

What We Heard Report: Sandy Lake Wilderness Area

Community conversation and survey, May 2024

Project

The Sandy Lake Wilderness Area is a 167-hectare natural area in the west of Sturgeon County. The area has been left in its natural state, and park users can access it freely for a variety of recreational pursuits. On June 8, 2021, Sturgeon County Council passed a motion to explore opportunities to enhance its use. This initiated a process to create an area concept plan. This plan aims to identify potential amenities and includes conducting a biophysical assessment to guide management strategies that protect the area's natural integrity. The assessment specifically targets critical natural features that need conservation.

Overall, the Sandy Lake Wilderness Area is designated as an Environmental Preserve and must be left in its natural state or be used as a public park. The proposed concept plan considers both public input and the regulations and bylaws for environmental preservation lands, which may include the development of passive recreational amenities.

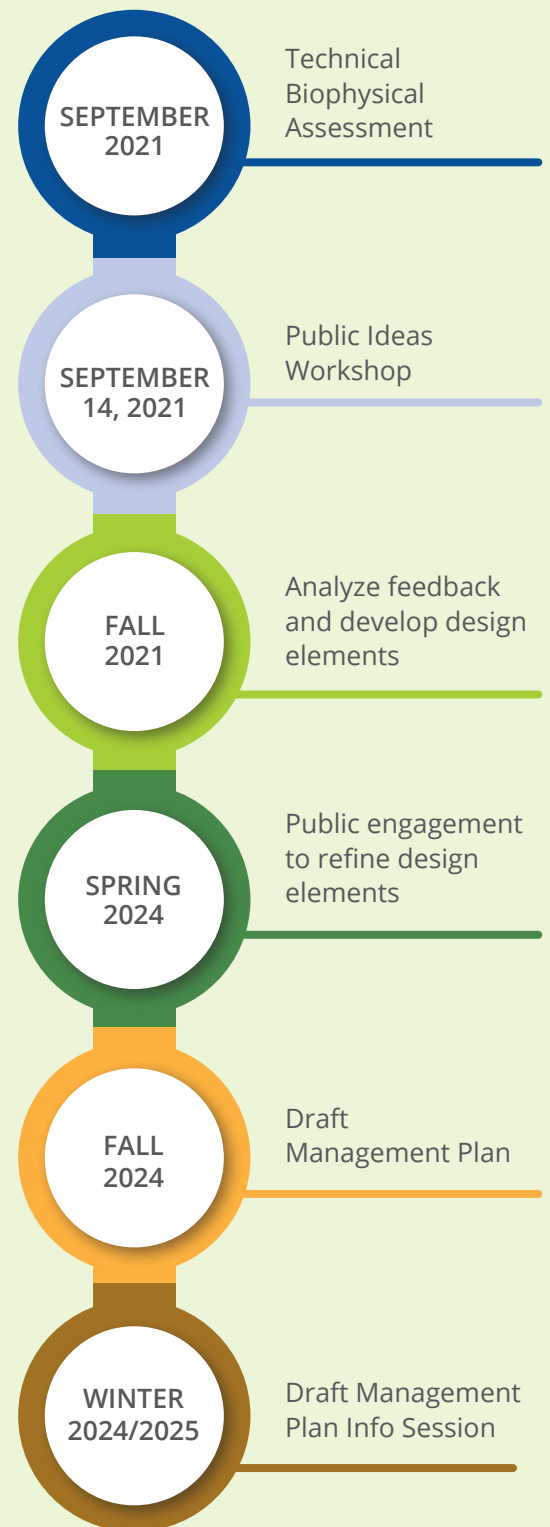
Decisions

In developing the Concept and Management Plan, the County needs to understand residents' issues and aspirations for the space within the constraints/opportunities identified in the Biophysical Assessment.

During this round of consultation, the County asked for input on:

- Preference for concept designs focusing on a conservation or recreation approach
- Desired uses and potential amenities for the space
- Ways the area could be managed in the future

The site is zoned Environmental Preservation under the Land Use Bylaw. This zone provides the opportunity for preserving natural areas and parkland along the river, creeks, ravines and other designated areas for recreational uses. Any development that occurs in the space must integrate conservation areas.



Public Engagement – What We Did

Public Engagement - Phase 1

Phase 1 of the engagement process took place from September 2021 to April 2023. It involved in-person workshops with adjacent landowners west of Highway 44. Forty-three people participated in these workshops. The County gained understanding about the adjacent residents' issues and aspirations for the space within the constraints/opportunities identified in the biophysical assessment. This local knowledge is useful in helping the County identify and address:

- Existing site issues that the plan should address
- Desired uses and amenity ideas
- Ways to manage the area in the future

Sturgeon County Council also engaged Alexander First Nation to request information about the traditional uses, cultural, ceremonial, or sacred sites within the Sandy Lake area and how best to protect those spaces.

This information was used to develop the concept options for the next phase of work.

What We Did – Phase 2

Stakeholder Engagement

The next round of Public Engagement took place from April 22 to May 17, 2024. During these conversations, residents were asked to comment on two concept plans for the Wilderness Area.

An in-person workshop was held at Sturgeon County's Family and Community Services HUB meeting room on April 23, 2024, from 12-1:30 p.m. The invitation was sent to 35 stakeholders. Groups were identified by their ability to assist with developing the natural area proposed amenities and/or offer assistance with programs. In addition to this workshop, one individual meeting with a key stakeholder group was arranged for additional input.

Twelve representatives from a total of seven groups participated in a group discussion about the question: "What resources are needed for the group to assist in the development and programming of the natural area?".



Online Survey

An online survey was posted on the County website, and 164 responses were received. 88% were from the County, 10% other, and no responses from Alexander First Nation.

Summary of survey responses:

- 52% of respondents supported Option 1 – Conservation Approach
- 36% of respondents supported Option 2 – Recreation Approach
- 5% of respondents needed more information before making a decision
- 5% (10) Of respondents preferred neither option
- The remainder skipped this question

Top Five (5) Amenities Supported:

- 60% (98) Toilet Facilities
- 57% (92) Parking Area
- 54% (88) Different types of trails
- 52% (84) Boardwalks with lookout areas
- 49% (80) Benches/Resting Areas

Additional comments:

- concerns about the road conditions and traffic impacts if park is developed
- concerns about inappropriate use of the are by OHVs, parties, hunting and dumping.

Input in Numbers

- 1 online survey
- 164 responses to the online survey
- 88 per cent of participants live in Sturgeon County
- 2 Stakeholder meetings
- 35 Stakeholder groups invited
- 12 representatives from a total of seven groups participated in a group discussion

What We Heard – Desired Uses and Amenities

Responses gathered at the Stakeholder Engagement sessions were provided around four topic themes:

1. Amenity and capital construction

- a. Building washrooms
- b. Animal safe/proof garbage cans
- c. Land Stewardship Centre – WRRP grants

2. Events and programs

- a. Trail riding activities a couple times a year
- b. Guided walks around native plants and species
- c. Bioblitz event

3. Park education and promotion

- a. Start “Friends of ...” program to manage forest, parklands etc.
- b. Potential to help galvanize support with volunteer network to raise awareness around the site
- c. Supporting with the design and review of educational signage
- d. Building signage, interpretive signage
- e. Public presentation about area
- f. Identification of plan materials (native species)

4. Natural features management

- a. Picking garbage, trail cleanups, environmental projects that could be related that could be credited for the project; pheasants project to release birds in the wild do it with alberta conservation project,
- b. Riparian restoration, access to funding
- c. Weed pulls and invasive species removal -experience organizing events
- d. Sourcing funding if activities align with protection of area goals

General comments:

- Retain open space
- Area needs more enforcement
- More signage and information
- Leverage ALUS program
- No informal pathways, pathways should be clearly defined
- Concerns about bikes in the wilderness, often cyclists don't stay on trails and cause damage and erosion
- Trails on sensitive areas cause negative impacts
- Programs that encourage local residents to steward the area
- Smaller organizations can benefit from horse trails in the area
- Existing site issues that the plan should address
- Gr 5 field trips; biggest issues will users going out there for safety and security; how to promote its clean, tidy and safety.
- The parking areas would block vehicle access, so they don't go any further; more visibility from the road to see what's going on in the wilderness area;
- Protect tree areas
- Keep areas that are undisturbed, undisturbed
- Concerns about horses and ATVs having negative impacts in the area and disruptive to wildlife; have other places in the County, these activities should be kept separate

Next Steps

A recommended Concept Plan will be presented to the public and then to Council during the capital budget planning process in 2025.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact us:

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