

## A Plan to Redevelop the Lower Kananaskis River

Meaningful public consultation. This phrase is a favourite of government and industry but too often the substance seems to belie its meaningfulness. There are often times when a consultation experience can feel as useful as shouting at the night sky – cathartic, but the moment your words leave your lips they are lost forever into the void.

In a refreshing change of pace, the proposal to redevelop the Lower-Kananaskis River and Barrier Lake area is a great example of a moment when public consultation was actually meaningful.

In 2011, a proposal was submitted to redevelop the Lower Kananaskis River area including areas such as Canoe Meadows, Widowmaker, and the Kananaskis Visitor Centre. This plan proposed a staggering amount of new development in the area: 109 new campsites at Widowmaker, 79 new campsites at the Kananaskis Visitor Centre, and an 18 Hole disc golf course between Barrier Dam and Widowmaker. Unsurprisingly, this proposal drew significant controversy and concerns from the public regarding the extensive development being proposed so close to the river.

The provincial government listened to public concern surrounding the proposed level of development and conducted a comprehensive environmental review. The review confirmed concerns raised by the public, showing that the amount of proposed development would have a negative impact on wildlife movement and connectivity.

The new redevelopment proposal was released in August of this year. Using the results from their public consultation and environmental review, the plan was rewritten “to better reflect the ecological sensitivities of this landscape.” The golf course and the massive campgrounds are no longer being considered; instead the focus has shifted onto changes which would improve user conflict issues and congestion. New development is now proposed to be largely contained within already disturbed areas. The plan also takes wildlife corridors seriously



*The original redevelopment proposal for the Lower Kananaskis River area in 2011. CREDIT: GOVERNMENT OF ALBERTA.*

– there will be no development in identified wildlife corridors and a road will be decommissioned in order to widen the wildlife corridor at one of its narrowest points.

Despite these significant improvements to the proposed redevelopment plan, AWA is still concerned about some aspects of the plan which may increase the recreational use footprint in the area. This is particularly true for the Barrier Reservoir Day Use area, where a new hand boat-launch and associated road access, water sports equipment rental hut, expanded parking, and comfort camping spots are being proposed. However, it is encouraging to see that the plan recommends an environmental review of these proposed changes as well. Comfort camping amenities (think of cabins and yurts) are also being proposed in Canoe meadows. This is contradictory to another part in the plan which suggests that providing comfort camping options at Canoe meadows and Barrier Reservoir could increase human-wildlife conflict. AWA believes the government should carefully reconsider any development with the potential to degrade ecological values by increasing recreational infrastructure and accommodations.

Clearly, Kananaskis is well loved. It receives many visitors every year. This plan is clearly trying to address these high visitation numbers by better managing human traffic in the area. However, the reasons why people are attracted to the area – an easily accessible place to experience nature that is less commercialized than the National Parks – may be lost if this area is developed further. If visitation increases in the future, it's clear that building facilities in order to accommodate more visitors is not the solution. We believe that there will be a point in the near future where Kananaskis will reach visitor carrying capacity – when it will be impossible to effectively manage human-wildlife conflict and ecological integrity will be significantly compromised.

Finally, the popularity of this area shows that Albertans love and appreciate our protected areas. What many do not know is that only about 50 percent of Kananaskis is currently protected. It may be time for this public consultation exercise to produce a plan that will meaningfully increase protection of this incredibly valuable area.

*- Joanna Skrajny*