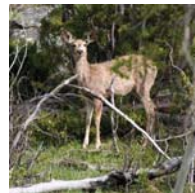


A Plan of Action for the

# Capital Region River Valley Park

## S U M M A R Y R E P O R T



Western Economic  
Diversification Canada

Diversification de l'économie  
de l'Ouest Canada

# Capital Region River Valley Park



## 1. A COMPELLING VISION... AN URGENT CALL FOR ACTION

### Today...

The Capital Region North Saskatchewan River valley is an 88 kilometre, loosely connected strip of land covering 18,000 acres. People marvel at its unspoiled beauty. We drive through the river valley, travel on the many trails already in place, paddle its waters, experience the changing seasons, and catch glimpses of wildlife that live in the river valley. It is a priceless treasure, but its full potential as an internationally recognized major regional metropolitan park has yet to be tapped.

### Now imagine this...

The entire river valley is linked and accessible as a single regional metropolitan park. Walk, bike, canoe, run or cross country ski from Devon to Fort Saskatchewan in one of the largest metropolitan parks in the world — a defining symbol of Alberta's Capital Region.

Start a canoe trip from Devon's River Valley Park. Enjoy a day skiing or mountain biking at Rabbit Hill. Hike one of the adventure trails to Terwillegar Park or take in a seminar at a new river valley conference centre. Enjoy nature at its best in natural landscapes that are home to a diverse array of flora and fauna. Go for a

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A leading urban planner from the United Kingdom, Sir Peter Hall, recently described the river valley as "spectacular". In his view, "It's one of the best green corridor systems I've seen in any city in the world" (Sir Peter Hall, quoted in the Edmonton Journal, September 11, 2003)

Now imagine this...  
The entire river valley is linked as a single regional metropolitan park. It's internationally recognized as one of the largest river front parks in the world and a defining symbol for the Capital Region.

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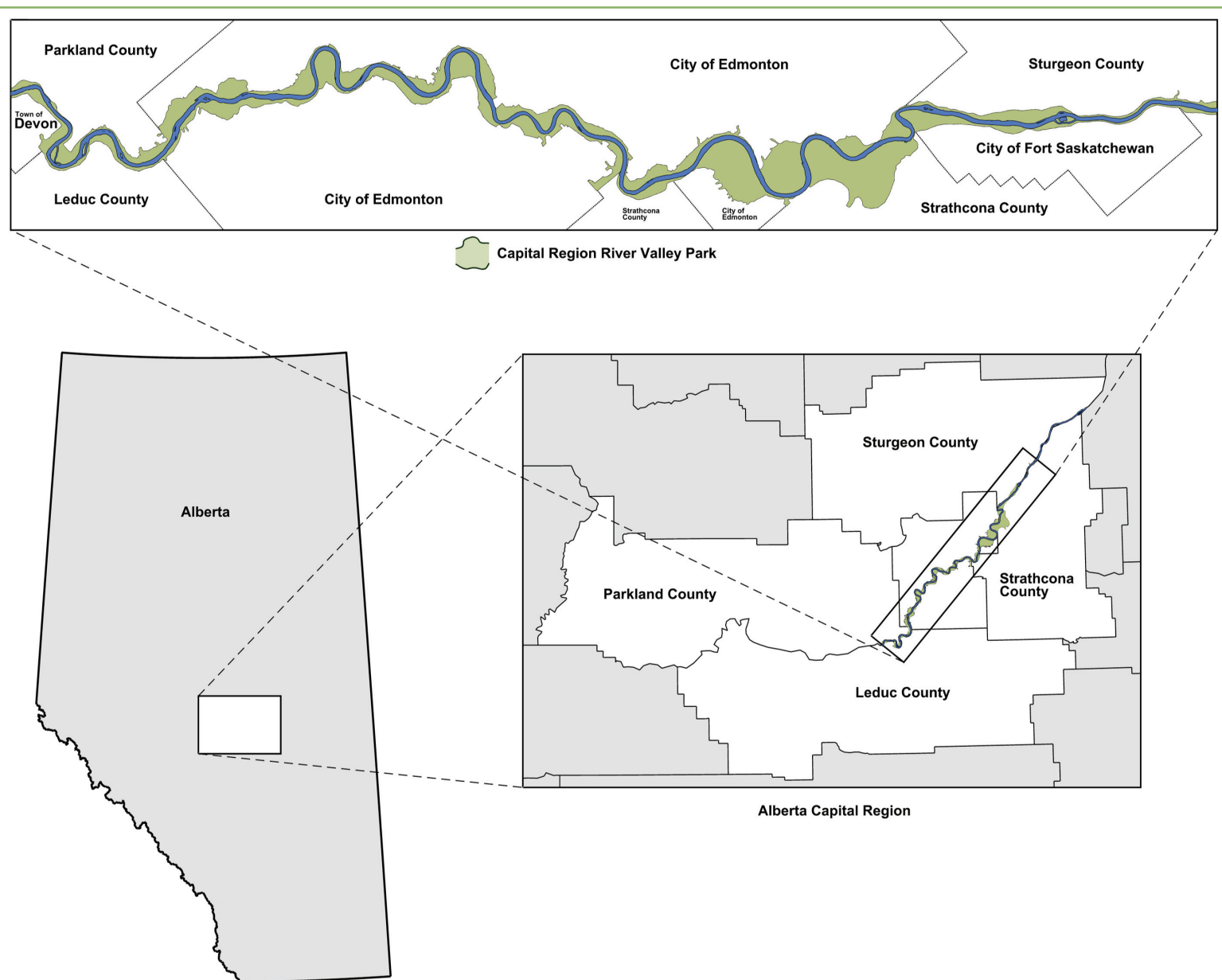


Figure 1 – Regional Context of the Capital Region River Valley Park

# Capital Region River Valley Park

horseback ride at the Whitemud Equine Centre then spend an afternoon at the John Jantzen Nature Centre. Relive history at Fort Edmonton Park or check out the elephants at the Valley Zoo.

Walk or take a river taxi from downtown Edmonton to the new grounds of the Legislature Buildings or the Royal Alberta Museum, and enjoy neighbourhood restaurants and breathtaking views of the river on a warm summer evening. Go for a walk, run or a bike ride, then catch the action at Telus Field or travel east to tour a new Coal Mine Interpretive Centre, a river marina, and a new River Science Centre and Aquarium.

Take in a concert at the new festival amphitheatre or if you are the adventurous kind, experience a world-class whitewater course, then head to a new recreation-based park in northeast Edmonton where athletes from around the world test their skills.

Learn about topics such wildlife behavior, natural area conservation, and pond ecosystems at the Strathcona Nature Centre. Then round out the final leg of the Capital Region River Valley Park with a historic tour of the Lamoureux Settlement, Fort Augustus,

Edmonton House, and the Fort Saskatchewan Northwest Mounted Police Garrison Barracks.

Natural landscapes, adventure, sports, history, education, and family fun. The Capital Region River Valley Park will have it all.

That vision takes us far beyond the river valley we see today. It stretches our imagination and allows us to envision what this unique treasure could become.

If action is taken now, our Capital Region river valley could be:

- ◆ A significant natural corridor — its natural diversity and visual character appropriately managed for the benefit of future generations
- ◆ One of the largest internationally recognized metropolitan parks in the world — rivaling the importance of Stanley Park to Vancouver or Central Park to New York
- ◆ Recognized around the world as one of the truly great metropolitan parks, integrating urban and surrounding rural regions and landscapes.
- ◆ A rich blend of preserved natural areas, places for recreation, winding trails, river access, urban life, historical sites, and world-class attractions and events



◆ A vibrant and changing place with something for everyone — old and young, families, sports and adventure enthusiasts, history buffs, tourists, and the growing population of the Capital Region

◆ A lasting legacy for future generations

The opportunities are possible, but only if we act now — with a clear vision of what we want to achieve for the river valley and a careful and deliberate plan to attain the goals we set. Without that, we risk seeing development that threatens the river valley's current biodiversity and contributes to the fragmentation and erosion of a river valley that is, in many ways, unique in the world.

We can not be lulled into thinking this invaluable treasure of nature and history will be there for future generations to enjoy. The river valley is under pressure and with a growing population, increasing demands and fragmented developments, we are already seeing signs that the river valley environment is under significant strain.

The RVA, with the support of its municipal shareholders and the provincial and federal

governments, initiated the preparation of a comprehensive plan to integrate the 88 kilometres of North Saskatchewan River valley from Devon through Edmonton to Fort Saskatchewan as the Capital Region River Valley Park. This plan challenges us to imagine the future of the Capital Region's river valley and to take action to make that vision a reality. It sets out seven key planning areas — each unique in its own way, each providing a blend of natural areas, current attractions and exciting opportunities to bring new life and vibrancy into the river valley. The plan sets clear and over-riding objectives for protecting and preserving the natural environment of the river valley while also meeting social and economic objectives. It also describes the important steps that need to be taken to achieve the vision and secure the lasting legacy of the river valley — a legacy our children and their children so richly deserve.

We cannot let this opportunity slip through our fingers. The time to act is now. The plan is here. And with the support of all stakeholders in the RVA and people in the Capital Region, the plan can and will proceed — and succeed.

## 2. THE TIME TO ACT IS NOW

This plan of action sets out a clear vision for the future of the Capital Region River Valley Park and identifies opportunities for achieving specific environmental, social and economic objectives. But the key question is: why is it urgent to move ahead now?

The answer is that the river valley is coming under increasing pressure and unless we put a clear and deliberate plan in place — and act on the plan now in cooperation with landowners, developers, conservation groups and municipalities — we risk losing opportunities to save, protect, enhance and build a real treasure and a legacy, not just for now, but for future generations.

Alberta and the Capital Region are experiencing enormous growth. Perhaps like never before in our history, there is a growing recognition of the importance of planning ahead, anticipating the impact of new developments, preserving our environment, and not compromising the quality of life we value so highly.

That certainly applies to our river valley. Much of the land in the valley is already being used for a variety of purposes ranging from recreation to industrial developments. The

population in the Capital Region is expected to grow significantly in the coming years putting increasing pressure not only on the environment and the current biodiversity in the river valley, but also on existing attractions and facilities. We have an opportunity to build on the work done to date and learn from the experiences of others to preserve, protect and enhance the value of the river valley and achieve a new vision for its future.

## BUILDING ON WORK DONE TO DATE

Over the past ten years, considerable work was done to anticipate and plan for the future of the river valley. Led by the RVA, an Integrated Concept Plan for Alberta's Capital River Valley was prepared in 1998 and a Trail Plan was completed in 2000. The Concept Plan was updated in 2003 and several river valley initiatives have proceeded since then. Funding assistance was provided by the provincial and federal governments to allow this more detailed plan to be prepared.

This plan builds on previous work of the RVA and its member municipalities, and provides a common base of information, outlines the key planning areas for the park, and provides a road map for implementing the plan.

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**The river valley is coming under increasing pressure. Unless we act now with a clear plan, we risk further deterioration, haphazard developments and lost opportunities to preserve the river valley. We will face serious challenges in balancing public access to and use of the river valley with the need to preserve, protect and enhance its natural environment and create a lasting legacy for future generations.**

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## ADDRESSING PRESSURES ON THE RIVER VALLEY

A number of factors are affecting the river valley today and reinforce the urgency of moving ahead with a comprehensive plan.

### Urban growth and expansion

The population in the Capital Region now exceeds one million people. In the next 25 years, another half a million people are expected to make this region their home. That

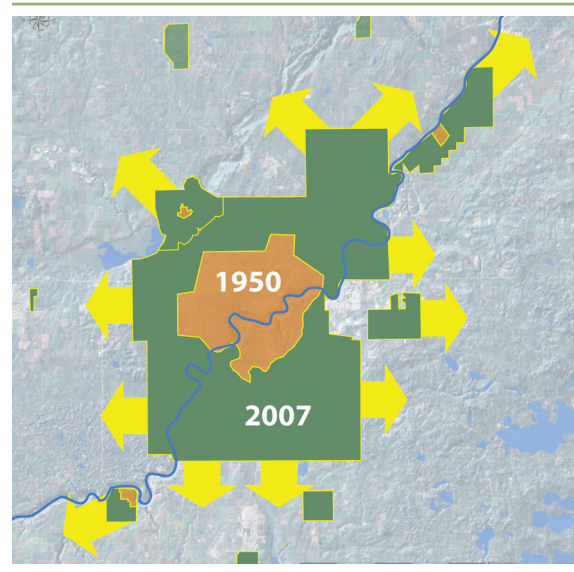


Figure 2 – Urban development in the Capital Region, Past – Present – Future.

is more than the populations of Lethbridge, Medicine Hat, Red Deer, Grande Prairie, and Fort McMurray — combined. Where will these people live? What kind of pressure will a growing population put on the river valley? Will the public still be able to access the river or will it be overtaken with a hodge-podge of developments? Without a deliberate, dedicated and comprehensive plan in place, we can not assume that the river valley will continue to be accessible to a growing population and retain its natural character while the Capital Region grows around it. There is an urgent need to secure the necessary lands for an integrated river valley metropolitan park. Otherwise, there is a very real risk that those lands, many of which are now privately owned, may be used for development that will not fit with a vision for a world-renowned river valley metropolitan park. Further discussions and the consent of private landowners are essential before opportunities involving private lands in the river valley can proceed.

### Increasing pressures on the river valley

Current research indicates that there are almost 10 million visits to the river valley

# Capital Region River Valley Park

every year. If attendance at special events and projections from groups that use the river valley are included, the actual number increases to over 14 million visits, making this park setting the most visited site in Alberta next to West Edmonton Mall. With a growing population, pressures on the river valley will climb dramatically. Participation in unstructured recreation activities involving the use of trails in the river valley (e.g. hiking, running, walking, biking, canoeing, skating, and skiing) is also on the rise. Unless we plan

ahead, demand could quickly exceed the supply of recreation and tourism sites and public infrastructure. Clearly, the river valley can not meet all future demands in all locations. There is also a risk that the character and the environmental quality of the river valley and its riparian areas could be lost forever. To address this, the plan includes strategies for adding capacity to existing facilities, spreading and diversifying use across the length of the river valley, acquiring new sites, and providing better management of use to safeguard the natural character and resources of the valley.

## Preserving natural landscapes

Maps of the Capital Region clearly show that the North Saskatchewan River valley is one of the few remaining natural areas in a region



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**Preserving the natural landscapes in the river valley is a paramount objective of this plan. Much of the land in the river valley is already being used for a variety of purposes from recreation to industrial developments. It is important that any future developments in the river valley are consistent with the objectives of this plan.**

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that is quickly becoming a predominantly urban and industrial landscape. At the same time, the river valley is certainly not an untouched natural landscape. Roughly half of the river valley area has experienced some degree of change from development and use. Only a relatively small area is occupied by forested lands while grasslands are the most dominant natural vegetation. The plan for the valley must include strategies to retain remaining forested land, protect the integrity of the ecosystem in the valley, and maintain its natural green scenic character.

### **Understanding history**

The North Saskatchewan River valley's history stretches back almost 12,000 years. It is the site of many of the earliest developments in the Capital Region and it provides unique historical perspectives not only for people in this region but for Albertans as a whole. A number of heritage and cultural sites are located in the river valley. Preserving and presenting our collective past is an important objective of the plan for the river valley.

## **RESPONDING TO EXPECTATIONS**

The plan for the river valley should reflect the expectations and ideas of people in the Capital Region.

Through consultations, surveys and dialogue with public stakeholders in each of the seven RVA municipalities, the following expectations have been outlined for the river valley:

- First and foremost, protect and preserve existing natural areas
- Maintain and enhance access for all residents and visitors
- Manage potential conflicting uses through a combination of planning design, regulations and enforcement
- Keep the river valley safe and enjoyable
- Promote partnerships to develop facilities and deliver programs and services





# Capital Region River Valley Park

- Recognize the rights of private landowners and use dialogue and consensus to promote compatible land uses and appropriate public access to the river valley
- Recognize the uniqueness of the people, communities and cultures that are part of the river valley

Lessons also can be learned from other organizations that have embarked on similar plans for landscapes like the Capital Region River Valley Park. Those lessons include:

- Importance of a world-class vision
- Need for coordinated bylaws, policies and planning direction
- Importance of securing funding from public and private sources
- Need to involve a broad representation in ongoing planning and decision making



- Importance of predictable, annual funding to ensure that plans are implemented and goals are met

## SECURING THE VALUE

While it is difficult to place a dollar value on the river valley, its existing natural, social and economic value should be secured through a clear and deliberate plan.

- **Existing Natural Capital**

The river valley provides a series of ecological goods and services including: air purification/filtration; water quality purification; storm water management; erosion control; carbon sequestration; and pest control; along with the intrinsic value of its flora and fauna.

- **Existing Social Capital**

The river valley enhances the quality of life for local residents, providing opportunities for active and passive recreation and education. It also contributes to a general improvement in human health by encouraging active lifestyles for our growing and aging population.

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Recent surveys show that residents in the capital region expect the natural areas in the river valley to be protected. They also want to be able to access the river valley, make use of its trails and amenities, and enjoy the natural environment it provides.

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**This plan provides an opportunity to develop the Capital Region River Valley Park as a leading example of municipal cooperation. The result will be a river valley park that becomes the single defining characteristic of the Capital Region.**

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- **Existing Economic Capital**

The river valley contributes to the economy of the region by generating employment, attracting business and investment opportunities and by creating wealth. The economic benefits occur in a number of ways, including capital development, tourism and special events. The river valley also contributes significantly to the quality of life in the Capital Region and this helps attract new employees and a creative class of entrepreneurs to the region.

Taken together, the estimated value of these three components is in the range of \$350 to \$630 million per year (Implementation Plan Summary Report, EIDOS/EDA 2007).

## **REALIZING THE POTENTIAL**

The Capital Region River Valley Park, with improved infrastructure and marketing, can become internationally recognized as a nature-based, heritage-based, and adventure/recreation-based destination. Coupled with its proven reputation for hosting festivals, major fairs, and sporting events, the river valley has the potential to host world-class events and

become a major economic generator for the region and the province.

At the same time, the risks to the river valley are high as a growing economy and population place increasing demands and pressures on the current ecological integrity, biodiversity, historical significance, and general enjoyment of the river valley.

This plan is designed to address those risks and opportunities, to build on the important work done to date under the leadership of the RVA and others, and to present a comprehensive plan for achieving the vision and securing the future of the river valley.

The overall goal is to establish the Capital Region River Valley Park as a centre piece of municipal planning cooperation, extending well beyond the top of the bank and integrated, both in concept and design, throughout existing and new growth areas. The result will be an extraordinary river valley park that becomes the single, unifying and defining characteristic of the Capital Region — just as Stanley Park and Central Park are for Vancouver and New York.

### 3. ESTABLISHING AN INTEGRATED PLAN FOR THE RIVER VALLEY

With a clear understanding of the opportunities and the risks, a comprehensive plan for the river valley was prepared. This plan is based on clear objectives and a specific planning framework. The result is a unique vision for the river valley involving seven planning areas stretching along the North Saskatchewan River from Devon in the west to Sturgeon County in the east.

### MEETING KEY OBJECTIVES

The vision for the river valley described in this plan reflects an appropriate interaction of three interdependent and interconnected “spheres of sustainability” — environment, society and economy. Specific objectives have been set for each of these three interrelated spheres.

#### Environment objectives

- Preserve natural land in the Capital Region River Valley Park
- Respect important wildlife habitat and movement corridors

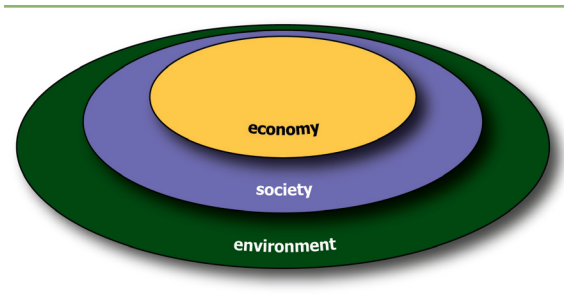


Figure 3 – A sustainable conceptual framework for the relationship between economy, society, and the environment.

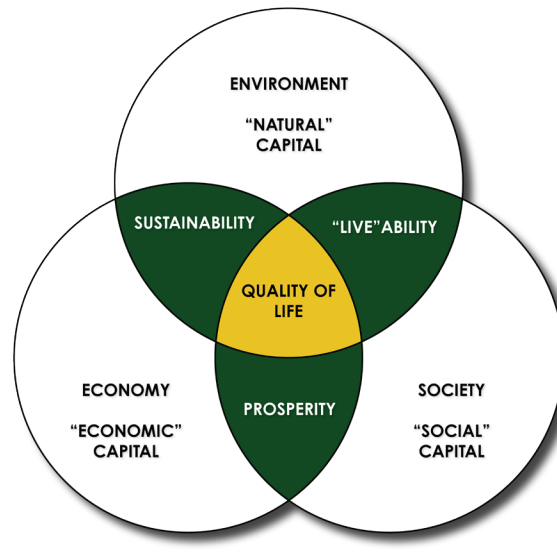


Figure 4 – Park Spheres of Benefit

- Enhance the public's understanding of the environmental health and importance of the Capital Region River Valley Park
- Protect the diversity and productivity of the valley's ecological communities
- Maintain or enhance the hydrology, fish habitat and watershed of the North Saskatchewan River within the Capital Region

#### **Social objectives**

- Use trailways and waterways to connect communities and attractions along the valley and from the park to surrounding communities and attractions
- Create new destinations that enhance the quality of life in the region
- Improve access to the river front for shore and water based activities
- Reflect the cultural and natural heritage of the river valley and expand education opportunities based on the park's natural and cultural history
- Support an active and healthy lifestyle for people in the Capital Region
- Enhance the urban experience in the Capital

Region by creating connections to the park and providing venues for cultural, arts, athletic and entertainment-related activities

#### **Economic objectives**

- Establish and enhance attractions and destinations to attract new visitors
- Take advantage of opportunities for heritage and landscape touring, adventure-based tourism activities, and river-based attractions to increase tourism to the region
- Enhance the quality of life for all people living and working in the Capital Region and help attract and retain skilled labour, new businesses and investment

### **PLANNING FRAMEWORK**

To achieve these objectives, the planning framework reflects the following key concepts:

- **Nature conservation and management**

Within the context of a balanced approach, conserving the natural environment is the over-riding priority that shapes how we plan for and manage the river valley park.

# Capital Region River Valley Park

Figures 3 and 4 illustrate the conceptual planning framework and show the primary emphasis on preserving and protecting the natural environment of the river valley. The sensitivity and current status of the natural environment determines which landscapes to protect (meeting environmental objectives), which landscapes could sustain moderate uses (meeting societal objectives), and which landscapes are suited to more intensive uses (meeting economic objectives). This approach applies to the entire river valley as well as to specific sites within the park. Sensitive landscapes should be buffered from zones with intense use. A number of sites within the river valley have been disturbed by industrial development, which creates opportunities for environmental reclamation. Buffer zones need to be established around new development sites, and efforts should be made to restore naturally occurring vegetation.



Consistent with this approach, the plan proposes two new projects (a Nature Centre at Point aux Pins Creek and the West Natural Area) with an emphasis on environmentally focused education, interpretation and research. Ongoing operation and maintenance of the river valley park will require specially trained staff with expertise in conservation sciences.

- **Access and linear trail systems**

A primary goal of the RVA and of this plan is proposed to connect the entire length of the river valley with a land and water based trail system. Specific trails identified in this plan include: River Promenade, Main Trail, Secondary and Tertiary Trails, Historic Trail, and Adventure Trail. Trail heads, rest stops, and viewing points are also included





in the plan to augment the proposed trail system.

- **Capital waterway**

A proposed river trail will connect the park and provide a binding feature for the 88 kilometre-long park. The river trail will include: access to boating and fishing and the ability to “touch” the river directly, river edge treatment, marina, floating docks, boat launches, and walk-in launches for car-top boats.



- **Heritage preservation and interpretation**

A variety of heritage sites, attractions and events are proposed to be an important feature of the park. A series of new or

enhanced sites are identified in the plan (e.g. Beverly Coal Interpretive Centre, Lamoureux Settlement, Fort Augustus, and a new river ferry crossing).



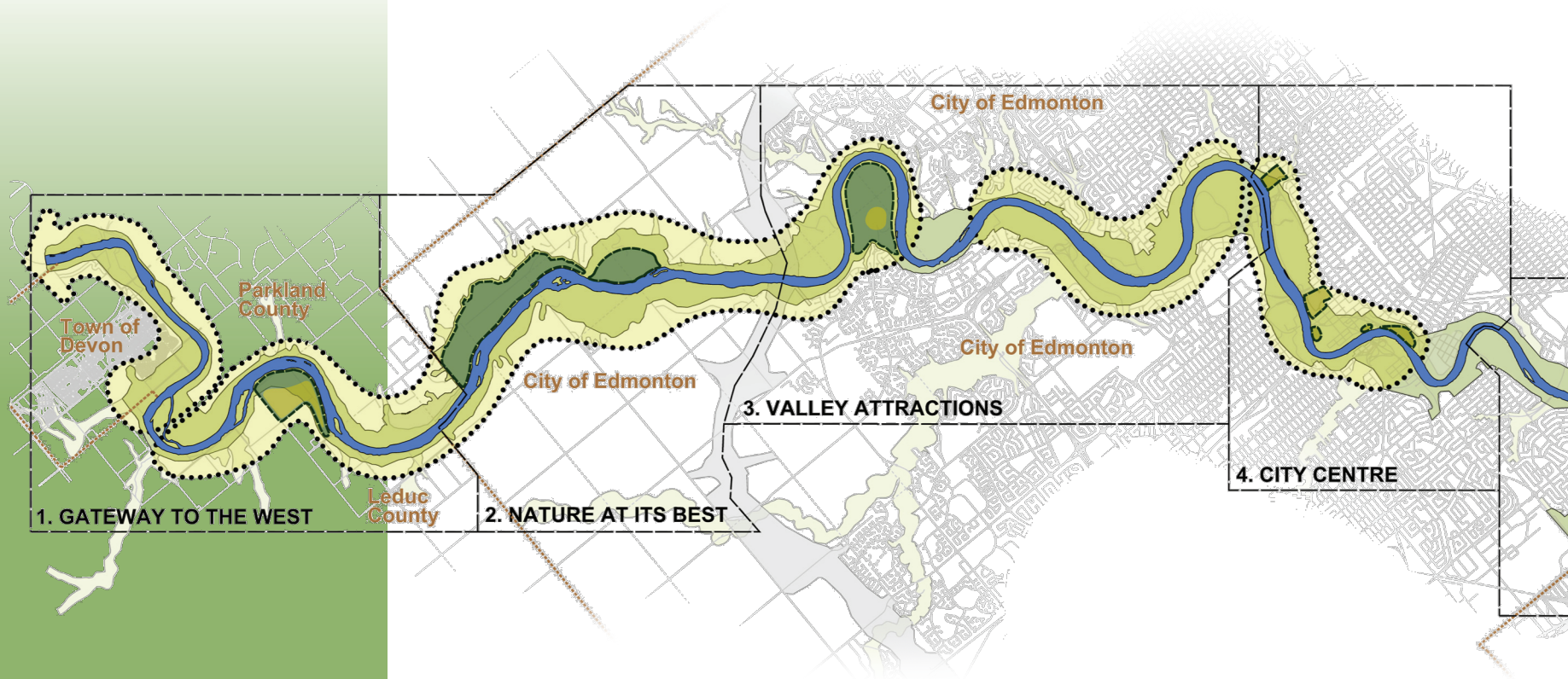
- **Parks and trail signage**

A regional signage system is proposed to link the existing features and parks together with a common identity. A number of sign types are recommended including: valley identification markers, distance markers, direction markers, and trail head signs. The river valley has to become one unified park and it has to look like one in terms of its overall visual identity and orientation by the users of the park.

- **Safety**

To protect the safety of park users, the plan proposes a combination of signage and hazard identification, municipal coordination of policing and emergency services (including police boats and emergency phones), communication and education, and managing competing activities in the park





## SEVEN PLANNING AREAS

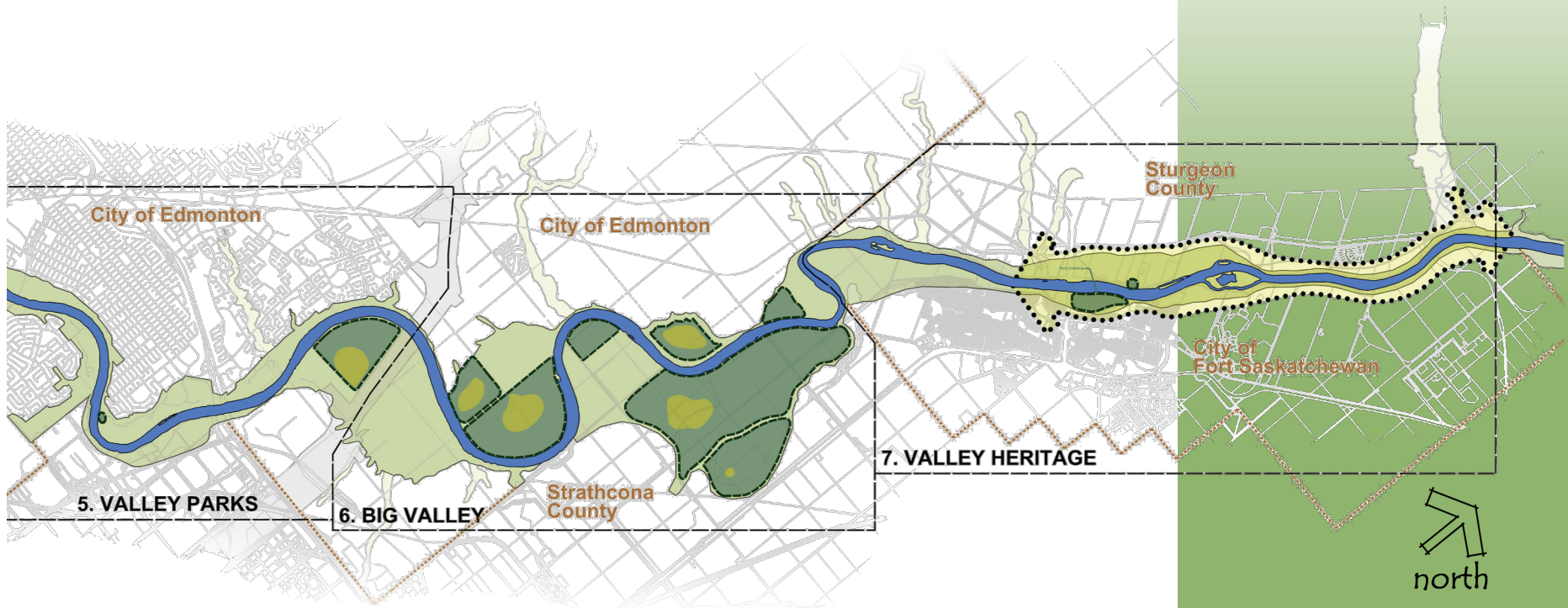
Consistent with the planning framework, the plan for the Capital Region River Valley Park outlines seven distinct planning areas. This approach proposes distinct themes, primary uses and potential opportunities for new attractions, facilities and activities for each of the seven areas while, at the same time, achieving the overall objectives for the river valley.

The following section describes each of the seven planning areas. Major highlights are described in the margin notes. Some plan features are focused on one site while others are connected across a cluster of sites and related features (see Legend in the right margin). Each plan feature focuses on different facets of the plan such as:





# Capital Region River Valley Park



- Natural area conservation & management
- Adventure attraction
- Environmental education
- Recreation
- Urban amenity
- Heritage interpretation
- Environmental restoration

## LEGEND

 Capital Region River Valley Park

Special Opportunities:

 Facility Development

 Natural Conservation / Naturalized Parkland

 Group of Opportunities