



University Heights 3 Natural Area Screening

What We Heard Report

February 4, 2022



Engagement Summary

Natural Area Screenings are a science-based approach to documenting and understanding existing conditions of a site at a specific point in time. It is one of many technical studies that are required by the City of Saskatoon as part of a [Neighbourhood Concept Plan](#) application.

One of the overarching goals of the University Heights Neighbourhood #3 (UH3) planning process is to design and build a neighbourhood that balances human use with the natural environment. The future development site borders significantly important natural areas, primarily the Northeast and Small Swales (the Swales), which have been identified as unique environments with high quality biodiversity that provide economic benefits for education and recreation, as well as numerous ecosystem services (i.e., flood control, pollination, etc.) for the surrounding communities. In 2019, Environmental Dynamics Inc. (EDI) was hired to complete a Natural Area Screening Study with three main objectives:

1. *Natural Areas Screening* – document the current state of vegetation and wildlife communities through on-site field studies, including recommending boundaries for ecologically significant species and wildlife corridors
2. *Assessment and Monitoring* – determine what positive or adverse effects the UH3 neighbourhood may have on the Swales
3. *Management Practises* – make recommendations for best management practises to balance the neighbourhood development plans with the surrounding natural environment.

The UH3 Natural Area Screening Study was completed as part of the process of developing the UH3 Neighbourhood Concept Plan (Concept Plan). The results will be considered during the development of the draft Concept Plan as well as during City Administration's review.

In May 2021, an Access to Information Request was made requesting City Administration make the [UH3 Natural Area Screening Report](#) available to the community. To fulfill the request and provide further information on the findings within the report, City Administration and Saskatoon Land made the report public on the [City's Engage Page](#) and conducted a public information session on June 21, 2021. During the public information session participants were invited to provide their feedback to the project team.

This engagement summary includes an overview of the feedback provided during the public information session. The intended audience, activities, dates, participation rates and detailed engagement results are provided in the Engagement Report that follows this summary.

Concerns for the Development of the Swales

It is important to note that some of the comments and concerns provided by the participants were not directly related to the UH3 Natural Area Screening Report, but rather related to larger City development practises and initiatives. Many respondents asked why the site is being developed in the first place, due to the importance of the natural habitats and species that already encompass the area. Respondents stressed the need to protect natural areas within Saskatoon to ensure the ecological integrity of our city is maintained. Also, some respondents asked why other adjacent areas, such as the University of Saskatchewan Beef Research Site or the west side of the city, were not being explored further for development since they could provide better alternatives.

Comments provided by participants on developmental considerations included the following main themes:

Learned lessons: some participants felt that the City has made similar mistakes in the past and should learn from the lessons that were learned, such as the Saskatoon Natural Grasslands which represents a failed attempt by the City and Meewasin to maintain a healthy grassland in an urban setting

Prioritizing environmental considerations: numerous participants felt that environmental considerations and the ecological integrity of the Swales was secondary to development considerations, and these considerations should be considered a priority

Reducing roadways: many participants felt that there is no need for additional roads that transect the Northeast Swale, especially since vehicles can already use McOrmond Drive and Central Avenue

Sharp-tailed Grouse Lek

Being the most popular theme discussed during the event, many participants expressed their concern for the local sharp-tailed grouse population and their breeding grounds (i.e., lek) located near the Northeast Swale. Many participants stated that the current recommendation for a setback from the grouse lek was not sufficient and based on the minimal requirements rather than what is optimal. Participants expressed concern that the setback for the grouse lek is only half of the 400 m setback that is recommended by the Ministry of Environment; however, the project team noted that the [Saskatchewan Activity Restriction Guidelines for Sensitive Species](#) are guidelines suggested by the Ministry of Environment and the recommendations in the report were based on the effect of light traffic (i.e., foot traffic only) on the bird species' breeding periods from March 15 to May 15. Overall, many participants strongly believed the greater development and human presence would be a major disturbance for this important species.

Participants identified that the shelter/shrub belt adjacent to the main grouse lek could be problematic for numerous reasons, including the attraction of predator species and the introduction of invasive species.

General Comments and Concerns

The following main themes emerged from the comments that were provided by participants:

Extending the recommendations: it was suggested that the recommendations provided in the report should extend to future Saskatoon North Partnership for Growth (P4G) development plans and proposed Saskatoon Freeway to ensure the continuity of the Swales northward

Opportunity for leadership: many respondents suggested this is an opportunity for the City to take a more progressive stance in developing around their greenspaces; building sustainable places and spaces to live in is positive for residents, developers, the City, and the environment itself

Scope of protection: numerous respondents identified that the City seems to be focussing on minimal mitigation rather than proactive ecological protection of larger portions of the Swales

Future Engagement

Due to the length of the report and community interest in the site, it was suggested that further engagement opportunities with the community should be conducted by Saskatoon Land and the City in the future. Respondents specifically called for further consultation with the community through the development of the Concept Plan. Many participants suggested that the information provided by community and stakeholders should be used in the development of the Concept Plan, rather than trying to incorporate these considerations after the Concept Plan has already been approved by City Council.

Contents

Engagement Summary	2
Contents	5
1 Background.....	6
1.1 Strategic Goals	7
1.2 City Project Team	7
1.3 Spokesperson(s).....	7
2 Engagement Activities.....	8
2.1 Public Information Session.....	8
2.1.1 Intended Audience	8
2.1.2 Marketing Techniques.....	9
2.1.3 Analysis	9
2.1.4 What We Heard	9
3 Evaluation	13
3.1 Data Limitations	13
3.2 Opportunities for Improvement.....	13
4 Next Steps	15

1 Background

Natural Area Screenings are a science-based approach to documenting and understanding existing conditions of a site at a specific point in time. It is one of many technical studies that are required by the City of Saskatoon as part of a [Neighbourhood Concept Plan](#) application.

One of the overarching goals of the University Heights Neighbourhood #3 (UH3) planning process is to design and build a neighbourhood that balances human use with the natural environment. The future development site borders significantly important natural areas, primarily the [Northeast](#) and [Small Swales](#) (the Swales), which have been identified as unique environments with high quality biodiversity that provide economic benefits for education and recreation, as well as numerous ecosystem services (i.e., flood control, pollination, etc.) for the surrounding communities. Their diverse environment offers considerable habitat for a large variety of plant species (more than 200), birds (more than 100), mammals, amphibians, reptiles, and insects. Therefore, the City of Saskatoon and the Meewasin Valley Authority partnered to conserve the portion of the Northeast Swale located within both the City boundary and within the Meewasin Conservation Zone, to maintain the diversity of species represented within this area.

Numerous studies have been conducted in this area since the creation of the [University Heights Sector Plan](#), including hydrogeological, heritage resource assessment, paleontological, environmental assessments, wildlife mitigation plans, and natural area screening. In 2019 Environmental Dynamics Inc. (EDI) was hired to complete a Natural Area Screening Study with three main objectives:

1. *Natural Areas Screening* – document the current state of vegetation and wildlife communities through on-site field studies; this included providing recommendations for boundaries for ecologically significant species and wildlife corridors
2. *Assessment and Monitoring* – determine what positive or adverse effects the UH3 neighbourhood may have on the Swales
3. *Management Practises* – make recommendations for best management practises to balance the neighbourhood development plans with the surrounding natural environment.

The goal was to provide direction for design related parameters to help shape the future UH3 Neighbourhood Concept Plan (Concept Plan) and further understand how to balance human use with the surrounding natural environment. The UH3 Natural Area Screening Study was completed as part of the process of developing the Concept Plan. The results will be considered during the development of the draft Concept Plan as well as during City Administration's review.

In March 2021, an Access to Information Request was made requesting City Administration make the [UH3 Natural Area Screening Report](#) available to the community. To fulfill the request and provide further information on the findings within the report, City Administration and Saskatoon Land made the report public on the [City's Engage Page](#) and conducted a public information session on June 21, 2021. During the public information session participants were invited to ask questions and provide their feedback to the project team.

This engagement report summarizes the feedback collected during the public information session. The feedback collected will be considered, alongside numerous studies and developmental considerations, by Saskatoon Land in developing the draft Concept Plan. It will also be considered by City Administration once the draft Concept Plan is submitted for review. As part of the review process, the draft Concept Plan will be presented at a public open house, before going to Municipal

Planning Commission and City Council for consideration. Additional open houses or engagement opportunities with select stakeholders may occur throughout the development of the Concept Plan and/or City Administration's review, if needed.

1.1 Strategic Goals

This UH3 Natural Area Screening Report supports the [Strategic Goals](#) of Sustainable Growth, Moving Around, and Environmental Leadership contributing to responsible land and water use.

1.2 City Project Team

- Frank Long, Project Sponsor, Saskatoon Land
- Derek Thompson, Project Manager, Saskatoon Land
- Nola Stein, Project Coordinator, Saskatoon Land
- Brendan Garrity, Project Support, Saskatoon Land
- Tracey Lewis, Marketing Consultant, Communications & Public Engagement
- Kenton Lysak, Engagement Consultant, Communications & Public Engagement

1.3 Spokesperson(s)

- Frank Long, Director, Saskatoon Land
- Derek Thompson, Project Manager, Saskatoon Land

2 Engagement Activities

Community members were able to learn more about the results of the UH3 Natural Area Screening Report and ask questions during a public information session or by contacting the project team directly via email, mail, or telephone.

2.1 Public Information Session

A public information session was held on June 21st, 2021 to provide an overview of the results from the UH3 Natural Area Screening Report. This was an opportunity for representatives from Saskatoon Land, Environmental Dynamics Inc. and the City of Saskatoon to answer questions from the community. The public information session was held virtually via Microsoft Teams and consisted of a 30-minute presentation provided by Saskatoon land, which was followed by a 90-minute question and answer period. Attendees were invited to submit and vote on questions/comments through Pigeonhole Live. Attendees could continue to submit their questions/comments via Pigeonhole Live one day after the event and a recording of the event was made available online through the [City's Engage Page](#) on June 23rd, 2021.

2.1.1 Intended Audience

Along with the surrounding communities, specific stakeholders involved in conserving the Swales were invited to participate in the public information session. These stakeholders included the following:

- Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society of Saskatchewan Chapter
- Ducks Unlimited Saskatoon
- Ecofriendly Sask
- Endangered Grasslands Alliance
- Environment and Climate Change Canada
- Meewasin
- Native Plant Society of Saskatchewan
- Partners FOR the Saskatchewan River Basin
- Saskatchewan Environmental Society
- Saskatchewan Light Pollution Abatement Committee
- Saskatoon Nature Society
- Saskatoon Swalewatchers
- Saskatoon Wildlife Federation
- Troutreach
- University of Saskatchewan – Global Institute for Water Security
- University of Saskatchewan – School of Environment and Sustainability
- University of Saskatchewan – Urban Wildlife Information Network
- Wild About Saskatoon

A total of 32 individuals participated in the public information session.

2.1.2 Marketing Techniques

The following marketing techniques were employed for the public information session:

1. City Website
 - a. Updates to the Engage Page were made to encourage participation
2. E-invites
 - a. Personalized emails were sent to stakeholders asking them to participate and share an e-invite with their members and the community
 - b. The surrounding community associations were provided the e-invite to be sent to their memberships
3. Printable Poster
 - a. An 8.5" x 11" printable poster was sent to community associations, City Leisure Centres, and stakeholder organizations.

2.1.3 Analysis

The results were analyzed using qualitative methods, including the thematic analysis and open coding of responses.

2.1.4 What We Heard

Concerns for the Development of the Swales

It is important to note that some of the comments and concerns provided by the participants were not directly related to the UH3 Natural Area Screening Report, but rather related to larger City development practises and initiatives. Many respondents asked why the site is being developed in the first place, due to the importance of the natural habitats and species that already encompass the area. Respondents stressed the need to protect natural areas within Saskatoon to ensure the ecological integrity of our City is maintained.

"Why develop this precious natural place at all given the number of endangered species and rare plants that have been found repeatedly?"

"Why is [Saskatoon Land] still developing this neighbourhood given the obvious negative environmental impacts when there are a large number of other greenfield sites available"?

Some respondents asked why other adjacent areas, such as the University of Saskatchewan Beef Research Site or the west side of the city, were not being explored further for development since they could be better alternatives.

"Why is the east side of the city expanding so much faster then the west side. Why is the farmland on the west side of the city not developed over natural lands. This seems very inequitable."

Comments provided by participants on developmental considerations included the following themes:

Buffers: larger buffers should be incorporated into the development plans so that these areas truly remain wild

Connectivity: some respondents expressed their concern for the lack of connectivity between the Swales and other green spaces due to the division caused by McOrmond Drive; patches of habitat will degrade over time and not adequately serve to support the grassland ecosystems if further divided

"[Saskatoon Land] has designed a car dependent impermeable road network that will destroy natural habitat, wildlife Corridors, wetlands and further endanger bird and at-risk species. Shame on the C of S!!!"

Learned lessons: some participants felt that the City has made similar mistakes in the past and should learn from the lessons that were learned; the Saskatoon Natural Grasslands represents a failed attempt by the City and Meewasin to maintain a healthy grassland in an urban setting due to the creation of a biological island surrounded by houses/roads

Prioritizing environmental considerations: numerous participants called for environmental considerations and the ecological integrity of the Swales to be considered as a priority instead of secondary to developmental considerations; some participants felt that the City and Saskatoon Land's primary concern should not be the revenue generated from developing the area, but rather environmental protection and conserving biodiversity

"The balance referred to is not really balanced as we are losing so many natural lands! The City has been building in the Swale for some time with the Evergreen and Aspen Ridge neighbourhoods and now another neighbourhood."

"As you can tell, many of the people on this call want to see the Swales protected. So yes! Protect the wetlands, protect the lek,. Create connections. Leave wide margins. Half measures will not work."

Reducing roadways: one of the most popular themes; many participants felt there is no need for many of the roadways that transect the Northeast Swale, especially since vehicles can already use McOrmond Drive and Central Avenue; it was suggested that if the existing Lowe Road needs to remain for emergency purposes it should contain a locked gate that is only accessible to emergency vehicles; Lowe Road should not be paved since it will encourage greater traffic; the development planning process need to consider the impacts of the future Saskatoon Freeway as well

"An expanded commuter access road through the ecological core of the Swale is not acceptable. How do you justify this permanent intrusion of noise and light?"

Sharp-tailed Grouse Lek

Being the most popular theme discussed during the event, many participants expressed their concern for the local sharp-tailed grouse population and their breeding grounds (i.e., lek) located near the Northeast Swale. Some participants believe that the local grouse population within the area has been declining since the introduction of major roadways with high speeds along and adjacent to the main grouse lek.

Participants found the shelter/shrub belt adjacent to the main grouse lek to potentially be problematic for numerous reasons, including the attraction of predator species (i.e., falcons, owls, etc.) and the introduction of invasive species. Participants suggested that any additional stress to the existing population and location of the grouse lek would result in the grouse abandoning the site, which would be a major loss to the ecological integrity of the site. It was noted that the location of the grouse lek may change somewhat annually depending on numerous environmental conditions, which could potentially result in the need to protect a larger area than is currently being represented as their breeding grounds. Also, native shrubs would need to be used since many natural areas are currently experiencing challenges with invasive shrub species (ex. European buckthorn).

Participants expressed concern that the setback for the grouse lek is only half of the 400 m setback that is recommended by the Ministry of Environment; however, the project team noted that the [Saskatchewan Activity Restriction Guidelines for Sensitive Species are guidelines](#) suggested by the Ministry of Environment and the recommendations in the report were based on the effect of light traffic (i.e., foot traffic only) on the bird species' breeding periods from March 15 to May 15. Overall, many participants strongly believed the greater development and human presence would be a major disturbance for this important species and participants believe this will not be sufficient in protecting this important population.

"You cannot expect grouse to compromise. They need space. The city already appears to have caused a calamitous decline in this lek by ill-considered development. By pressing in on these birds you will displace an already declining species— which just happens to be the provincial bird."

General Comments and Concerns

The following general themes emerged from the comments that were provided by participants:

Extending the recommendations: one of the most popular themes; it was suggested that the recommendations provided in the report should extend to future Saskatoon North Partnership for Growth (P4G) development plans to ensure the continuity of the Swales northward; the study should also include the areas surrounding the new alternative route for the proposed Saskatoon Freeway

Importance of nature: the value of nature for human health and well being is evident within research and our daily lives; one participant suggested that the value of natural areas for human health is often overlooked; it was identified that many schools treat these spaces as outdoor classrooms which have been shown to be extremely important places for learning

Opportunity for leadership: many respondents suggested this is an opportunity for the City to take a more progressive stance in developing around their greenspaces; building sustainable places and spaces to live in is positive for residents, developers, the City, and the environment itself for numerous reasons; it was suggested that the Swales should similarly be treated as other areas that were identified in the report as being not "subdivision material"

"Saskatoon has an immense opportunity in UH3 to do something different. History will be the judge I guess. The natural capital, ecological goods & services provided by natural areas are VERY important."

"why not address the issues that continue to be ignored. Build a neighborhood with significant wildlife corridors, bird friendly windows, low energy homes, municipal grey water system, natural landscapes, etc."

"I would like to see Saskatoon Land take leadership in requiring sustainable practices of the builders."

Scope of protection: numerous respondents identified that the City seems to be focussing on minimal mitigation rather than proactive ecological protection of larger portions of the Swales; since much of the ecological system lies outside of City boundaries, a regional ecosystem study should be used to assess the impacts of development on the entirety of the Swales; using minimal requirements in site-specific cases is not always the best course of action

Stormwater: there was confusion surrounding whether an additional stormwater pond in the Northeast Swale (i.e., along Agra Road) was being recommended; although the report recommends placing the storm ponds on previously disturbed areas of the Swales, many participants stressed the need to move the stormwater pond for the Northeast Swale outside the boundaries and into the surrounding croplands that are not as environmentally important; the Swales should not be reduced or greatly impacted by considerations for stormwater

Remaining Questions

Some questions were submitted but were unable to be answered within the timeframe of the public information session. Participants were notified that these questions would be provided to the project team for future consideration. These questions included the following:

- How is Saskatoon Land consulting with the Indigenous community about protecting the Swales?
- How will the City's new [Triple Bottom Line](#) process come into play?
- If you have not designed the neighbourhood, how do you know that Lowe Road is needed for commuter traffic?
- Why are you proposing a forebay within the Northeast Swale?
- Will Saskatoon Land or the City provide adequate funding for the stewardship of these natural areas? Funding for stewardship is essential
- Will there be strict environmental rules for developers for this area (ex. solar panels, community geothermal, naturalized parks, etc.)?
- Will these plans effect the Saskatoon Freeway in any way?

Future Engagement and How the Information Will Be Used

Due to the length of the report and community interest in the site, it was suggested by respondents that further engagement opportunities with the community should be conducted by Saskatoon Land and the City in the future. Respondents specifically called for further consultation with the community on what the next steps are following the release of the UH3 Natural Area Screening Report and through the development of the Concept Plan. Representatives from the City and Saskatoon Land clarified that the UH3 Natural Area Screening Report will be submitted as a supporting document to the City as part of a Neighbourhood Concept Plan Application. City Administration will then review the Concept Plan when it is submitted by Saskatoon Land to confirm it appropriately incorporates the information and recommendations represented in the UH3 Natural Area Screening Report. City Administration will then provide a recommendation to the Municipal Planning Committee and City Council regarding the approval of the Concept Plan.

Respondents also asked whether the information that was collected from the public information session will be taken into consideration prior to the Concept Plan going to City Council and the future development of the area. Many participants suggested that this information should be used in the development of the Concept Plan rather than being reactive and trying to incorporate these considerations after the plan has already been presented to City Council. Furthermore, some participants expressed their support for Saskatoon Land and the City of Saskatoon engaging the community at earlier stages of the neighbourhood planning process, which they felt had not been done before.

3 Evaluation

Informal participant evaluation was determined through the comments provided by participants during and following the public information session. Some participants provided their support for the engagement conducted and the opportunity that was provided; however, some respondents expressed the need for future engagement activities to include more plain language and be performed in-person rather than virtually:

“Engagement must be in plain language and not require university education to understand the jargon and undefined science terms. You talk 1 hr we have only 200 characters?!”

“High tech ‘engagement’ alienates understanding and democratic participation. Why not a socially distant session on site at swale so people can see what will be lost. Use battery microphones?”

3.1 Data Limitations

Due to public health orders (i.e., social distancing measures) and considerations related to the COVID-19 pandemic, engagement activities were confined to virtual means. Virtual engagement has limitations, primarily by limiting accessibility for those without internet access or with limited computer literacy and by enabling accessibility by those who have a more active online/social media presence. The COVID-19 pandemic has also shifted the priorities for many people, resulting in numerous stakeholders being unable to participate in our engagement process due to more pressing concerns. Therefore, the community may not have been able to fully participate in the engagement activities conducted; however, the results are considered to provide the best available indication of how the community perceives the findings in the UH3 Natural Area Screening Report at the time of the event.

The nature of the virtual public information session required comments to be provided through the Pigeonhole Live platform, which resulted in some participants being limited in how they could express their feedback and concerns. Many of the topics that were addressed during the event could have warranted further discussion with the participants and further exploration by the project team in developing the Concept Plan. It is recommended by the respondents that continued engagement of the community and stakeholders is conducted in a way that ensures a diversity of voices can freely express their opinions and concerns openly.

3.2 Opportunities for Improvement

Based on participant feedback, the following opportunities for improvement will be considered for future engagement activities:

- Allowing more time for the community and stakeholders to review the UH3 Natural Area Screening Report prior to the public information session would have allowed for more specific concerns to be addressed
- Continued engagement during the UH3 planning process and development of the Concept Plan is needed to balance the protection of the Swales with developmental needs
- Engagement activities that reduce engagement limitations presented by the COVID-19 pandemic should be developed to optimize engagement during this period
- Future engagement activities should include opportunities for open discussions between Saskatoon Land, the City and the community for opinions to be more fully expressed and for solutions to be sought through more open dialogue

- Saskatoon Land should continue to engage the community in the development of the Concept Plan so that the community can identify their concerns prior to the Concept Plan going before City Council

4 Next Steps

The feedback collected during this event will be considered, alongside the numerous technical studies and developmental considerations, by Saskatoon Land when developing the draft Concept Plan. City Administration will also consider this feedback during their review of the draft Concept Plan.

Once Saskatoon Land completes the initial draft Concept Plan, it will be submitted to City Administration for review. As part of this review, a public open house will occur, as well as any additional engagement that may be needed before the Concept Plan is brought forward for consideration by Municipal Planning Commission and City Council. Additional reports may also be provided to various Standing Policy Committees, as needed. Specific timelines are not being provided at this time since there are many factors that may influence certain aspects of the project, and therefore the overall timelines. If the design is approved by City Council, it will become an official [Neighbourhood Concept Plan](#).