

ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT

TO: Robert Nicolay, City Manager	DATE: February 14, 2023
FROM: Kase DeVries, M.Sc., Director of Parks	MEETING: Operational Services Committee
SUBJECT: Boulevard Mowing and Naturalization	

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Operational Services Committee recommend Council:

1. Direct Administration to proceed with weekly mowing of arterial boulevards by reallocating resources from fall operations to early summer.
2. Direct Administration to proceed with the Boulevard Naturalization Pilot Program as presented.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL / COMMITTEE DIRECTIONS

At the October 3, 2022, City Council meeting, the following motion was passed:

"Council direct Administration to report back to the appropriate Standing Committee outlining a potential pilot program for naturalization along arterial roads, including a public engagement program."

At the November 16, 2022, Council Committee of the Whole Budget Deliberations, the following motion was passed:

"Committee amend the 2023 Operating Budget to add Broadleaf Weed Control – weekly mowing along arterial corridors, with the funding amount of \$44,854 to be offset from other areas of mowing."

BACKGROUND

At the Infrastructure and Economic Development Committee on September 27, 2022, Administration presented four options regarding broadleaf weed control along arterial boulevards. The options were status quo, contracted spraying, increased mowing, and naturalization.

Council referred budget requests to 2023 deliberations for contracted spraying and increased mowing. Council then requested Administration develop a pilot program for naturalizing boulevards along arterial roads, inclusive of a public engagement program. Naturalization is the process by which land previously maintained through mechanical mowing is returned to a state representing a natural landscape.

During budget deliberations, Council directed Administration to increase mowing from bi-weekly to weekly along arterial boulevards. However, the funding amount of \$44,854 required to increase the service level was requested to be offset from other areas of mowing within existing operations.

ANALYSIS

Weekly Boulevard Mowing

Arterial boulevards account for approximately 73 hectares (ha) of area within the city. For context, 73 ha has the same surface area as 90 Canadian Football Fields.

The arterial boulevards are serviced using the large rotary mowers that are also responsible for mowing neighbourhood parks, community parks (e.g. Lion's Park), and regional parks (e.g. Muskoseepi Park).

To offset the requested increased mowing of arterial boulevards without increases to operational funding, Administration would need to divert resources from areas within the same operational scope. Most areas within this scope that can easily be naturalized have been (Attachment 1), and upon review, Administration was only able to identify 4 ha within the same operational scope to naturalize without significantly impacting neighbourhood, community, or regional parks (Attachment 2). Sites were identified for naturalization using considerations contained in Attachment 3.

The 4 ha proposed for naturalization still leaves 69 ha remaining to be naturalized in order to make up the difference from the initial 73 ha required. To achieve this, Parks would need to naturalize recreational spaces. Administration does not recommend naturalizing these areas in favor of mowing arterial boulevards, as doing so would significantly shift service level expectations for the community and could result in decreased customer satisfaction and quality of life for park users.

As an alternative, Administration recommends reallocating resources typically reserved for fall operations to enable weekly mowing frequencies along arterial boulevards during early summer. This resource optimization would enable weekly mowing during the high growth period of broadleaf weeds earlier in the season. It is noted that this reallocation may result in service reductions in the fall should summer weather hold through September. Mowing operations are likely to be most impacted should weather hold. Parks would focus any remaining resources on higher priority sites, such as ensuring sports fields are maintained for safe play.

Boulevard Naturalization Pilot Program

Administration also recommends initiating a pilot program to naturalize 13 ha of the arterial boulevard area (Attachment 2). This pilot will accomplish the direction Council provided on October 3, 2022, to develop a boulevard naturalization pilot program. There are several ways to achieve naturalization including but not limited to: rehabilitating the entire landscape and seeding with natural seed mixes, working on the front-end of development to plant natural seed mixes into the landscape, or ceasing mowing operations and allowing existing species to grow. For the purpose of this program, the latter option is recommended given the pilot nature of the recommendation.

Administration recommends running the pilot program for three growing seasons starting in spring 2023 and ending in fall 2025. This timeframe allows the naturalized areas to properly establish and enables Parks to address any noxious weed issues that may arise from ceasing mechanical control within the naturalized areas.

Relationship to City Council's Areas of Focus / Strategic Priorities

Quality of Life – Fostering a community in which our residents love where they live and embrace their environment. Specifically, outdoor space enhancement.

Environmental Impact

While increased mowing generally has a net negative impact on the environment, this impact is understood to be less than that of pesticide use in terms of broadleaf control methods. Naturalization generally results in positive environmental impacts, including but not limited to slope stabilization, improved habitat to support pollinators, and reduced erosion during rain events.

Economic Impact

Weekly mowing along arterial boulevards will likely assist in controlling the frequency of broadleaf weeds going to seed. This action may assist in controlling the spread of weeds, such as dandelions, to private lands, which may reduce the operating cost of private landowners if their current practice is to control broadleaf weeds. Naturalization can reduce maintenance costs compared with traditional horticultural practices (mowing, fertilizing, aeration, etc.). New development may also realize cost savings by reduced maintenance in locations suitable for naturalization.

Social Impact

Weekly mowing along boulevards should assist in controlling the frequency of broadleaf weeds going to seed, which may improve traditional horticultural appearance in these areas. The process of naturalization can lead to areas appearing unkempt during the first few years. However, naturalized areas often fold into the backdrop of the surrounding landscape if given adequate time to establish.

Relevant Statutes / Master Plans / City Documents

- [Parks and Open Space Master Plan 2012](#)
- Council Bee City Resolution – October 19, 2020
- [City of Grande Prairie Land Use Bylaw C-1260](#)
- City of Grande Prairie 2022 Design Manual – Section 16
- City of Grande Prairie 2022 Construction Manual – Section 32 92 19.13

Risk

Risks associated with increased mowing frequency include:

- The potential that reallocated resources from fall to early summer may result in service reductions later in the season should summer weather hold through September.
- The potential that the increased frequency may not cut the sprouts fast enough to adequately deal with broadleaf weeds going to seed.

Risks associated with naturalization include:

- Significant public inquiry and pressure regarding the initial unkempt nature of the areas naturalized.
- An influx of noxious weeds in the areas naturalized requiring increased attention from the Integrated Pest Management crew that may pull service capacity from other areas (i.e. hardscape weed control, etc.).

Alternatives (Optional)

1. Retain bi-weekly mowing on all boulevards and move forward with the boulevard naturalization portion of the pilot program (13 ha) as presented.
2. Proceed with a combined Boulevard Mowing & Naturalization Pilot Program that uses the offset 17 ha of new naturalized area to enable weekly mowing of 17 ha of select boulevard. Retain bi-weekly mowing on all other arterial boulevards.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Parks consulted with Transportation, Engineering Services, and Environmental Services on suitable locations for the proposed Boulevard Naturalization Pilot Program. Should the pilot be approved, Administration will continue developing engagement content to accompany the pilot program. Parks, Environmental Services, and Corporate Communications have developed a naturalization website and have signage that can be adapted to the naturalization pilot program areas. Administration is planning on expanding the "Orchard Tours" engagement program from 2022 to integrate broader greenspace engagement topics, including that of naturalization. If the pilot program is approved as presented, these tours would incorporate some of the areas naturalized within the presented scope.

BUDGET / FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There are no budget impacts associated with the Boulevard Mowing and Naturalization Pilot Program as presented.

SUMMARY / CONCLUSION

Administration recommends proceeding with weekly mowing of arterial boulevards by allocating resources from fall operations to early summer. Without an overall increase in resources, naturalizing additional rotary mowing scope to increase capacity is not recommended as doing so would require naturalizing neighbourhood, community, and regional parks. Additionally, Administration recommends proceeding with the Boulevard Naturalization Pilot Program as presented in Attachment 2. Both recommendations accomplish the outstanding motions, and enable Parks to execute actions on controlling broadleaf weeds along arterial boulevards.

ATTACHMENTS

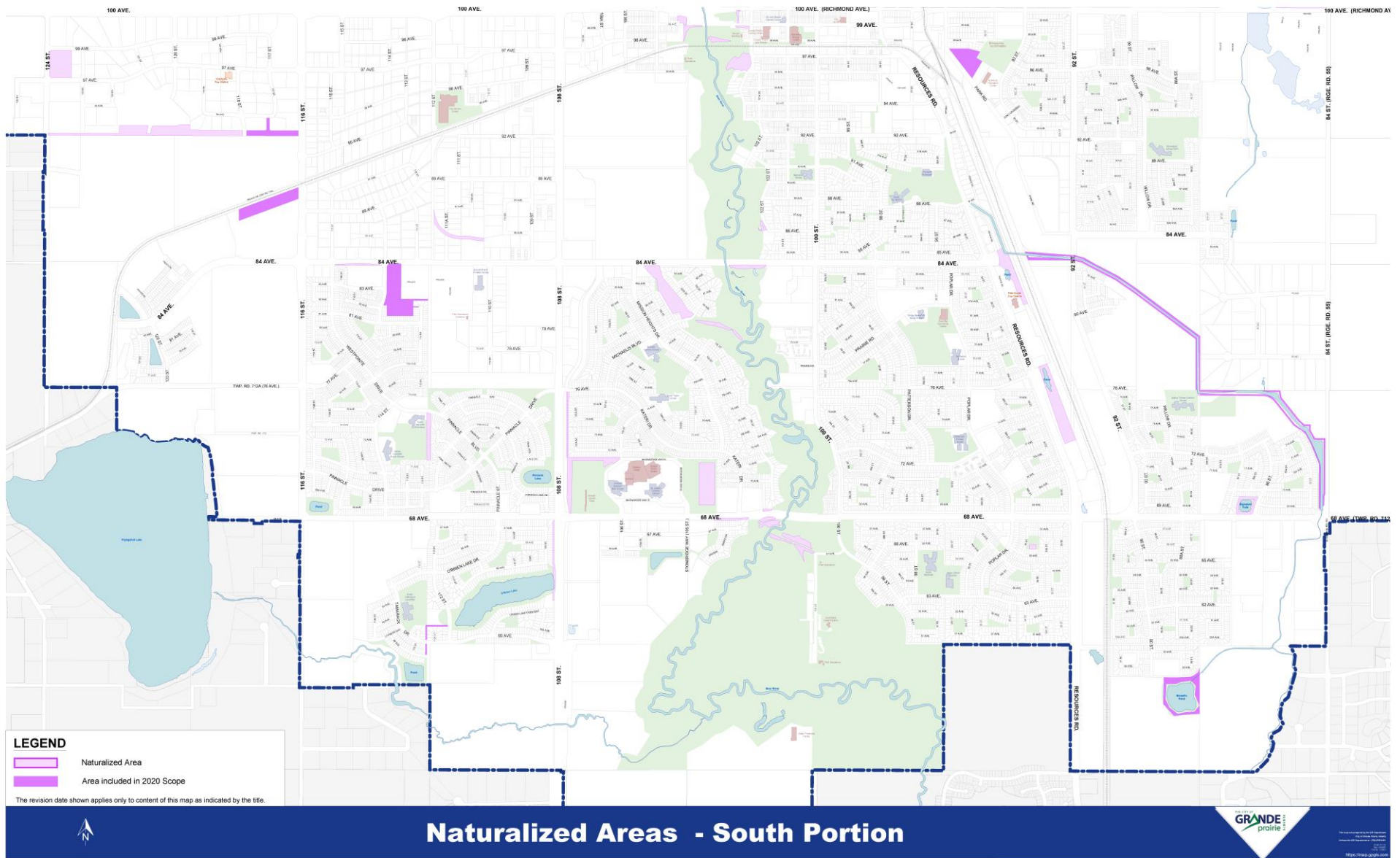
Attachment 1 – Existing Naturalized Areas

Attachment 2 – Proposed Naturalization Areas

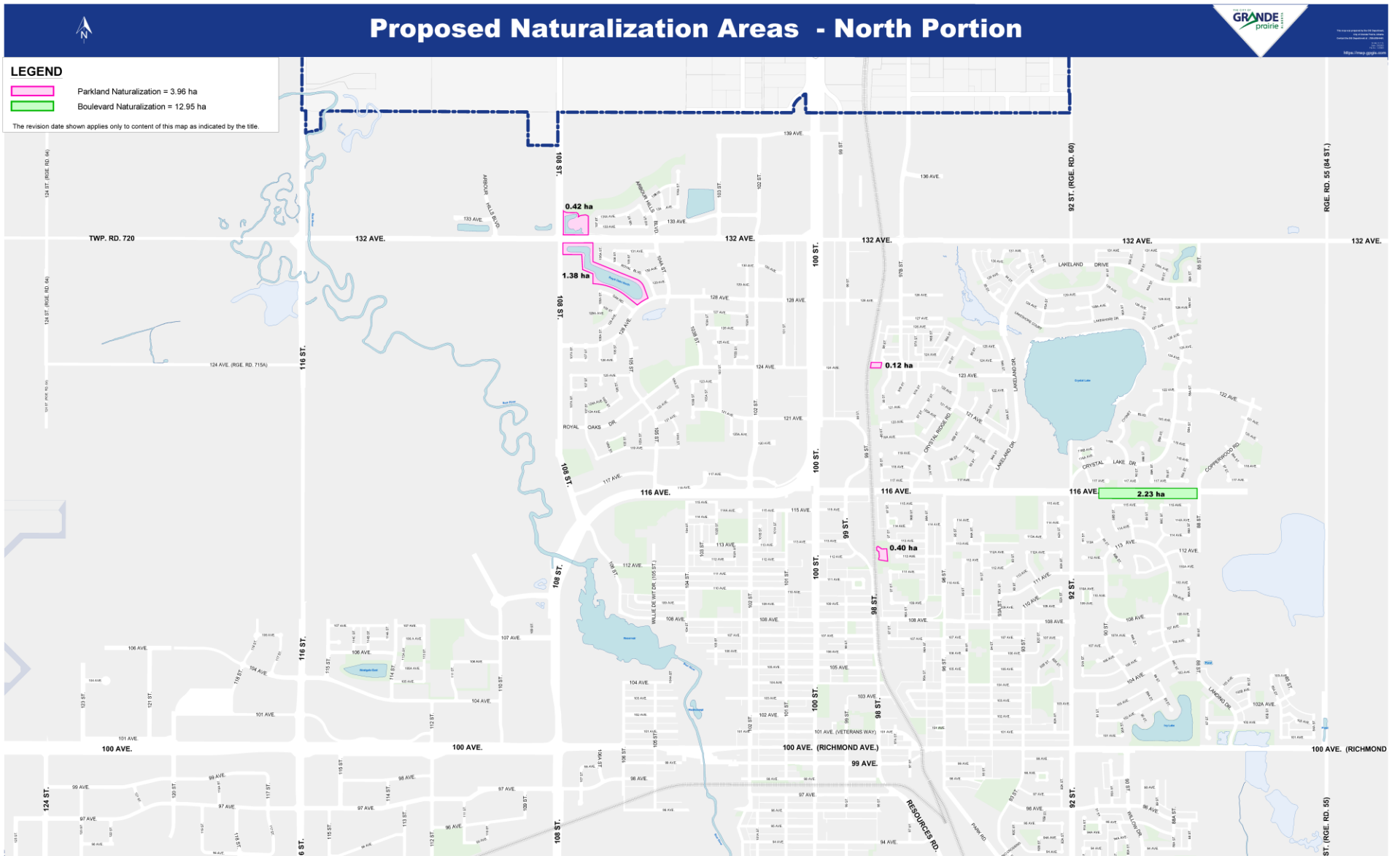
Attachment 3 – Pilot Program Site Selection Criteria

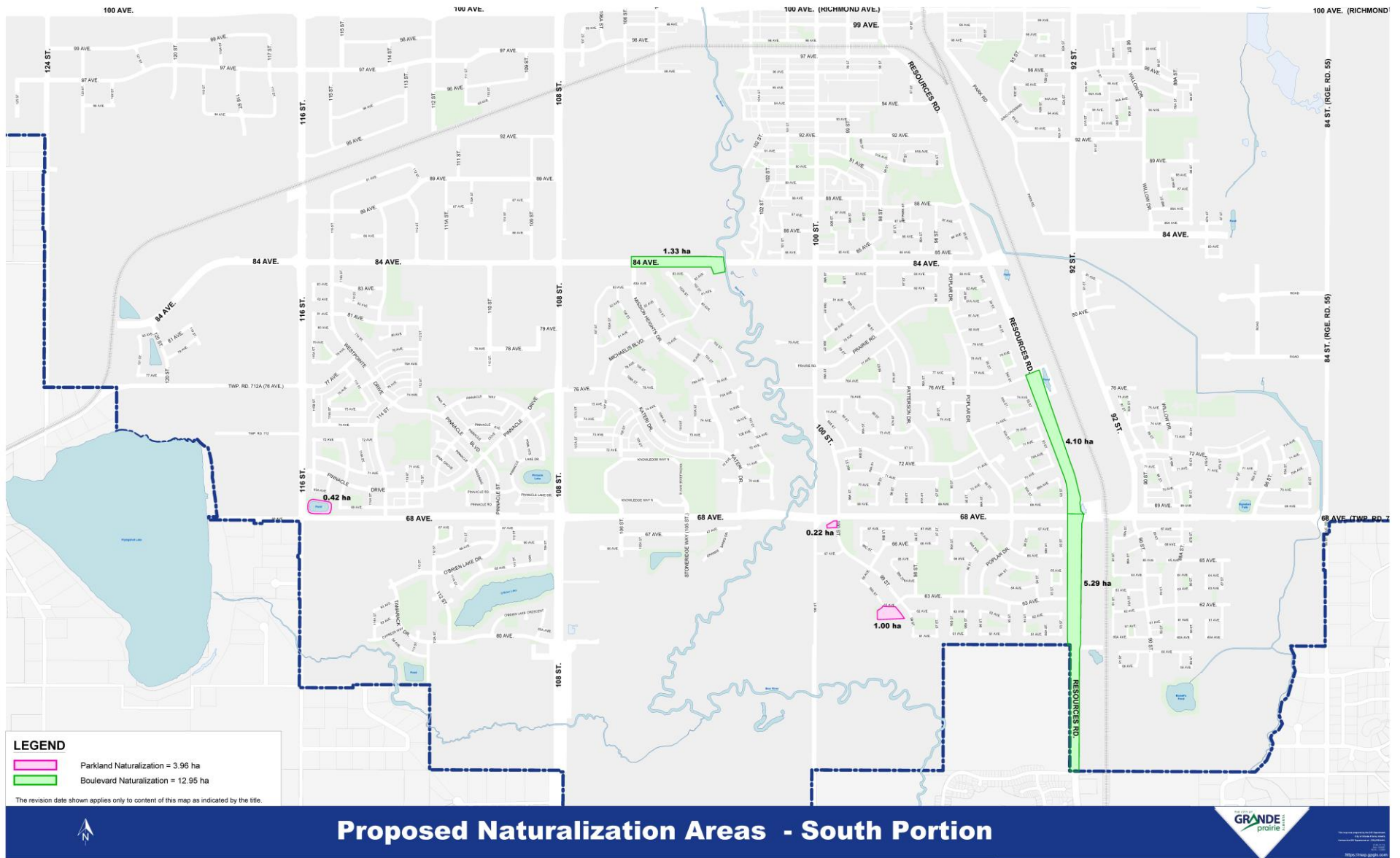
Naturalized Areas - North Portion





Attachment 2 – Proposed Naturalization Areas





Attachment 3 – Pilot Program Site Selection Criteria

Naturalization Selection Criteria:

1. Location is within 400m of maintained Parkland.
2. Location is within or near existing Environmental Reserve or naturalized areas.
3. Location is acceptable to other departments (Engineering, Environment, etc.).
4. Location presents slope angle concerns for operational staff.
5. Location presents perpetual wet area concerns for operational staff.