Sturgeon signs on to Smoky Lake's push for Canadian Heritage River System status

Sturgeon County Council unanimously opted to send a letter of support to Smoky Lake County Council for nomination of the North Saskatchewan River to the Canadian Heritage River System (CHRS). The decision followed a presentation on the initiative at Sturgeon's Jan. 26 regular Council meeting.

Smoky Lake County Planning and Development manager Jordan Ruegg and Planning, Development and Heritage Assistant Kyle Schole presented the background and request for a letter of support for the nomination. To date Smoky Lake County has received 50-plus letters of support as well as Alberta Minister of Environment and Parks (AEP) Jason Nixon's support of the nomination. There is no financial commitment attached to the letters of support.

"Smoky Lake County is a community which recognizes the importance of conserving and enhancing its character, the roots from which it grew, preserving the natural environment in which it resides," noted

"Smoky Lake County, the Town of Smoky Lake, and the Métis Nation of Alberta (MNA) are collaborating towards an economic development strategy, specifically to leverage, support, promote, and grow the Indigenous, agricultural, culinary, and cultural tourism assets of the Victoria District National Historic Site. CHRS is a natural fit with these goals and values," he added.

With an investment of \$14 million to develop the Metis Cultural Gathering Centre on the river that opened in 2019 there is another \$10 million planned for the development of a lodge to accommodate visitors at the site:

Ruegg contended the CHRS designation benefits include regional, national and international exposure for the region; tourism recovery and economic development including nature, land and river-based recreation; and opportunities for the unlocking of federal provincial grants.

Canada's approximately 40 Heritage Rivers are recognized nationally for their outstanding natural, cultural, and recreational heritage. These rivers are an important part of Canada's rich heritage, its routes of exploration, settlement and growth, its waterways of industry and commerce, its northern wild waters of great scenic beauty that shape who we are as a nation, cited Ruegg in the presentation.

Schole noted the CHRS designation is strictly commemorative. "CHRS does not carry any planning or development approval authority over lands within the river corridor. There are no added referrals or considerations. Alberta Environment will continue to act as the "River Manager." The value in CHRS is not enhanced topdown enforcement, but grassroots public education." The value as an educational tool was recently enhanced with the new GIS Story Maps added during the pandemic to the CHRS website.

"With just a click of a button, visitors can enjoy an interactive virtual tour of amazing Canadian rivers and gain a deeper understanding of their values.'

He suggested the County's support would prioritize this area's "status as a river community," adding "there is some incredible river heritage in Sturgeon County."

The nomination initiative was originally undertaken in the early 2000's by the North Saskatchewan Watershed. They did a great deal of work, Schole said, on the comprehensive background study before extenuating circumstances saw the file moved off the table.

"It sat for a number of years," he concluded. "It's high time to complete the project." The nomination is for the river from the Banff Park boundaries to the Saskatchewan provincial boundary. The 48 km of the North Saskatchewan river in the Banff Park boundaries was already designated a CHRS in 1989.

Once the nomination document is completed AEP will put it forward to the Heritage Rivers Board for a decision on the designation.



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