but also in relation to the quality of that park space by providing multifunctional parks spaces.
Amenities and Infrastructure	Equipment Trails and Pathways Washrooms	The theme of *Amenities and Infrastructure* and its subthemes were incorporated into the action of *Manage and Maintain*, which addresses the need to provide standards for additional amenities such as drinking fountains and washrooms and expand and better maintain the pathways network.
Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging	*None identified*	*Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging* was combined into the *Include and Support* action, to address that some Calgarians cannot get to, or participate in parks due to physical, socio-economic and cultural barriers. This action provides policy directions to address these issues.
Education (Learning) and Awareness	Park Etiquette Indigenous Culture	The theme of *Education (Learning) and Awareness*, and the identified subthemes were included in the *Include and Support* action and *Manage and Maintain* action. Collectively, these actions are meant to address that parks are not always planned with respect to Indigenous peoples and traditions, there is a general misunderstanding about what are considered cultural landscapes and their purpose, and there is a lack of understanding on appropriate park usage leading to safety issues among park users.
Environment	Preservation / Conservation Biodiversity Pollution	*Environment* and its subthemes were incorporated into the *Protect and Enhance* action to address natural area protection, the need to expand and protect the tree canopy, and supporting biodiversity and habitat health across the park system.
Events	Live events Programming	*Events* and programming were captured in the *Include and Suppor*t action, responding in part to respondents wanting parks to support a sense of place and belonging. Calgarians expressed that there are not enough gathering spaces, supporting amenities, and programming for them to participate in recreation opportunities, celebrate, and spend time with family and friends.

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Health & Wellness	Mental Health Physical Health Social Connections	The theme of *Health and Wellness* and related subthemes were incorporated under the *Include and Support* and *Connect and Grow* actions. These actions address the need to improve access to parks and ensure that Calgarians can use them and their related programming to support individual and community well-being.
Human Impacts/Usership	Dogs Cyclists Development Overuse (crowded) Pollution	*Human impacts/usership, safety & securit*y and related subthemes were summarized into the *Protect and Enhance* and *Manage and Maintain* actions. These actions include addressing habitat fragmentation and increased human usage of natural areas, which increases the potential for wildlife conflict.
Safety & Security	Education Enforcement Design / features	Providing clarity and education on appropriate park usage and regulations including environmental literacy, speed limits on pathways, litter control to reduce conflict. *Safety* is addressed through a parks wide strategy to address perceptions that parks are unsafe and the relocation of encampments for the safety of people experiencing vulnerabilities and park users. Lastly the design of parks should address safety by incorporating Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles and supporting more activation of parks.
Indigenous Relations	Knowledge (Learnings) Awareness Acknowledgements	The theme of *Indigenous Relations* was summarized into the *Include and Support* action, acknowledging that the park system plays a key role in protecting lands significant to Indigenous people or lands that have other historical and archaeological significance. These lands are sensitive to human impacts and the pressures of development. Proactive protection and management are needed for their protection.
Management Practices	Water management Maintenance Partnerships & Collaboration	*Management Practices* and related sub-themes have been incorporated into the *Manage and Maintain* and *Include and Support* actions. The Manage and Maintain action acknowledges increasing maintenance costs and differing maintenance standards across the city. To address these challenges, The City will need to standardize levels of maintenance and establish a sustainable funding mechanism for the parks system. Water management also plays a role in making parks healthy. The City will need to incorporate drought tolerant species and sustainable water management practices into the design of the park system. Collaborating with partners, the development industry and the public also plays an important role in supporting and enhancing management and design of the park system.

Recreation (Play!)	Play Programming - activities	The theme of recreation and play has been included in the Connect and Grow and Include and Support actions. Respondents voiced that more needs to be done to enable play and recreation opportunities in parks, by making it easier to access parks, and improving the quality of park space through more and better amenities and programming. The City will support this through the provision of large multifunctional parks that are accessible.
Public Art	*None identified*	The *Public Art* theme has also been incorporated into the I*nclude and Suppo*rt action. Public art offers opportunities to engage citizens, celebrate unique places, tell Indigenous stories and promote education. Additional art can play a crucial role in the development of a modern, vibrant city and brings awareness of park spaces through the enhancement of landscapes.

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Phase 2: What we heard, what we did

The feedback collected during the second phase of engagement overwhelmingly supported the four actions – Protect and Enhance, Connect and Grow, Include and Support, and Manage and Maintain – aligned with what previous engagement participants felt were most important for parks. Much of the feedback collected during this phase echoed the themes from Phase 1, except for community engagement, which emerged as a stronger priority, and highlighted the need for inclusive and ongoing participation in park system decision-making from local communities.

ADDRESS SAFETY AND SECURITY CONCERNS: Respondents continued to raise concerns about safety in Calgary's parks, especially around managing conflicts between users. In addition, participants emphasized the need to address safety concerns through improved enforcement tactics and thoughtful park design.

PROTECT AND CONSERVE EXISTING PARK SPACES: Participants emphasized the need to protect important ecological areas in Calgary from sale, development, and human and animal impact. Protection and growth of the tree canopy was also a priority for respondents.

PRIORITIZE NATIVE SPECIES AND NATURAL SPACES: Participants expressed support for the naturalization of the park system, as well as efforts to improve biodiversity. They emphasized the need to carefully consider Calgary's unique ecosystem when planning naturalization efforts and raised concerns about naturalization being done incorrectly.

ENGAGE WITH THE COMMUNITY TO CREATE PARKS THAT WILL MEET THEIR NEEDS: During this phase of engagement, respondents highlighted the need to include the community in parks decisions and programs through education, campaigns, volunteer opportunities and partnerships.

INCREASE CONNECTIVITY BETWEEN PARKS THROUGH PATHWAYS AND PARK NETWORK: Participants expressed strong support for enhancing connectivity between parks to improve both transportation options for people and wildlife corridors for animals through expansion of the park and Pathway and Bikeway networks.

MULTI-USE SPACES WITH AMENITIES FOR DIVERSE PARK USERS TO INCREASE USER EXPERIENCE: Participants expressed a desire to improve infrastructure and provide additional amenities in parks to enhance the overall user experience. Participants supported the creation of accessible, multi-use spaces that cater to the needs of diverse users, ensuring that parks are inclusive and welcoming for all.

IMPROVE MAINTENANCE OF PARK SPACES: Feedback emphasized the need for better management and maintenance of parks to ensure they remain clean, safe and functional. Respondents felt that it was important to incorporate both environmentally friendly practices, as well as cost-effective approaches, in management efforts.

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During Phase 2 participants were asked to provide feedback on ten strategic directions. The strategic directions were developed in response to challenges identified through feedback from internal and public engagement, research, spatial analysis and best practice review. They define what Calgarians value and want the park system to achieve and capture the four actions (see Phase 1) to address improvements to the park system.

The strategic directions, four actions and feedback received through Phase 2 was then used to develop Connect's draft polices and operational actions. The policies provide direction on the planning, development, and management of the park system, while the operational actions direct The City on how best to carry out Connect's policies.

The following table summarizes the draft policies and operational actions in Connect that support the strategic directions and informed by public engagement.

Strategic Direction	City Response and Details
Conservation and Protection of the Environment	• Improving, enhancing and supporting nature conservation, wildlife protection and biodiversity by taking a nature-based approach. • Building a resilient and sustainable urban forest that can tolerate and continue to thrive in future climatic conditions. • Plant 1.3 million trees on public land in 10 years. • Using the best practices of ecological network planning to identify and address gaps in the networks to enhance connectivity. • Ensuring ongoing maintenance and management of natural areas.
Climate Resilience	• Building a resilient city that can accommodate drought, flood, extreme heat and cold events to reduce negative impacts to property and Calgarians.
Inclusive and Accessible	• Ensuring that the park system meets the needs of all Calgarians through the provision of parks and amenities that address barriers to access and incorporate barrier-free design. • Setting minimum targets for the amount of park space communities should have. • Ensuring that people have access to multifunctional park spaces that support recreation, sport, and access to nature.
Connectivity for People and Wildlife	• Strengthening connections to the park system by supporting different travel options. • Connecting new and existing parks and open space, habitat corridors, commercial areas, institutional uses and community destinations. • Ensuring connectivity through natural areas to provide space for wildlife movement.
Physical and Mental Health and Wellbeing	• Designing, developing and managing parks to support physical and mental health and active lifestyles through public recreation and sports amenities, multi-use passive recreation amenities and access to nature opportunities. • Targeting 400 metre access for all residence to the three park

	functions: sport, recreation and environment.
Support Communities	• Providing communal and accessible spaces to foster neighbourhood gathering, events, and a sense of connectedness.
Cultural Landscapes	• Conserving and protecting cultural landscapes (e.g., Indigenous, recent heritage, archaeological). • Building relationships with Indigenous peoples to support traditional and ancestral knowledge, management, and places for ceremony in the park system. • Encouraging the development of visitors' awareness through increased educational opportunities.
Safety and Security	• Reducing user conflicts in the park system through design, education, and regulation. • Creating safe park spaces where visitors feel welcome and comfortable. • Partnering with community service groups to address mental health and encampment concerns. • Encouraging community participation and enhanced programming to address safety issues and activate parks.
Economic Resilience	• Pursuing financial sustainability and an equitable distribution of resource by providing a high-quality park system with multifunctional value and operational efficiency through a standard level of service maintenance.
Innovation	• Promoting forward looking practices and data-based decision-making in park provision, design and management.

Next steps

- Phase 3 of engagement began in October 2024 and will wrap up later in the fall. The draft Connect plan will be shared with the public and partners to validate its policies and operational actions. Once Phase 3 is completed, this What We Did report will be updated with how that feedback was incorporated into the draft plan prior to going to City Council.
- Following Phase 3, the draft plan will be finalized and presented to City Council for approval in early 2025.
- The Calgary Plan, The City's Municipal Development Plan, contains some of new policy provided from engagement feedback. This includes future protection and enhancement of the ecological network and directions for the development of the parks system through the Local Area Plan and Area Structure Plan process. This approach allows even greater support across all the services we offer to Calgarians to increase and enhance our natural areas, urban forests, and to ensure we are building well connected, year-round, multi-use parks that meet people's needs. For these reasons approval of the Calgary Plan by Council must come before approval of Connect. Calgary Plan is also scheduled to be finalized and presented to City Council for approval in early 2025.