

BLESS June 2020 Newsletter

This is the quarterly newsletter informing the BLESS membership about ongoing environmental issues, events and achievements around Big Lake. We hope the membership finds this newsletter useful and interesting. Comments, questions and suggestions from anyone reading this newsletter would be much appreciated. Please submit your feedback to the BLESS board of directors at info@bless.ab.ca.

Current Board Members

President – Al Henry

Vice Presidents – Pat Collins, Linda Brain

Treasurer – Miles Constable

Secretary – Dave Burkhart

Directors at Large – Lyn and Tony Druett, Jillian Dyck, Teresa Marshall

Regular Board Meetings

These are usually held at 7:00pm on the first Wednesday of every month. During the current Covid 19 shut down the board meetings are being conducted using ZOOM. In addition to board members, all members of BLESS are welcome to “attend” the meetings. Anyone wanting to be added to the list of ZOOM invitees should submit their request to info@bless.ab.ca.

The BLESS AGM has been postponed. Under normal conditions we would have until July 1 to hold the annual meeting; however, the Alberta Government has temporarily suspended requirements under the Societies Act to hold AGMs. The suspension will remain in effect for the duration of Alberta's State of Public Health Emergency. The BLESS AGM will take place once the state of emergency has been lifted.

At the June board meeting it was decided to postpone the World Migratory Bird Day event until spring of 2021. Rather than holding a live event in 2020 we are now planning to post information and photos regarding the bird migrations on the BLESS website.

Financial Report

We are currently in good financial shape with many donations in memory of Dr Fin Fairfield, our founder, from TDFEF, from Investors Group to Support Migratory Bird Day, and from the Alberta Real Estate Foundation.

We are working closely with the City of St Albert to finish off a report for the province on our CFEP grant to pay for roughly half of the rebuilt platform.

BLESS Summer Nature Centre Program

BLESS has received a \$6400 grant from TD Friends of the Environment to hire a summer employee. In response to the Covid 19 restrictions we are making a big change in how we deliver the educational program. We have decided to have a Nature Interpreter working at the platform and the John E Pool Boardwalk. Four directors interviewed five candidates for the position and decided on Olivia DeBourcier. She is in her fourth year of Environmental Conservation at the U of A, has considerable experience in nature interpretation with the Valley Zoo, has excellent speaking skills, is local and knows the area quite well. She started work planning a new program June 16.

Ray Gibbon Drive Widening

Construction of Phase 1 of the Ray Gibbon Drive widening commenced in May. Over the years BLESS has been actively involved in looking at ways of minimizing the environmental impact of this roadway. In order to continue this approach we recently submitted a list of questions to the City regarding the design and the public consultation processes involved. The following in italics are key responses that we received from Dean Schick the City's Transportation Manager.

Phase 1 – 137 Avenue to LeClair Way

This section of the road does not abut directly on to Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park (LHCPP), and there is industrial development on the east side of the right of way. The work will include the construction of multi-use trails on both sides of the 4 lane roadway. These trails will run north from 137 Ave and will connect to the south end of the Red Willow Trail system. BLESS's environmental concerns and questions are mainly about the immediate implications of the construction that will occur in the next 12 months.

The access into the park and parking lot to the west of Ray Gibbon Drive at LeClair Way will be slightly realigned to the north to allow continued access while construction occurs. It will remain open through the duration of construction with the exception of anticipated paving of the intersection and direct access which is expected to have work performed at night; thus not impacting higher public access demands.

There is no fencing planned for the segment of Phase 1 (from the south City limit to just north of LeClair Way)

Phase 2 – LeClair Way to McKenney Avenue

Phase 2 of the widening runs between LHCPP on the west and Grey Nuns Park and Riel Recreation Park on the east. It includes widening the existing bridge over the river. It raises significantly more environmental issues than Phase 1 of the widening.

Design work has not yet been completed; however, the project shall be informed by the completed EIA (2003), with any applicable new recorded information. Examples of specific scope identified in design include:

- i. Review of wildlife crossing allowances and deterrence opportunities.*
- ii. Conduct a complete fixed-radius point count survey for birds in the breeding season, based on locations used in the original 2003 Environmental Impact Assessment.*
- iii. Conduct an updated traffic noise assessment investigating the areas around Riel Pond, within 100 m of the Sturgeon River, within 200 m of the Grey Nuns White Spruce Forest, and with consideration for Big Lake. The assessment shall account for current conditions with forecasted impacts of the 2042 traffic horizons, approximately 40,000 vpd.*

- iv. *From the noise assessment conducted and forecasted results, identify if noise mitigation should be considered for bird populations for the long-term operations of Ray Gibbon Drive and provide recommendations as to what mitigation measures would be effective and sustainable with special consideration given to birds listed as Threatened, of Special Concern, At Risk, May Be At Risk, and Sensitive.*
- v. *Conduct pre-construction surveys to identify wildlife features (including nests and dens) and recommend appropriate site-specific mitigation measures to prevent wildlife and bird impacts during construction.*

Phase 2 (north of LeClair Way to North of McKenney Avenue) design work will commence in 2020 and allow for completion of Phase 2 construction by end of 2022.

Pending results of the submittals of design; construction on Phase 2 may advance as design work is completed and as schedule allows; however, the objective is the delivery and completion of construction of Phase 2 by end of 2022.

BLESS is pleased to hear that the environmental impacts are going to be considered in this degree of depth during the detailed design stage and is looking forward to continuing to provide input on these issues.

Further Phases of Construction

Phase 3 (North of McKenney Avenue to North of Giroux Road) will have design work completed by end of 2022. Construction is anticipated in 2026.

Phase 4 (North of Giroux Road to anticipated Fowler Way) will have 60% design work completed by end of 2022. Construction is currently anticipated in 2029.

Ultimate Design Requirements for Ray Gibbon Drive

The 2003 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) specified that the likely ultimate design for Ray Gibbon Drive would be a 4-lane arterial with at grade signalized intersections. A Functional Planning Study (FPS) was carried out in 2008 and finalized in 2009. That study reviewed the implications of revising the ultimate classification of the Ray Gibbon Drive to be an “8 lane Freeway”. BLESS is concerned that environmental implications must be taken into consideration when specifying the ultimate designation for the roadway. We believe that the design and size of the roadway should be kept to the minimum needed to accommodate foreseeable traffic volumes.

To date a new EIA has not been carried out, as the current work (2020) proceeds with the design of the 4-lane cross-section and maintains at grade intersections. Potential expansion beyond the 4-lanes may trigger an updated EIA.

The current traffic modeling projects to 2042 (the City’s Transportation Master Plan model) and uses a cross-section of a 4-lane roadway. Further modeling would be required to quantify the demand of further widening and improvements of intersections (such as interchanges).

The designation of “Planned Freeway” is within the City’s Transportation Systems Bylaw which was updated and passed by Council.

BLESS's current position on this is that if the speed limit is intended to be increased, alternative mitigation will be required, ideally appropriate fencing along the entire length with wildlife overpasses like they have in Banff National Park to accommodate moose and deer.

BLESS Viewing Platform Structural Repair and Enhancements

The good news is that the structural repairs to the BLESS viewing platform were completed on schedule and the platform has now been open to the public since April 21st. The platform was closed briefly at the beginning of May in line with the Covid 19 restrictions, but was opened again a week later, after installation of a sign reminding visitors to follow all appropriate social distancing requirements.

In mid-May BLESS was asked to give a 5 minute update presentation to City Council using ZOOM. The mayor and councillors were pleased to hear that good progress had been made on the platform and that the work has been completed well within the City's previous budget. They were also pleased to hear that work on the signage depicting various species of birds that can be viewed at Big Lake is still progressing. Subsequently BLESS has had a virtual meeting with the City staff who are now refining the design for 4 signs to be located at the rear of the platform. It is hoped that those signs and a second set of binoculars will be installed prior to a possible formal platform reopening ceremony in the fall. The Councillors stated that this initial work is within the discretionary budget of the City manager, but the budget for any further "enhancements" will likely need to be approved by City Council.

Red Willow Trail Flooding Update

Another item of good news is that the Red Willow Trail under the Ray Gibbon Drive bridge has now been open to the public since May 23rd. This is despite the level of the river still being very high and other portions of the trail further downstream, including under Perron Street and the St Albert Trail, still being flooded and closed to the public.

The temporary inflatable dam along the trail edge under the bridge was reinstalled by City personnel when the river level started to rise in the third week of April. Almost immediately after installation the dam was inundated by flood water and the trail had to be closed to the public. However, by the middle of May the river level had started to drop and the City personnel were able to pump out the water behind the dam and keep the surface level on the path side of the dam low enough to permit pedestrian and bicycle access to resume.



While BLESS is pleased that the Red Willow Trail under the bridge has been reopened earlier this year than last year, we are hoping that a more permanent solution will be implemented as part of the bridge widening contract in 2022. In his response to our questions Dean Schick, the City's Transportation Manager, stated:

As part of scope of Phase 2 design, a review of the crossing on the south side of the bridge structure will be performed to investigate opportunity of design changes to mitigate high water levels and maintain passage / use.



Small submersible pump currently needed to keep the water at bay.

Update Regarding Alberta Parks Dept Activities and Changes

BLESS has continued to have positive meetings and correspondence with the Provincial Parks Dept. The following is a summary of Provincial news and activities that have occurred in the last few weeks and will be continuing throughout the summer.

First, a piece of disappointing news is that Sharina Kennedy, our main contact at the Province, has now left Alberta Parks to take up a position in Whitehorse, Yukon. Sharina was largely responsible for developing the first management plan for Lois Hole Park and shepherding it through the provincial government bureaucratic approval process last year, a long overdue initiative given the park has operated without a plan since it was established in 2005. She has been particularly helpful to BLESS in the last few years and we want to express our gratitude to her. We wish her all the best in her new situation. Sharina's replacement as Acting Yellowhead Area Manager will be Kayla Campbell.

On a more positive note, the Parks Dept. personnel have been quite active in the last few weeks. Here are a couple of photos of their recent activities.



There has been a significant increase in canoeing and kayaking on the Sturgeon River and on Big Lake in the last few weeks. At peak times on the weekends there have been more than 40 water craft

out on the Lake. There have been just as many on the stretch river adjacent to the City centre. The Provincial staff members in the photograph above have responded by providing assistance and advice at the boat launch area located in Rotary Park.

These same people are responsible for putting warning signage around this somewhat unusual bird nesting area. The swallow that can be seen sheltering in place at right must be given credit for making such a creative use of a dog poop bag dispenser.



On a totally different topic, BLESS was pleased to see that the operator of the gas plant site that is located just northwest of the junction of 137 Ave. And 199 St. significantly cleaned up that site at the end of last year. The derelict buildings, which were previously a potential safety hazard, have now been removed. Several new warning signs have been installed. The public should be aware that this is still private property and that the excavations, which have been loosely backfilled, still present a safety hazard.

Finally, one last piece of news that Sharina was able to pass on to us is that the Province is going to proceed with trail improvements to the value of \$100,000 later in the summer. This money was originally allocated to this project by the previous government in early 2019. We are obviously pleased that the work is now going ahead and will be continuing to liaise with the Provincial employees as trail development proceeds.

Latest Wildlife Sightings



