



# FORT SASKATCHEWAN URBAN FOREST PLAN:

Indigenous Engagement - Interim Report



Submitted to:  
Diamond Head Consulting &  
The City of Fort Saskatchewan

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## Background

The City of Fort Saskatchewan is developing an Urban Forest Protection and Enhancement Plan (the Plan). Diamond Head Consulting, along with MODUS Planning, Design & Engagement, were hired to oversee the public engagement. pipikwan pêhtâkwan is supporting Diamond Head Consulting by leading the Indigenous engagement component of this work.

The Indigenous engagement efforts occurred between June 2023 and August 2023. The engagement began in a Pipe Ceremony that was held on June 15 with Pipe Carriers, Elder Jesse Morin and Lloyd Cardinal. The Indigenous engagement began by identifying, and speaking, with Indigenous environmental scientists, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Indigenous organizations, and surrounding Indigenous communities. Those insights were then shared and discussed with the Indigenous community members of Fort Saskatchewan.

The method for engagement with Indigenous community members of Fort Saskatchewan was *keeoukaywin: The Visiting Way*; A term coined by Indigenous Scholar and researcher, Cindy Gaudet in 2019. keeoukaywin is an Indigenous research methodology grounded in Cree and Métis ways of knowing and being. As the Indigenous community of Fort Saskatchewan are predominately Cree or Métis, this approach was most meaningful in connecting with community members in a good way. Using keeoykaywin in practice, means that all activities are grounded in reciprocity, co-lead dialogue and with prioritizing protocol.

### **Purpose of the work:**

- Identify important Indigenous history and cultural significant areas
- Learn what Indigenous experts identify as high value in an urban forest plan
- Learn the vision Indigenous community members have for the urban forest
- Collect traditional knowledge to inform the Plan
- Build relationships with Indigenous stakeholders



## Researcher's Statement

Research is intended to bring change, but we often forget that we ourselves are changed by the research we conduct. Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) notes that research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise, but rather an activity that is framed by the social conditions and the researcher's own experience.

As a mi'kmaq woman on one side, and a first-generation Canadian on the other, my relation to the City of Fort Saskatchewan has only recently germinated. A resident of Grande Prairie myself, I look at the urban forest in Fort Saskatchewan with admiration. This project has inspired me to consider the City of Fort Saskatchewan as my next home. Historically, I do not have a connection to this land. Spiritually, on the other hand, the dialogue about Mother Earth and our interconnection as Indigenous people is long standing. The Pipe Ceremony offered a chance to bring ceremonial print to the river valley in Turner Park and connect with the land before I began this project. My role as a Social Worker is often focused on the human societies. The engagements reflected in this report brought together the interconnection between the human, animal, plant, and spiritual societies.

Through my journey practicing Indigenous research methodologies, I fall deeper into my lessons on keeoukaywin. The relationality that had grounded this work will be life long. I want to take this moment to thank the Indigenous Society of Fort Saskatchewan for the opportunity to connect with them, and other community members, throughout this project.

Indigenous engagement often happens independent to public engagement. I am proud to say that the project team embodied etuaptmumk: two eyed seeing. An approach coined by mi'kmaq Elder, Albert Marshall. The Indigenous engagement will be deeply braided with the public engagement, to design a successful and respectful Plan. These actions are a direct result of the team at Diamond Head Consulting and MODUS Planning, Design and Engagement being intentional in this work. I am grateful for the administrative staff from the City of Fort Saskatchewan who invested themselves in visiting and working on developing etuaptmumk themselves.

To all the participants who sat with me and visited, wela'lin, nata'n teliula'lin.  
Thank you, I do well by you.



## Summary of Engagement

The following is a summary of engagements, successes and challenges in the project to date:

- The project was started in a Pipe Ceremony on June 15. The sacred prints were hung on poplar trees in Turner Park. On July 24th, they had been discovered to be removed. The Indigenous participants were harmed by this news, but focused on the possibility to add a plaque or education for ceremonies going forward. Their hope is to have another Pipe Ceremony to rebuild the intention for the urban forest areas.
- As the project kicked off, pipikwan pêhtâkwan reached out to Indigenous experts, communities and Elders. In many cases, we began visiting, *keoukaywin*, for the purpose of sharing and getting to know the individual priorities. Afterward, we would visit again and share insights. Most of the time this was done in person, but there were some visits that occurred virtually.
- When visiting with communities and Indigenous organizations, understanding the history of Fort Saskatchewan was difficult. Many communities have been focused on their cultural revitalization, over history. All communities acknowledge the area of Fort Saskatchewan has a predominate history for Métis people, and note there is some evidence of First Nations history.
- For some parts of the project, we sat in relationship with Elders, and heard stories, received teachings, shared food, and accepted guidance related to a healthy urban forest.
- One challenge with reaching more communities was timing. Community is busy! There is a lot of work happening on Nations and Settlements. To fit in another project may have taken the community away from their collective priorities. Summer is a specifically difficult time as many Indigenous community members are in ceremony.
- Overall, we engaged with 83 individuals or groups; 14 were Indigenous community members in Fort Saskatchewan. There was one engagement activities where non-Indigenous individuals attended: the community BBQ. The engagement dialogue was minimal in this activity, but it was aligned strongly with Indigenous perspectives shared.
- We see these 83 participants as co-researchers in this work. Therefore, they own this document too. Like Mother Earth, this document is a living, breathing spirit and can grow and change with time. All recommendations in this report have been cross-checked with Indigenous community members directly in Fort Saskatchewan.



## Engagement Activities

The following is a highlight of the scope and approach to this work:

### **Pipe Ceremony | June 15**

pipikwan pêhtâkwan started the project with a Pipe Ceremony organized by the Indigenous Society of Fort Saskatchewan. The Pipe Carrier was Elder Jesse Morin and oskâpêw Lloyd Cardinal. The intention of the Pipe Ceremony was to open the project in a good way and put intention into the work to follow. There were 16 participants present. Ceremonial prints were then hung on poplar trees throughout the river valley in Turner Park.

### **Indigenous Environmental Experts | June 19 to June 29**

pipikwan pêhtâkwan facilitated multiple visits with Indigenous environmental experts. There were 3 participants. Each participant was visited with between 2 to 3 times. The focus on the visits were traditional knowledge that impacts urban forests, values that Indigenous experts would prioritize, and environmental considerations Indigenous assessments.

### **Indigenous Environmental Science - Yellowhead Tribal College | July 13**

pipikwan pêhtâkwan facilitated a session with Indigenous Environmental Science Degree graduates in their final term. There were 7 participants present. 1 participant was a previous resident of the City of Fort Saskatchewan; 2 others had visited the City of Fort Saskatchewan. The focus on the visit was identifying Indigenous concerns, recommendations for incorporating into the Plan, and up and coming trends for Indigenous environmental considerations.

### **Fort Saskatchewan Community BBQ | July 24**

pipikwan pêhtâkwan facilitated a Circle with the Indigenous Society of Fort Saskatchewan and the Naturalist Society of Fort Saskatchewan. There were 20 participants present. The focus was to introduce the project team to the community, identify community priorities and vision, and to provide contact for future engagement.



## Engagement Activities cont.

### **Indigenous Nations, Settlements, and Organizations | July 24 to August 29**

pipikwan pêhtâkwan facilitated a visit with members, administration or leaders in 6 different communities: Alexander First Nation, Alexis First Nation, Saddle Lake First Nation, Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement, the Confederacy of Treaty 6 First Nations, and Métis Nation of Alberta. The purpose of these visits were to collect history and understand if there are culturally significant areas in Fort Saskatchewan, to introduce the City of Fort Saskatchewan work on the Plan, and to identify any aligning priorities that may be incorporated in the Plan.

### **Elders and Knowledge Keepers | July 22 to August 2**

pipikwan pêhtâkwan facilitated a visit with Elders and knowledge keepers to learn about traditional knowledge that may inform the Plan, and to highlight any Indigenous history and culturally significant spaces in Fort Saskatchewan. There were 7 Elders or Knowledge Keepers who shared on the project. There was one circle on July 22 that brought together two Elders and Indigenous social workers to speak about the land and working with Urban Indigenous Communities.

### **Indigenous Community of Fort Saskatchewan | July 26 to August 25**

pipikwan pêhtâkwan facilitated multiple visits with many Indigenous community members of Fort Saskatchewan. The majority of engagements occurred August 21 to August 25. There were 14 Indigenous community participants. Each participant was visited between 2 to 5 times. The youngest participant was 17 years old.

## Engagement Activities - Photos



*Above:* Community BBQ participants for event held on July 24, 2023 in Turner Park

*Left:* Print hung in Turner Park following the Pipe Ceremony on June 14, 2023

*Below:* Elder Leona Makokis and Elder Carola Cunningham hosting a circle with Indigenous social workers on July 22, 2023.







## History

There are many ways Indigenous people connect to the land. The connections below are specifically made with components of urban forests in Fort Saskatchewan: Animals, plants, land, water, and ancestors. Elders, Indigenous communities, and Indigenous organizations were asked about significant Indigenous history and places that should be noted for the Plan. There were few Indigenous experts in this project who had a full, comprehensive history for the Indigenous people of Fort Saskatchewan, pre-colonization. However, each acknowledged Fort Saskatchewan as a sacred land for Métis people.

### Birch History

It was shared that Fort Saskatchewan was known by the nehiyawak (Cree) people as waskwayâhtik ispatinaw (birch hills) due to the many birch trees that were present in the land prior to colonization. Birch bark was not only important for the building of canoes along kisiskâciwan-sîpî (the North Saskatchewan River), it was also a material used to create birch-bark scroll with nehiyawak syllabics inscribed in them.

One Elder shared that birch trees are excellent protectors against wind and snow due to their strong root systems and dense foliage year round. Birch trees are a significant source of food for many animals societies, such as: foxes, birds, moose, deer, beavers and more. The birch tree produces a flower cluster known as catkins, and those flowers produce small fruits called samaras.

*"The birch tree was a gift from Creator to connect animal and human societies." - Elder Leona Makokis*

### Recommendation

Include birch trees in the Plan to ensure that native plants and animals are able to thrive in their intended habitat. This action allows the land to be reacclimated and to return to a more holistic urban forest.



## History cont.

### Turner Park History

The area known as Turner Park has been identified as a potential homestead for the Métis, specifically Joseph A. Turner. Yet, it was not known by participants how the land belonging to Mr. Turner had left his familial ownership and became public property. There was no evidence discussed of script being given and taken for these plots. The area was also highlighted as a traveling land for many nehiyawak (Cree) people from Saddle Lake First Nation and Cold Lake First Nation. As Indigenous people, the land closest to kisiskâciwan-sîpî was prominent during trade and Elders believe it is likely to have significant artifacts such as tools, artisan crafts, and scrolls.

*"Turner Park is an abundant pharmacy and we need this land to stay healthy for our medicines to grow and be harvested"*

*- Métis Knowledge Keeper*

Community members identified the Turner Park areas as a priority for protection due to the known Métis and Indigenous history. The area is currently being used to harvest medicines and as a place to gather for circle. Community members disclosed a City of Fort Saskatchewan approval for the expansion of Lions Campground into Turner Park. Many Indigenous community members, Nations, and organizations expressed concern about the loss of any natural forested area in Turner Park.

### Recommendation

To advance efforts of reconciliation in Fort Saskatchewan, we recommend further investigation into the Indigenous history of Fort Saskatchewan prior to any changes to the current Turner Park area.

The history review should included:

- Identify the exact homestead location for Turner
- Discover any potential timber rights that previous existed
- Identify areas that are likely to have Indigenous artifacts
- Identify traditional plants and medicines that could be lost



## Visioning

Indigenous visions for the future include the Seven Generations in front of us, and also the interconnectedness to the land and other societies. The vision for the Plan was learned from Indigenous environmental experts, Elders and community members.

### **Protection, then Enhancement**

Enhancement is not as important to Indigenous People as protection. A Plan without protection lacks depth. Indigenous people work to heal Mother Earth from the many ways we take from her. Indigenous community members and experts have identified protection as a core principal to be included in the Plan. Some areas of protection that were highlighted are:

#### ***Top Soil Protection***

Around 90 per cent of the Earth's precious topsoil is likely to be at risk by 2050, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. This reality means that growing food will become significantly difficult. Indigenous environmental experts shared that it takes almost 500 years to regenerate the top 1 inch of top soil, and for agriculture to take place, top soil is required. Food sustainability, globally, will be impacted by top soil loss. When land is broken and the top soil is not protected from the sun, it dries out and loses all of the nutrients.

***"My Nation has a program where anytime land is broken, the top soil is removed and put in bins, protected, for people to access for their own gardens. We never lose the nutrients needed to grow our food."***  
***- Yellowhead Tribal College; Indigenous Environmental Science Graduate***

Community also indicated that the most likely places that investors and developers are interested in are the places that have the most healthy soil. Indigenous community members in Fort Saskatchewan would like to see the municipality include a requirement for developers to think about the land in any application for development. For example, how will they ensure any traditional plants are relocated and protected, how will the ground be broken in Ceremony, and how will the top soil be protected from permeant loss.



## Visioning cont.

### **Medicines**

There are many traditional medicines found along the banks and land of kisiskâciwan-sîpî. In some cases, these medicines are needed for sacred bundles, such as the Beaver Bundle. Indigenous experts and Elders shared stories about medicines that were found near the rivers edge before, but since developments and recreation have destroyed the land, many of these medicines are lost.

Rat root, a healing medicine, was once easily found near parts of kisiskâciwan-sîpî close to Fort Saskatchewan. Today, community has to travel a long distance to find this medicine. Sweetgrass is another medicine that is required for many ceremonies. Sweetgrass is highly resilient but there is little to none found within the community of Fort Saskatchewan.

*"We have to re-grow these medicines because they have been lost. But it needs to be understood how to protect them because we can't regrow them just for them to be sprayed with pesticide" - Fort Saskatchewan Community*

The community shared that many of the traditional medicines need to be protected against recreation, development and pesticides. Some community members felt that a dedicated space for a medicine garden was a start, but that stronger understanding of alternative to pesticides is critical to ensure the native growing plants are not contaminated.

### **Land Erosion & Recreation Damage**

Many community members indicated that there are sensitive fauna and flora that are being damaged by land erosion due to recreation. Community members indicated trails in the area known as West River's Edge to be sensitive to this erosion and have caused harm to the animal societies who call this space home. Community members indicated a positivity and willingness to retain trail systems currently in place, but a concern with expanding trail systems due to current damages. There were similar concerns indicated for the area known as Ross Creek.



Left: An example of the bank erosion in West River's Edge



## Visioning cont.

### Sustainable Food Forests

Another vision Indigenous community members have is for a predominate, sustainable food forests. Food forests are defined as “biodiverse agro-forestry systems with the potential to provide food, livelihoods, environment services (habitat, carbon storage, heat mitigation), and spaces for recreation, education, and community building” (Albrecht, 2020.)

Residents of Fort Saskatchewan have expressed an interest in increasing the opportunity to participate in food forestry. When the City beautifies its spaces, they often prioritize hanging plants such as flower pots, but residents have expressed a desire to incorporate food forestry practices into their beautification planning by planting things like vegetables, lettuces, or berry bushes throughout the city so that residents can freely pick food. Experts shared that there are opportunities to learn about vertical farming as a means to increasing the sustainable food forest, and beautifying community spaces.

***“We need a mindset shift. Social forestry and food sustainability should be a priority” - Fort Saskatchewan Community***

The financial component of growing food forests or gardens is a barrier to residents who feel that they don’t have the economic or educational resources to develop a sustainable food system. To mitigate this barrier, residents have suggested an increase in community gardens, including educational programming for people who are interested in growing and harvesting their own food.

***“Restoring the forest will help with growing medicines, especially for people who live in the City and don’t have the ability to go out onto the land as often.” - Alexander First Nation, Urban Liasion***



## **Visioning cont.**

### **Private Land - Food Sustainability**

When it comes to private land, residents have expressed the importance of autonomy over their spaces as an expansion to sustainable food forests, giving them the ability to plant substantial gardens in their front yards. Currently, citizens are under the impression that they cannot grow full gardens in their front yards.

*“Municipalities place different restrictions on what type of vegetation you can have on your property. However, the city doesn’t account for the vegetation that is taken away for development.”*

*- Indigenous Environmental Scientist*

With private land, community members suggest bylaws be re-written to enhance food growing practices. Many community members indicated that their back yards may receive insufficient lighting to grow crops, but that their front yards would be effective.

### **Education**

A focus for all groups that were engaged in this project was on education. Many felt that education was the most effective and needed focus to bring community together. There were many suggestions for types of education that may be needed in the Plan. Some of those educational priorities are:

### ***Ethical Harvesting & Medicinal Knowledge***

Community members felt that understanding *how* to harvest medicines was important to a sustainable urban forest. They indicated that many people remove what they consider 'weeds' without understanding the medicinal benefits of such plants. With growing awareness of how these plants can provide health benefits to both people and the natural world, Indigenous community members felt that there would be less harm to the land.



## Visioning cont.

### ***Bio-Diversity & Plant Benefits***

Community members indicated some rare fauna, flora and fungi that are located within the natural forest areas of Fort Saskatchewan. Community members felt that children and families could benefit from understanding the balance that comes with a healthy biodiverse landscape.

***"Cattails for example are considered to be 'unattractive' to many, but they hold and retain water and are a deterrent to forest fires" - Indigenous Environmental Scientist***



Community and experts felt that these educational opportunities could be created in a fun and community minded way. For example, a possible community scavenger hunt with education attached. Another suggestion from a community member was to implement a City wide educational opportunity where QR codes can be used to share information. The specific citizens who shared this comment indicated their knowledge of the previous tags used to track urban street trees. They felt this idea could be adapted, but used for more educational purposes.

### ***Youth Engagement***

There were youth, both in and out of the City of Fort Saskatchewan who were engaged in this project. Young people indicated that they wanted opportunities to make impact on the urban forest directly. One suggestion came from developing an educational partnership with schools and have young people 'adopt a tree'. There were also suggestions from young people that the trails and paths they use have insufficient garbage cans. The young community members felt that to keep a healthy urban forest, there needs to be less garbage littered around. There was one painted garbage can noted to be near the black bridge. Young people felt that youth could submit ideas and help decorate the garbage cans and that would increase their engagement with the urban forest areas.



## **Visioning cont.**

### ***Indigenous History & Knowledge***

Community members, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, indicated that education on the Indigenous history and knowledge of the land was important. Elders shared about the deep knowledge found in the land.

***"Western science is coming to know what Indigenous People have always known - we must protect the land if people wish to survive" - Knowledge Keeper, Saddle Lake First Nation***

Indigenous people felt that an Indigenous environmental scan of the area would result in significantly different outcomes than an environmental assessment done by non-Indigenous people. Bringing these two worlds together is often referred to as etuptamumk - two eyed seeing. Indigenous community members felt education on traditional Indigenous knowledge would not only provide a safer and healthier community, but would support reconciliation efforts for Indigenous people in Fort Saskatchewan.

### **Collaboration**

Many Indigenous community members focused on collaboration as a method for improving urban forest activities. Some suggestions were to create a collaborative circle that brought together groups such as the Indigenous Society of Fort Saskatchewan, The Trail Alliance, and the Naturalist Society to name a few. Together, these groups could share knowledge, priorities, and recommend collective actions for the ongoing maintenance of urban forest areas. While the complete vision for such a group was not clear, there was expressed willingness to explore how community members and groups may be able to collaborate and support the municipality with the urban forest for years to come.





## Appendix 1 - Co-Researchers

The below list are participants in the research.

### Fort Saskatchewan Community Members

- Colleen Dollfus
- Sparrow Leonard
- Kim Cunningham
- Jennifer Vanbuskirk
- Dana Mountain
- Bonnie (LNU)
- Shaina Handel
- Derek Chewka
- Amber Beebe
- Suzanne Doucet
- James (LNU)
- Shelan Richardson
- Ellie Lagrandeur
- Stacy Shearing

### Elders & Knowledge Keepers

- Elder Clifford Cardinal
- Elder Carola Cunningham
- Elder Tony Arcand
- Elder Leona Makokis
- Elder Jeanette Lean
- Elder Jesse Morin
- Elder Lloyd Gwin
- Elder Treasa Strawberry
- Elder Alfred L'Hirondelle
- Sharron Steinhauer
- Kevin Cardinal

### Communities & Agency

- Alexander First Nation
- Saddle Lake First Nation
- Alexis First Nation
- Confederacy of Treaty 6
- Metis Nation of Alberta
- Yellowhead Tribal College

### Environmental Scientists, Post-Secondary Graduates, & External Indigenous Participant

- Lloyd Cardinal
- Jocelyn Verreault
- Dwyane Donald
- Marlena Bullee
- Steve Watson
- Alvin Harris
- Vera Gladue
- David Taje
- David Keeg
- Dana Cross