

BLESS September 2022 Newsletter

This is the quarterly newsletter informing the BLESS membership about ongoing environmental issues, events and achievements around Big Lake. We hope members find 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, Tony Druett
Treasurer – Miles Constable
Secretary – Dave Burkhart
Directors at Large – Lyn Druett, Linda Brain, Jillian Dyck, Teresa Marshall, Meagan Dyck, Nick Parayko, Kevin Aschim, Megan Hobbins



Regular Board Meetings

These are usually held at 7:00pm on the first Wednesday of every month. During the Covid 19 situation the board meetings have been conducted using ZOOM. In addition to the board, 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.

Financial Report

As of September 1, BLESS is still in good financial shape with \$10,000 in our chequing account, although \$2,250 of that is reserved for the mammals book. We have just over \$5,000 in our Casino account. As the amount we received from the 2021 Casino was less than usual, BLESS Treasurer Miles Constable has applied to the St. Albert Community Foundation for enough money to pay for next years Summer Interpretation program. We will have to see if that is approved.

Summer Nature Program

The Summer Nature Program was a great hit, as usual. Loreena Nieuwenhout was hired and started in early June planning the program out at the park. As this approach was so successful in 2020 and 2021 we decided to keep to this format.

The BLESS Big Lake Nature Program for 2022 had the goal of fostering positive conservation mindsets in children and adult attendees through positive experiential education out in Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park.

The weekly themes were as follows:

June 27-30 “Welcome to Big Lake”
July 4-8 “Feathered Friends”
July 11-15 “Plant Kingdom Adventure”
July 18-22 “Hidden Underwater World”
July 25-29 “Mighty Mammals”
August 1-5 “Bug Safari”
August 8-12 “Friends of Big Lake”
August 15-19 “Big Lake at Night”
August 22-26 “Mystery Summer Celebration”



Between pre-registered guests and ad hoc guests along the boardwalk over 1,000 people attended the BLESS Summer Nature interpretation program.



Mammal Guide

The BLESS Guide to Mammals of Lois Hole Centennial Provincial Park is nearing completion and should be ready for printing by Christmas.

St Albert West Area Structure Plan

Staff at the City of St Albert advise they are currently working on a draft of the St. Albert West ASP.

Studies currently underway for the ASP include an Agricultural Impact Assessment, Transportation Impact Assessment, Servicing Design Brief, and Historical Resource study. There was no mention of an Environmental Impact Assessment. A second phase of stakeholder engagement meetings will take place on October 19th. The City is requiring that those who wish to attend the public open house register in advance. Administration will brief Council at its October 11th Committee of the Whole meeting. There will not be a draft ASP document for Council or second phase stakeholder and public engagement, however, a draft land use concept is available for feedback. The completed ASP will go to council for 1st reading later in the year or early in 2023.

As part of BLESS's input to the ASP planning process we have recently submitted a document to City Council Members suggesting that the proposed Lakeview Neighbourhood north of Meadowview Drive could possibly provide a site for a solar farm. The following are some extracts from that document.

BLESS believes that the St Albert West ASP and the subsequent Lakeview Neighborhood NSP can provide an opportunity to move forward with an alternative approach to providing solar farm facilities in St Albert. The Lakeview Neighborhood will cover approximately 500 acres west of Ray Gibbon Drive between Meadowview Drive and Giroux Road. At full development it will accommodate industrial buildings with a possible roof area of as much as 200 acres. Using this future roof area as the space for solar facilities seems to us to be an obvious answer to the City's conundrum of where to facilitate installation of a solar farm.

Even if the industrial development does not proceed quickly once the ASP and NSP have been approved, this will not mean that the solar farm project cannot go ahead right from the start of development. One of the benefits of solar panels as a source of electricity is that they can be easily and cheaply moved to new locations. The solar panels could be initially installed by the owner/operator of the system at ground level and later moved to their ultimate rooftop locations once the industrial buildings have been constructed. In fact, there is an argument that the initial installation of the solar field should be at the site of the probable last stages of the development. As development proceeds the owner/operator of the system could then progressively move the solar field on to the roofs as each of the buildings is completed.

We understand that the City already owns a large parcel of land in the NW quadrant of the neighborhood. However, development of the industrial parcels will likely start in the SE corner of the neighborhood and will not reach the City owned parcel for many years. Initially permitting installation of a solar field on the City owned parcel, and then eventually having the owner/operator of the system move most of it to the rooftops elsewhere in the neighborhood, could be a way to initiate the project. (It might even start some rental revenue generation for the City without requiring any significant financial outlay). It would also kick start development of the area.

In conclusion, we should stress that BLESS is only making this suggestion because we feel that the ASP provides an opportunity for the City to facilitate an environmentally positive project. Whether it becomes a "revenue generator" for the City, the utility companies, or the land owners is not our concern. We do feel that this project could become a development that will be beneficial to all the citizens of St Albert, and which will not negatively affect the natural environment of the surrounding area. It would certainly establish St Albert as a city that is committed to acting in a very progressive and environmentally responsible fashion.

BLESS Priorities for LHCPP Funding

BLESS has recently submitted a document listing our priorities for LHCPP funding to each of the MLA's for the constituencies that abut LHCPP. The document included the following suggestions.

Trail Improvements and Extensions in the St Albert Portion of LHCPP

This should include extending the existing gravel trail to the current south boundary of Lois Hole Park, an appropriate multi-use bridge over the creek, and other environmentally sensitive improvements where needed on the adjacent minor trails. It could also include some additional picnic facilities adjacent to the LHCPP shelter.

Extending the Trail System into the City of Edmonton

Eventually the LHCPP trail system should extend along the north boundary of the Trumpeter and Hawks Ridge Neighbourhoods and should provide connections into the City of Edmonton neighbourhoods and a connection across to the County of Parkland. In order to achieve this, and to

protect the environmentally sensitive land along the shoreline, the Province will need to acquire a portion of the parcel of land north of the Trumpeter Neighbourhood. Ideally, it will acquire an appropriate setback to permit construction of a multi-use trail above the floodplain. The Province will need to negotiate a deal with the existing landowner(s) to acquire a portion of their property, including all land that would be designated as Environmental Reserve (ER).

Acquisition of Additional Parcels on the North Side of Big Lake

This could possibly include the Ducks Unlimited parcel and other parcels of environmentally sensitive land. Once acquired the land could become the site of further trails and environmentally appropriate improvements, viewing platforms and information signs.

Environmental Learning Centre (ELC)

The Province has an outstanding commitment to build an ELC in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2010. This facility should preferably be near to the hub of the LHCPP trail system and will need to have an adjacent parking lot and adequate access route. Ideally it will be connected into municipal water and sewer servicing systems. The most likely location is just west of the LeClair Way extension in the City of St Albert. At this time any funding available for this facility would mainly be used to proceed with the building's detailed planning and design.

Environmental Cleanup of the Sinopec Former Gas Site

The cost of this cleanup should be born by the former operator of the facility. However, the Province should now allocate some funds for the legal and other costs involved in prompting Sinopec to proceed with full cleanup of the land and restoring it to its natural condition.

Recent and Current Stewardship Activities

BLESS Director and Treasurer Miles Constable recently attended a Zoom meeting with Alberta Environment and Parks, a selection of Alberta Stewards of natural areas and others to discuss a renewed approach to the provincial Stewardship Program. This three-hour meeting was primarily to get input from Stewards on their activities and to adjust the draft approach put forward by AEP. It was very thorough and interesting meeting in which to participate. A second meeting will be conducted in October.

On July 30, BLESS Directors Megan Hobbins, Linda Brain, Tony Druett and Dave Burkhart conducted a stewardship tour of the Big Lake natural area along the Alberta Capital Region Wastewater Commission right-of-way west of the 231 Street boundary between Edmonton and Parkland County. The trail had been recently mowed in several locations, including a path down to the lake which offered wonderful views of the west bay of Big Lake. Just a short distance down the main trail, the BLESS group encountered a relatively large patch of rare ostrich ferns, rated S1/S2 in Alberta. A stewardship monitoring report was sent to Alberta Parks to document the fern colony.



Sturgeon River Fish Kill

In early August, a large number of dead northern pike were found floating in the Sturgeon River near the Ray Gibbon Drive bridge. BLESS notified the City of St. Albert Office of the Environment, Alberta Environment and Fisheries and Oceans Canada. Staff from the City of St. Albert responded that they were aware of the dead fish and that such events were common in summer due to low dissolved oxygen levels in the river. An investigator and a wildlife biologist from Fisheries and Oceans came out, took water temperature and oxygen level readings and determined that the fish died because temperature and oxygen levels in the river were not conducive to their survival. Water temperature readings ranged between 19.9 and 21 degrees Celsius and dissolved oxygen readings were between 0.33 and 1.55.



When the fish kill occurred, construction activities to install the bridge deck for the City of St. Albert's road twinning project had been underway all summer and city contractors had recently removed asphalt from under the bridge, allowing the river to flow over the exposed substrate of the foot trail. Fisheries and Oceans staff who investigated noted that, because the City had sought approval for its road twinning project when the old Fisheries Act was still in force, permits for working in the water were not required. Fisheries staff also advised that, under terms of the revised Fisheries Act that came into law in 2019, permits for such work would have been required. Shortly after federal Fisheries and Oceans staff visited the site of the fish kill, the City installed silt fencing in the river to isolate the newly excavated foot path from the main body of the river.

Ray Gibbon Drive Widening

The City of St. Albert has provided BLESS with an update for its road widening project.

Construction on the new bridge structure is nearing completion. The multi-use trail that crosses the top of the bridge will tie into the trail system currently being constructed in the White Spruce Forest on the north side of the river.

The Red Willow Trail under the bridge on the south side of the river is being raised by between 0.5 meters and 0.75 meters. The north side wildlife area will be a naturalized area, whereas the south side pedestrian trail will transition from an asphalt trail to a concrete trail beneath the bridge structure. There is no retaining wall planned for construction on either side of the river (for the pedestrian trail or the wildlife trail), and each area will be naturally graded with a rip rap zone along the river edge. Currently the trail work is on hold and is anticipated to begin again in early October, with an anticipated completion date of end of October.

University of Alberta Students' Visit to Big Lake

In the first semester of each academic year the Biology Department of the University of Alberta organizes a student visit to the wetland area on the north shore of Big Lake. The following photo of some of this year's visitors was taken close to the shoreline at the south end of the Ducks Unlimited parcel on the weekend of Sept 17th. The students were looking at the wide variety of lakeshore vegetation as part of the Biology 333 course entitled Wetland Science and Management.



Latest Wildlife Sightings

BLESS member Tracy Kolenchuck took the following photos this summer from the BLESS viewing platform at Big Lake. It's good to see that moose still make the lake home, despite ever increasing pressure on their upland habitat from urban development.



We close this edition of the newsletter with an artful rendition of a heron created by BLESS member and director Kevin Aschim.

