

Strathcona County Regional Park Master Plan

Phase 2 What We Heard Report

September 2022

A landscape photograph showing a river or stream flowing through a field of tall grass. The sky is a soft pinkish-purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The text "Project Overview" is overlaid in white on the upper left portion of the image.

Project Overview

Project Background



Strathcona County is developing a master plan for a new 290-acre regional park along the North Saskatchewan River.

The new regional park will become part of a larger integrated and connected network of open spaces, serving a range of ecological and recreational purposes. The master plan will give the County direction on the type of development and activity that is desired for the park for the next 15 years.

The master plan will respond to community needs by engaging with the public and stakeholders throughout its development. Direction for the master plan will also come from municipal, provincial, and federal policy and an understanding of what may be appropriate for the park based on site analysis.

Strathcona County's new regional park will benefit the community through:

- + **Nature:** Ecology and nature experiences
- + **Park Uses:** Activities and recreation
- + **Movement:** Getting to and around the park
- + **Learning:** History, education, and storytelling
- + **Creativity:** Arts and culture
- + **Community:** Social connections and wellbeing

These themes will be used throughout the project to identify opportunities and challenges in the park and to organize recommendations in the master plan and implementation strategy.



A landscape photograph showing a river or stream flowing through a field of tall grass. The sky is a soft pinkish-purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The text "Engagement Process" is overlaid in white.

Engagement Process

WE ARE HERE



Project Process

Public and stakeholder feedback is essential to ensure that the master plan reflects current and future community needs.

During the first round of engagement (February 14-28, 2022), you were asked for ideas on what the new regional park could become for the community and how you would like to use it.

The first round of engagement focused on the overall vision for the park. Several methods of engagement took place from 2020-2022:

- **2020-2021:** Virtual workshops and site visit with Indigenous Communities and Organizations
- **February 2022:** Public online survey and virtual stakeholder workshops

In the first round of engagement, we heard that conserving and restoring the park's ecological health is important, as is creating opportunities for visitors to connect with nature through education, community programming, and recreation. For a more detailed breakdown of engagement results, see the Phase 1 What We Heard Report at: strathcona.ca/newregionalpark.

In the second round of engagement (June 20-July 8, 2022), you were presented with two park concepts, each with its own amenities and activities that reflect the shared vision. You were asked to provide feedback on which elements of the designs you prefer. Your feedback, summarized in this report, will be used to craft the final park concept for the master plan.

For all project updates and background information, visit strathcona.ca/newregionalpark.



Phase 2 Public and Stakeholder Engagement

How We Engaged

Project information and draft park concepts were presented to the public online and at an in-person open house. The open house took place from 5-8pm on June 20, 2022. The online survey also launched on June 20 and remained open until July 8, 2022. During the engagement period, there were 1,388 visits to the website. Local responses (based on IP address) were included in the analysis. The public was made aware of the engagement through several communication methods, including:

- Social media posts (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)
- Posters along the regional trail and in the community
- Two billboard signs in Sherwood Park
- Community newsletters
- A newspaper ad
- Digital signage in County facilities
- Information release distributed to local media
- A project website: strathcona.ca/newregionalpark

What We Asked

The purpose of the second round of engagement was to receive feedback from the public and stakeholders on the vision statement and draft park concepts, which were developed based on earlier engagement results. The following questions were asked at the open house and in the online survey:

A. Vision: We asked for feedback on the vision statement that was developed using previous engagement feedback.

- Do you agree with this vision statement for the new regional park?

B. Concept Comparison: Two draft park concepts were presented to the public with a description of the experiences that each concept could offer. We asked which concept was preferred in relation to the trails and pathways, the landscape design, and the water design.

- Which trails and pathways do you prefer?
- Which landscape design do you prefer?
- Which water design do you prefer?

C. Park Program Elements: Sixteen different program elements were presented. Park program elements are features that impact what you do and how you interact with others in the park. We asked participants to tell us which elements they would like to see included in the final park concept.

- Do you agree with including the following program elements in the park?



Indigenous Communities and Organizations

The County is committed to engaging with Indigenous Communities and Organizations when a project intersects with Indigenous interests.

In September 2022, the County invited Indigenous Communities and Organizations to participate in a virtual engagement event to provide further feedback on the master plan and concept options. Future engagement and partnership opportunities will also be explored. Feedback from participating Communities and Organizations will be summarized in a separate, internal report.



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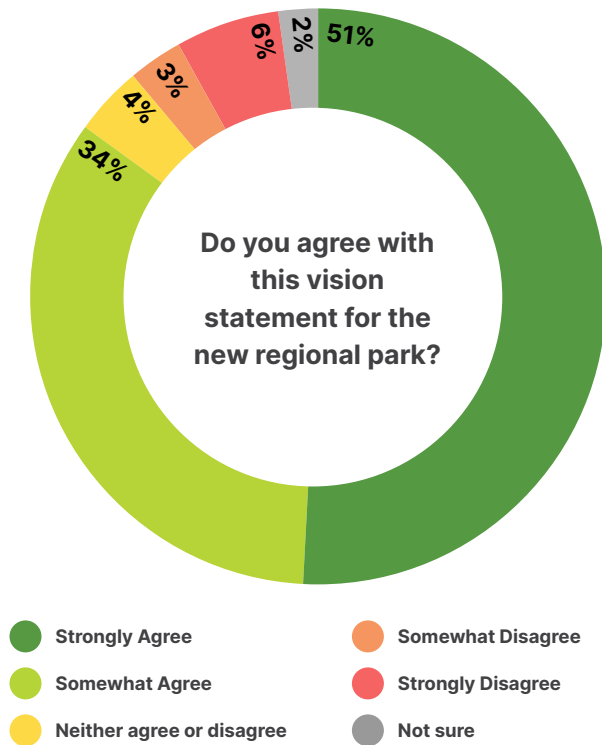
What We Heard

A | Vision Statement

The vision statement, which incorporates previous engagement feedback, was presented at the open house and online for commentary.

The proposed shared vision for Strathcona County Regional Park is:

... a regenerative river park in Strathcona County that balances inclusive outdoor recreation and nature appreciation to foster a healthy, connected river valley system, becoming a meeting place where important histories can be unearthed and shared with present and future generations.



Although participants support the sentiments of the proposed vision statement (85% of participants agree with it), several participants' comments indicate that the statement is long and difficult to understand. Participants want to ensure that the statement is clear, legible, and easy to implement.

... a regenerative river park in Strathcona County...

- Most participants are happy to see a focus on regeneration and restoration of the landscape, but a few are opposed to developing a new regional park in this location.

...that balances inclusive outdoor recreation and nature appreciation...

- There is support for creating an inclusive park that all residents will be able to enjoy. Some would like to see a greater emphasis on sustainability, conservation, and minimal infrastructure to support nature-based recreation and trail use. Others would like to see a greater focus on health and well-being, all-season recreation, and educational/cultural activities (particularly for children and school groups).

...to foster a healthy, connected river valley system...

- Participants appreciate that this park will contribute to a connected river valley, both through a connected trail system and restored wildlife corridors.

...becoming a meeting place where important histories can be unearthed and shared with present and future generations.

- Some participants are in favour of recognizing the history of the site in the vision statement; however, they feel that the last part of the statement is unclear and the language could potentially have negative connotations. The idea could be better integrated into the overall vision.

The County will use this feedback to revise the vision statement for the master plan.

B | Concept Comparison

Two draft park concepts were presented at the open house and online. The concept plans were accompanied by graphics and text that focused on the experiences each concept could provide park visitors. Similarities and differences between the two concepts were highlighted, with major differences being the treatment of the pathways, landscape, and water in each concept. The County asked for feedback on these three areas to inform the development of a single park concept for the master plan.

1. Trails and Pathways



Concept 1

The primary pathway loops around the park, running along the exterior of the site and connecting to the Riverside Nature Trail to the north. Cross-country ski trails run alongside the main paved pathway.



Concept 2

The main pathways meander through the park and connect to the main access road that runs through the centre of the park. Winding pathways lead to hilltop lookouts on the east while boardwalks lead visitors around the wetlands to the west.

2. Landscape



Concept 1

Much of the landscape is flat, with vast views over meadows, grasslands, and the large lake.



Concept 2

Rolling hills provide opportunities for a variety of plant communities and nature lookouts.

3. Water



Concept 1

The existing ponds are connected to create a large lake with an island, focused on water recreation and education.



Concept 2

The existing ponds are connected to create a series of restored wetlands with boardwalks for nature appreciation.

Trails and Pathways

The winding pathways and boardwalks in Concept 2 are generally preferred over the exterior pathway loop in Concept 1, however participants were able to see benefits to both concepts.



Concept 1: Exterior pathway loop with adjacent cross-country ski trails

Participants who preferred the trails and pathways in **Concept 1** commented that:

- The large pathway loop is simple, easy to navigate, and creates a good connection to the regional pathway for cycling and skiing
- Concept 1 provides more structured recreation opportunities

Legend

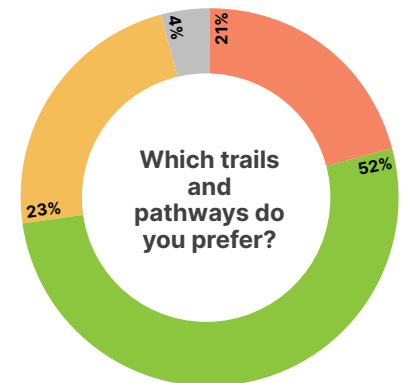
- Vehicle access road with pedestrian walkway
- Primary paved multi-use pathway
- Secondary paved pathways
- Gravel pathways
- Raised wooden boardwalks
- Natural trails / cross-country ski trails



Concept 2: Winding pathways and boardwalks with separate cross-country ski trails

Preferred aspects of **Concept 2** include:

- Trails that go through the park give people a chance to get closer to nature and create different experiences with each visit
- Winding trails offer more variety and interest
- The concept overall seems more natural and participants like the restoration opportunities presented
- Boardwalks through wetlands create learning opportunities and chances to experience nature
- Cross-country ski trails are separate from main pathways (this is preferred by all)



- Concept 1
- Both are good options
- Concept 2
- Neither option is suitable

Winter trail activities are a welcome addition to both concepts. Participants are excited by the opportunity to ski, skate, snowshoe, hike, and fat bike in the park during the winter months. Some questions came up over maintenance requirements for cross-country ski trails and whether supporting amenities will be provided (e.g. warming huts, washrooms, etc.).

Participants would like a variety of trail loops for different activities and skill levels, especially through natural areas. There were some concerns about conflicts with other trail users and dogs. Participants provided suggestions for separating different trail uses (e.g. separated lanes on paved pathways) as well as separating vehicle and pedestrian traffic.

Landscape

The rolling hills and varied topography in Concept 2 are greatly preferred to the flat landscape in Concept 1. Some participants could also see a combination of the two being enjoyable to visit.



Concept 1: Relatively flat landscape

Those who prefer **Concept 1** appreciate the accessibility of a flatter landscape and the opportunities this provides for recreation and amenities.

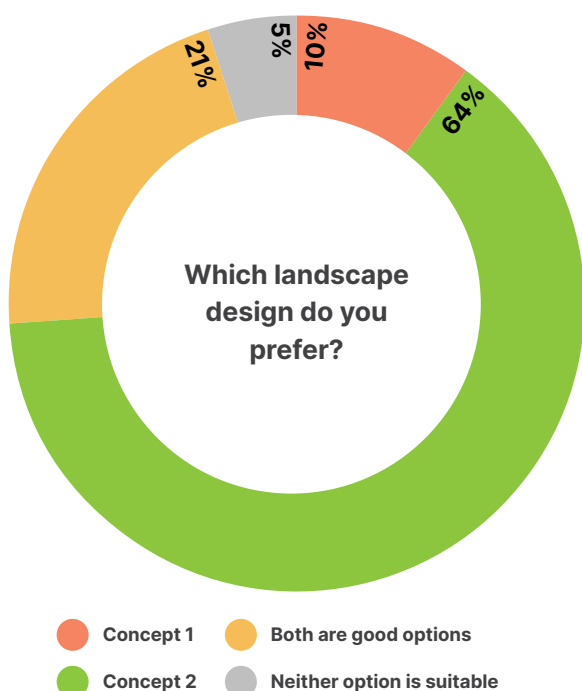
- Flatter landscape is more physically accessible to people with mobility limitations and provides extensive views across the park
- The flat topography will require less earthwork and could result in less disturbance to the landscape



Concept 2: Rolling hills and varied topography

Preferred aspects of **Concept 2** include:

- Hills are more interesting for a variety of activities (e.g. walking, hiking, cross-country skiing, disc golf)
- Rolling hills create more of a physical challenge for recreation as well as opportunities to explore
- Hilltop lookouts provide great views of the park
- Varied topography has a more natural feeling and creates a variety of habitats for wildlife
- Hills can help to create privacy and allow for more contemplative moments for visitors
- Some like the other landscape features in Concept 2, such as the wetlands and boardwalks



Several participants indicated that they would be happy to see a blend of the landscape options (some flat areas and some rolling topography) while others did not have a strong preference. Still others are not supportive of either option, stating that the plan would be too costly or result in too much disturbance.

Water

There is not a clear preference for either concept when it comes to the water design. In general, participants seem to be excited to enjoy a variety of water activities. There is interest in non-motorized boating, swimming, fishing, and skating on the ponds. (The County is undertaking studies to understand environmental and safety considerations for these types of activities in the park.)



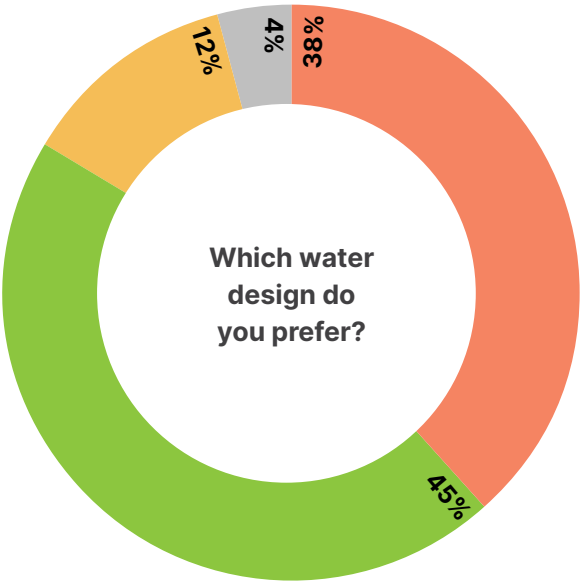
Concept 1: Large lake with an island

Some believe that **Concept 1** may be more appropriate for family activities and a variety of water sports. Many preferred the large lake for these reasons. The island received mixed feedback. A beach is an exciting addition for some participants since there are few beaches nearby.



Concept 2: Connected wetlands and ponds

Those that prefer **Concept 2** tend to think it is more natural and provides greater wildlife habitat, specifically wetland habitat for birds and waterfowl. Many are excited about the nature-viewing and educational opportunities that the interconnected wetlands could provide.



- Concept 1
- Both are good options
- Concept 2
- Neither option is suitable

Both concepts presented concerns for attracting geese and mosquitos. Additionally, some participants are concerned that large groups of people at the water could contribute to pollution, crowding, and/or water contamination. There are also concerns about capital costs, maintenance costs, and the impacts of earth moving and park development on existing wildlife.

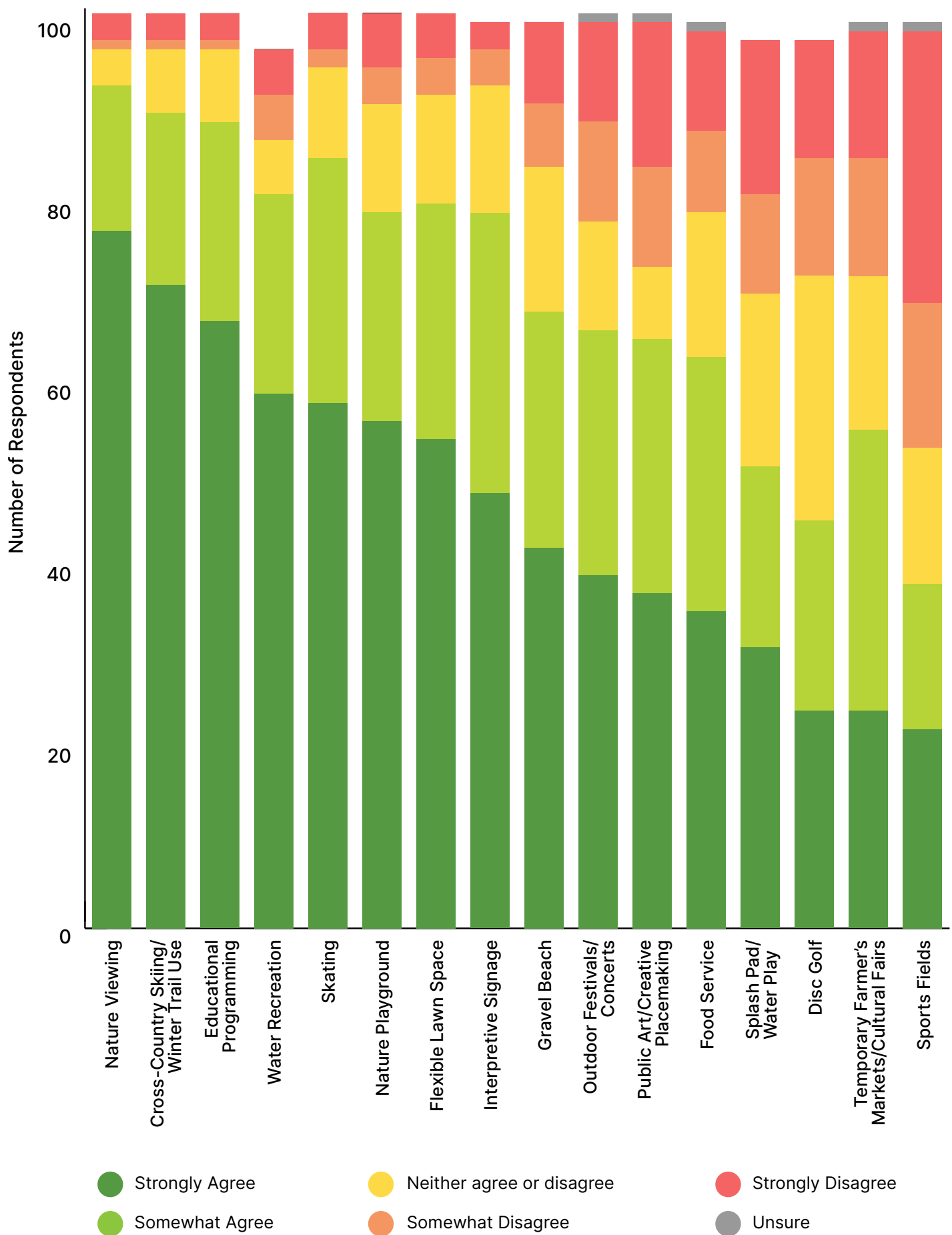
C | Park Program Elements

Sixteen different park program elements were presented at the open house and online. These elements were taken from Concept 1, Concept 2, or both concepts. Park program elements are features that impact what you do and how you interact with others in the park. We asked participants if they agreed or disagreed with including each element in the final master plan, and to provide reasoning for their selection.

Overall, participants want to see the park kept as natural as possible and would like park program elements selected for the final master plan to align with the park vision. Several examples of parks were provided by different respondents as references. These include:

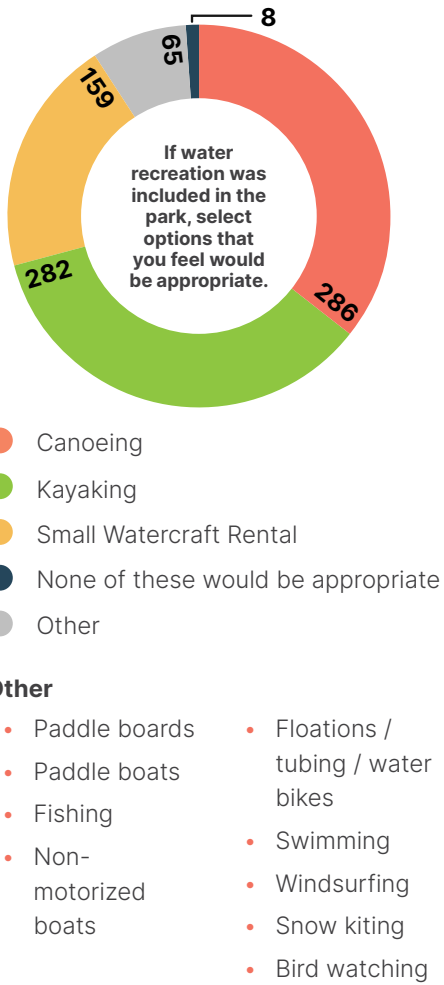
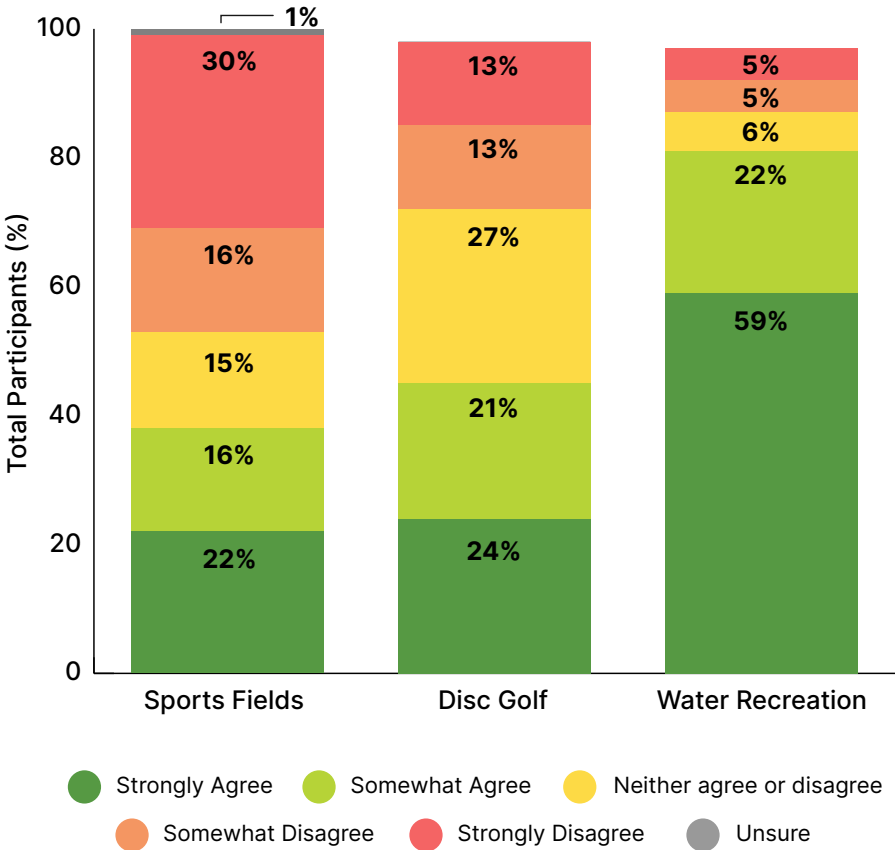
- Echo Dale (Medicine Hat, AB)
- Cardiff Park Pond (Cardiff, AB)
- West River's Edge Park and building (Fort Saskatchewan, AB)
- Rotary Park (Whitecourt, AB)
- Oak Hammock Marsh (Stonewall, MB)





Sports and Recreation

Do you agree with including the following program elements in the park?



Some participants think that sports fields would take away from the enjoyment of those looking to experience nature in the park. Some also noted that sports fields are available in other Strathcona County parks and want to avoid an unnecessary duplication of amenities. Those in favour of sports fields are happy to have more opportunities for organized sports and recreation in their community. Some suggested the inclusion of specialized sports fields and courts, including field hockey, cricket, bocce, pickleball, and ball diamonds.

Water recreation is the only park element in this category that received strong support. Desired activities include paddle boarding, paddling, kayaking, canoeing, and fishing. Some also expressed interest in swimming in the ponds if it is safe to do so. Others discussed the need for supporting infrastructure including vehicle access, a boat launch, and parking. There is a general opposition to motorized watercraft of any kind and mixed support for boat rentals. Feedback indicates that a rental facility would receive higher support if it was run by the County on a small scale and not commercialized.

General Comments

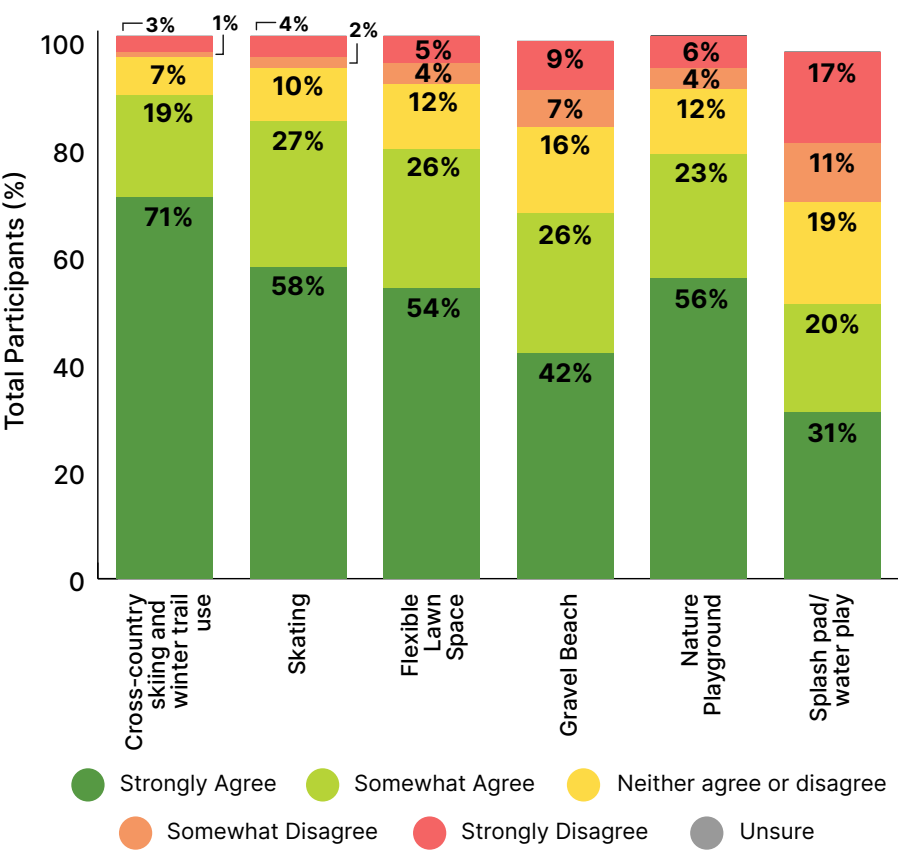
Concerns with the options presented above revolve around the noise and crowds they might introduce to the park. Participants feel that this would take away from the nature experience and could create a disturbance for wildlife. Most of these concerns are related to sports fields and motorized boats.

Other park elements suggested include:

- Off-leash dog area
- More family activities
- More activities geared toward seniors
- Winter ice sports (e.g. hockey)
- Bike skills course and bicycle facilities
- Trail sports including hiking, cycling, geocaching, and equestrian trails

Leisure Activities

Do you agree with including the following program elements in the park?



Winter activities are some of the most popular park elements overall. Winter trail sports are considered lower impact to the environment and are therefore in line with the park vision. Other winter activities mentioned by participants include tubing and ski rental.

Skating is a fun, low impact family activity for the winter months. This activity received support from participants.

Flexible lawn space provides space for gathering and informal recreation activities. It is relatively low impact and quiet, and therefore received a fair amount of support from participants.

The main concerns regarding the gravel beach include maintenance costs, litter, and potential low usage. Even with these concerns, it is an enticing option for many participants. Several people requested a sand beach which would be more comfortable for sitting and walking over gravel.

General Comments

Some participants do not want to see a duplication of activities that are available closer to Sherwood Park (e.g. splash parks, skating, skiing, and sports facilities). Concerns were also raised for the cost and maintenance requirements of the leisure activities presented. Many participants would like to keep the park as natural as possible with minimal infrastructure, but others would like the park to be welcoming for all, providing a range of activities. This contrast will need to be addressed in the master plan.

Other park elements suggested include:

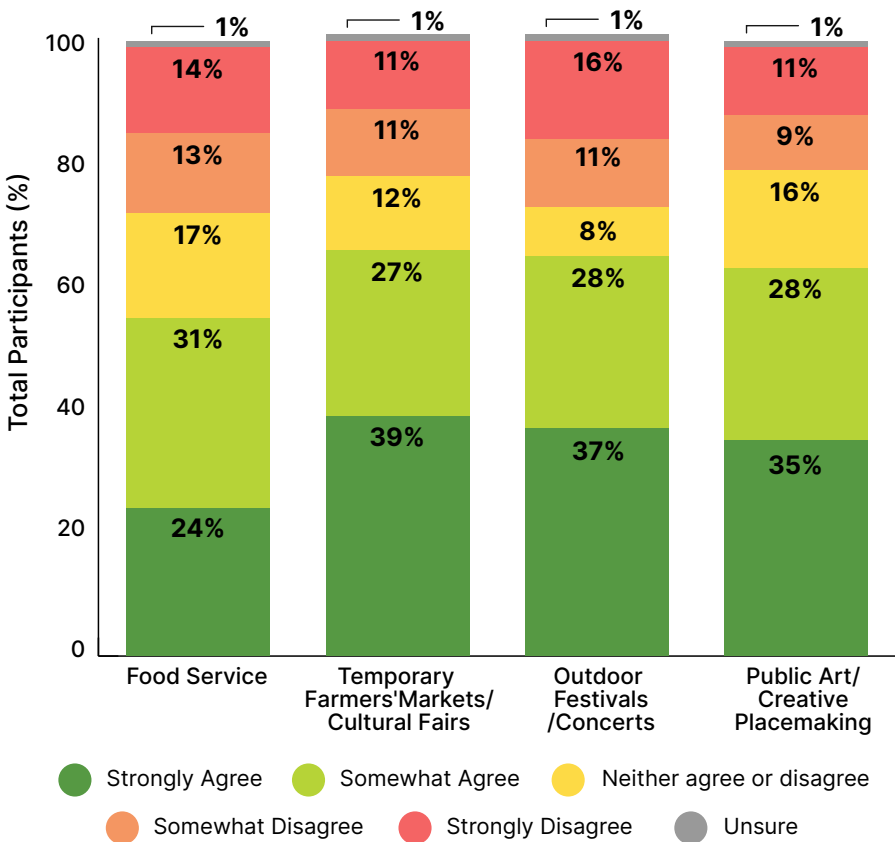
- Nature trails and mountain bike trails
- Recreational fishing
- Supportive amenities (like washrooms)

Play for all ages is desired in the park. Participants would like to have opportunities for nature play with limited infrastructure. However, there is also a desire for accessible play equipment and outdoor adventure activities for teens. These amenities should be balanced with the desire to keep the park natural with minimal infrastructure. There was also a specific request to have no sand in the playground.

The splash pad received mixed feedback. Some think it would be well-used and an attraction for families. Others are concerned about water quality and the infrastructure that would be required – they feel it does not fit in with the desire for a natural park. Splash pads are also already available in other areas in Sherwood Park.

Culture & Tourism

Do you agree with including the following program elements in the park?



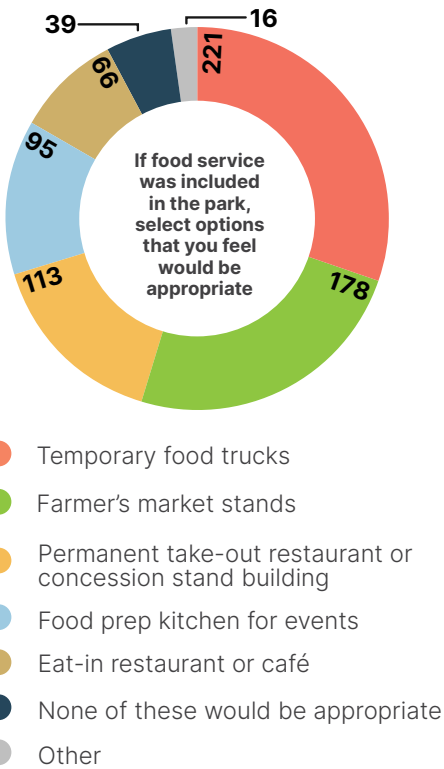
Temporary markets and fairs received moderate support because their infrastructure requirements are relatively low. Some participants mentioned that there are already successful markets in Sherwood Park and people may not be willing to travel a further distance to the park for a market. Cultural uses and gatherings are generally supported if they are smaller in scale and less disruptive.

Outdoor festivals and concerts also received fair support from participants. However, some participants are concerned about the noise and crowds that would be created from hosting larger events and how this would impact wildlife in the park.

There were no comments indicating strong disagreement with public art in the park. Art that is low-impact and integrated into other features is preferred.

General Comments

In all cases, participants want to ensure that the park does not become commercialized or overbuilt, staying as natural as possible. They do not want to duplicate services offered in Sherwood Park and other nearby outdoor spaces.



Overall, participants tend to agree that it would benefit to access a variety of healthy and sustainable food choices in the park. Seasonal, temporary, and mobile options are preferred, including food trucks and/or market stands. Participants would also like to see infrastructure for picnics and barbeques in the master plan.

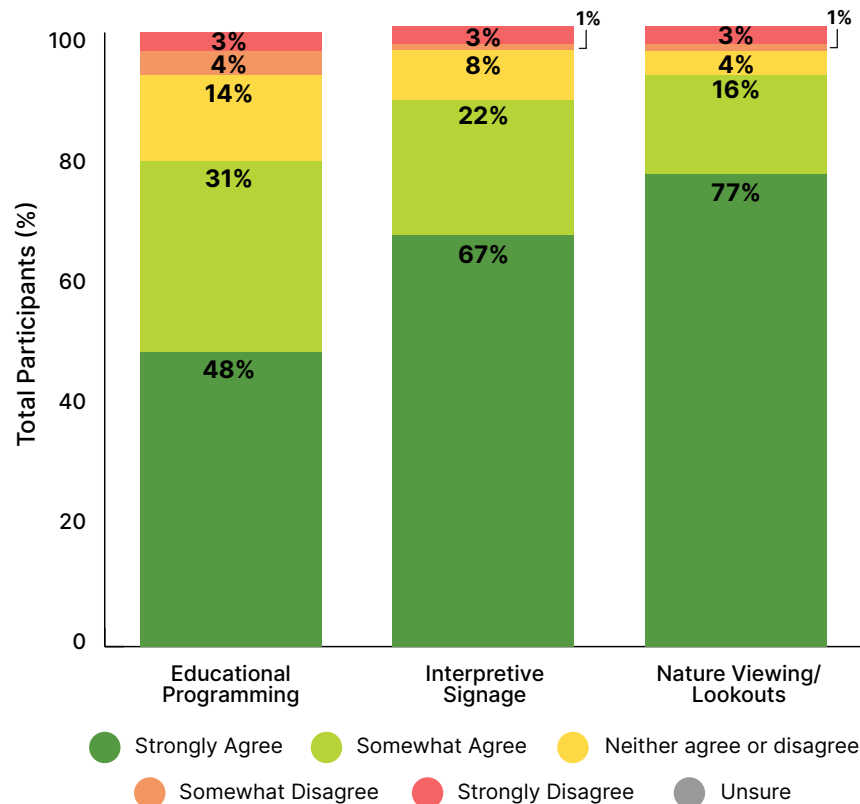
Some would like to see a permanent building with all-season food service and washrooms, but participants agree that the level of investment in food service should be justified. Many believe that a permanent restaurant would not receive consistent business to be economically feasible since the park is located outside of town. Some participants are concerned about the disturbance to wildlife and the creation of garbage that any type of food service would bring to the park.

Other

- Low impact and non-permanent services
- Fire pits, picnic tables, shelters

Education and History

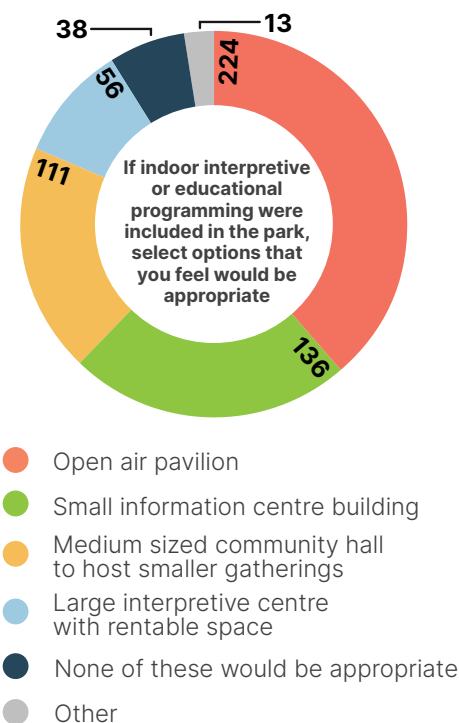
Do you agree with including the following program elements in the park?



There is a high level of support for non-intrusive interpretive signage along pathways and trails. Suggested topics for interpretation include nature, Indigenous history, and the history of settlement in Strathcona County.

General Comments

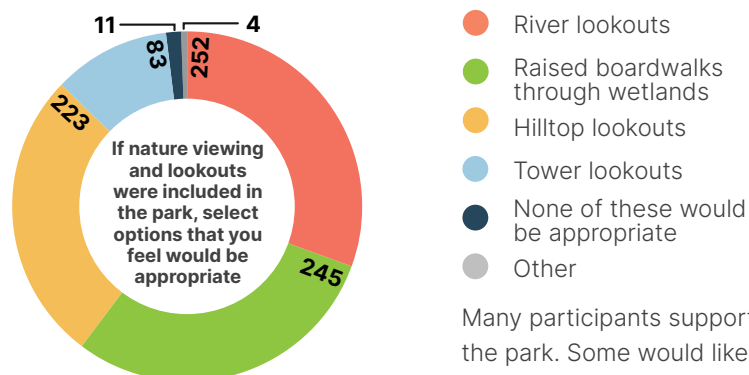
Overall, participants would like to see minimal development with consideration for nature and wildlife at the forefront of the plan, only installing structures where needed. Others would like to see a larger focus on recreation rather than education. The largest concerns in this category are disturbance to the landscape, cost, and low usage of the interpretive features.



There is a fair level of support for educational programming in the park. Some would prefer that visitors learn about nature through experiences rather than structured programming, while others support having a small building or sheltered space (potentially rentable) to accommodate programming opportunities in all seasons.

Other:

- West River Edge building in Ft Sask – small building with ability for rentals
- Building for winter use
- Washrooms



- River lookouts
- Raised boardwalks through wetlands
- Hilltop lookouts
- Tower lookouts
- None of these would be appropriate
- Other

Many participants support lookouts in the park. Some would like to see a variety of lookout points, including lookouts from a higher vantage point

like a hilltop. Tower lookouts received less support because participants worry that they will detract from the natural setting and may be vandalized. River lookouts and raised boardwalks received support as well, but there are concerns around safety and maintenance costs.

Other:

- Limited and minimal
- Focused on trails and hilltops

A landscape photograph showing a river or stream flowing through a field of tall grass. The sky is a soft pinkish-purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The text "Next Steps" is overlaid in white on the left side of the image.

Next Steps

Next Steps

The County will use feedback from this phase to develop a final concept plan for the park throughout the summer and fall of 2022. Engagement feedback will be balanced with guidance from policy and on-going site analysis to help build out the master plan.

The next steps for the project include:

- Engagement - July - September 2022
- Continued site analysis - August 2022
- Master Plan development - Fall 2022

After a thorough internal review by the County's Technical and Steering Committees, the final master plan will be presented to the public and Council in the Winter of 2022/2023. From there, master plan recommendations and capital projects will be carried forward into future budgets for implementation as they align with County priorities.

For all project updates and background information, visit strathcona.ca/newregionalpark.

