

## Ricardo Ranch: When Urban Sprawl and Conservation Collide

By Nathaniel Schmidt and Lindsey Wallis



It started with a tweet. Well, a series of tweets from AWA board member Nathaniel Schmidt about a small piece of land along the Bow River. What looks to be just an orange polygon on a city map is a plan for the creation of three new far-flung suburban communities on the outskirts of the city. We are frequently sold the narrative that these lands at the edge of town are blank slates just waiting to be developed so that they can become useful – as homes, gathering places, and community hubs. But the reality is that this area, known as Ricardo Ranch, is already all of those things.

As Nathaniel found out when he went to visit the site, it is currently a healthy, functioning riparian ecosystem. Birds gather along shallow stream beds to splash and drink. Great blue herons survey the land below from tall cottonwood trees, while red-tailed

hawks circle high above. Bees and other pollinators buzz in the sunshine across swatches of native prairie dotted with wildflowers. Songbirds flit through dense willows gracing the spring-fed wetlands. This place is alive and flourishing.

It turns out there were a lot of other Calgarians concerned about the threat to Ricardo Ranch as well. Nathaniel's tweet went viral, and then the media began to call. It was clear that people cared about what was going on at the outskirts of their city. Being able to see and experience this area with his own eyes had made such a difference to how Nathaniel thought about these new areas of development. He wanted to share that enlightenment with others.

So early on a Saturday morning in September, more than 70 folks gathered to see this place for themselves. In addition to the many concerned Calgarians, we had several people representing local conservation organizations supporting us. Katie Morrison from CPAWS Southern Alberta, Joan Lawrence from Calgary Climate Hub, and Bill Morrison and Simone Lee from Calgary River Valleys took time from their weekends to join us. There were journalists present to help tell this story about citizens standing up against sprawl in their city. Chris Manderson, a retired city parks biologist was on hand to give folks some insight into how the city plans and executes these development plans and the value of natural areas in cities. Ward 12 councillor Evan Spencer also attended. He seemed keen to learn more about this part of his

ward and hear from the citizens present.

Unfortunately, the council vote to start the development process by removing the growth management overlay from the area was pushed through the week before the event at a late-night meeting. This was despite a recommendation that council wait until budget deliberations in November to decide. But, armed with information about the importance of Ricardo Ranch's wetlands and prairie ecosystems, these concerned citizens will be able to engage in the next steps of this development. We are also hopeful that Councillor Spencer (who voted at the meeting to allow development to move forward) has a new perspective after his visit to Ricardo Ranch and speaking with the many knowledgeable and concerned folks present. As the councillor for the area, he could be a strong ally as this proposal moves forward if he chooses to be.

AWA's involvement in the fight to save Ricardo Ranch represents one of the first times we have been directly involved in municipal-level advocacy. This is important because growing populations mean that more and more of us live in cities, and the way that we build them has an impact on how we begin to tackle issues such as climate change and biodiversity loss. Cities designed with climate change and biodiversity in mind are crucial to ensure that we reach reduce our emissions and meet our climate targets. Increasing city-edge development through proposed projects like Ricardo Ranch works against Calgary's own stated climate goals and our declaration of a climate emergency.

Calgary has lost 90 percent of its wetlands along the Bow River which means Ricardo Ranch is an opportunity to preserve a vital climate asset for all Albertans. Every loss of an intact ecosystem, regardless of where it is located is one step backward in our fight against climate change. The next step for Ricardo Ranch will be for the developer to submit a Land-Use Outline Plan, at which time there will be the opportunity for more public engagement. To find out more and to be added to the mailing list for public engagement opportunities email [lwallis@abwild.ca](mailto:lwallis@abwild.ca).



*We were impressed that more than 70 people turned up to support our tour of the proposed site of the Ricardo Ranch developments in southeast Calgary. It is encouraging to know that so many people are concerned about the intersection of municipal and wilderness conservation issues. Photo © L. Wallis*