

A Trails Tourism Master Plan for the STEP Region

This summary document has been prepared for members and associates of the St. Paul / Elk Point Economic Development Alliance as an overview of the region's trails tourism master plan project completed in 2024.

Special thanks to residents, trail stakeholders, tourism operators, municipal and Alberta Government staff, and others who took the time to consider the potential of trails tourism and to inform this plan.

THE TRAILS TOURISM MASTER PLAN

Built with significant community involvement, research and pragmatic assessment, the STEP Trails Tourism Master Plan sets an ambitious, but pragmatic, vision for activating and realizing the region's trails tourism potential over the next 10 years.

The plan recognizes that the region has many of the foundational components needed to foster and grow a vibrant trails tourism economy, including a range of significant trail assets, diverse trail experience opportunities, appealing amenities, supportive trail enthusiasts and organizations, and an ability to access broader markets of trail enthusiasts.

Most importantly, the plan assesses the relative strengths and weaknesses of the area as a unique and appealing trail destination and goes on to recommend strategies and actions that STEP members could take to greatly improve the region's ability to benefit from motorized and non-motorized trails tourism.

INTRODUCTION (REPORT SECTION 1)

Path to the Plan - Work to develop the plan started in the fall of 2023 with a concentration on:

- Developing a comprehensive and accurate physical inventory of existing trails in the region.
- Engaging with residents, trail enthusiasts, land managers and others to build an understanding of trail-related perspectives.

Following the completion of two reports in winter 2024 documenting the findings and analysis of the above efforts, a draft of the Regional Trails Tourism Master Plan was developed later in the spring. The final plan was completed in late summer 2024. *For a full understanding of the project, please review all three reports.*

Planning Area and Scope - The plan focuses primarily on terrestrial trails and considers all types of motorized, non-motorized, summer, winter, front-country and backcountry trail activities in the region.



The municipal boundary of the County of St. Paul serves as the planning area, with emphasis on lands under the administrative control of STEP municipalities. However, connectivity to provincial lands and adjacent regions was also considered as these are important and attractive destinations.

While there is significant potential to nurture development of routes and trails that connect with local Indigenous and Métis communities, additional engagement would be needed to integrate these opportunities with this plan.

This plan also acknowledges and builds upon some of the significant related work in northeast Alberta, including trail and tourism planning related to the Iron Horse Trail, the STEP region, and the Northeast Lakeland Tourism Development Zone.

Finally, the plan is deliberately strategic in nature and does not provide detailed trail-by-trail or location-by-location actions. It is a framework and lens through which both our signature trail opportunities and other visitor and market ready trails should be viewed to inform their improvements.

What We Heard – A public survey, a stakeholder survey, an online mapping exercise, a series of community interviews, and several pop-up public kiosks were held to gather valuable perspective and insights. Broadly, input fell into eight themes. Please see the *STEP Regional Trails Tourism Master Plan: What We Heard Report* for detail and methodology.

1. Trails tourism can bring positive benefits to the region.
2. Good community support exists for trails and trails tourism, but with some reservations.
3. The region has lots going for it (e.g. Iron Horse Trail, local networks, river valley vistas).
4. Not all trails are suitable for Signature Trail opportunities, but some have potential.
5. Much work needs to be done.
6. Sustainable trail design and management is required.
7. Operational and management strengths exist, but with some challenges.
8. Several suggestions for Signature Trail experiences were made.

The St. Paul / Elk Point economic development region has a strong, but largely unrealized, trails tourism potential.



TRAIL BENEFITS AND DESIRED OUTCOMES (REPORT SECTIONS 2 & 3)

Hundreds of communities in North America are taking steps to improve their trails and trail services for a broad range of community, economic, environmental and quality-of-life benefits. Some have been so successful that these changes have literally transformed and reinvigorated their entire communities (e.g. Cumberland, B.C.; Bend, Oregon; Hatfield-McCoy system, West Virginia). Much, if not most, of that potential may be accessible in the STEP region.

With an emphasis on realizing tourism benefits, the report recommends that the region commits to achieving:

Presence as a Trails Tourism Destination

- *Become a provincial trails tourism destination that is recognized by trail enthusiasts and tourism organizations for its high-quality trail opportunities on and off the Iron Horse Trail.*
- *Be recognized as a high-quality, leading service region along the interjurisdictional trails that the region is part of (e.g. Iron Horse Trail, Trans Canada Trail, Great Canadian Snowmobile Trail).*

Trail Diversity, Quality & Tourism Readiness

- *Enhance and create a network of market-ready signature trails and trail experiences that motivate travel to the region and provide exceptional local recreation opportunities.*
- *Elevate the trails tourism readiness, appeal, and quality of other trails that are not part of the region's signature trail network.*
- *Ensure visitors to the region's trails are highly satisfied with their trail experiences and are excited to promote the region to, and among, their communities of interest.*

Visitation

- *Increase trail related visitation across all seasons and extend the length of time trails-based visitors spend in the region.*

Economic Growth & Diversification

- *Significantly increase the direct spending by visitors who come to our region for our trails.*
- *Increase the indirect economic impact of trails on the regional economy.*
- *Stimulate the expansion of existing local businesses and the development of new local businesses that service both trails and trail-based visitors.*

Quality of Life, Sustainability & Host Community Support

- *Ensure that all trails and routes in the region that are being promoted to visitors are intended for trail visitation and are designed, constructed, maintained, and actively managed in accordance with best practices.*
- *Actively manage trail visitation to mitigate impacts to the trails and on wildlife, fish, and sensitive ecosystems, historic resource and cultural values, other land users, and the quality-of-life in host communities.*
- *Establish respectful and mutually beneficial relationships with Indigenous communities in the region that are interested in supporting and advancing trails and trails tourism.*
- *Grow recognition and support for trails, trails tourism, and trail benefits among community residents and local decision makers.*

Functioning Trails Tourism Ecosystem

- *Strengthen the coordination, collaboration, integration, and alignment of the region's trails tourism ecosystem.*
- *Stimulate greater resident and elected leader support for trails and pursuing trails tourism.*
- *Increase both public and private sector investment in, and resourcing of, the region's trails and trail tourism ecosystem.*

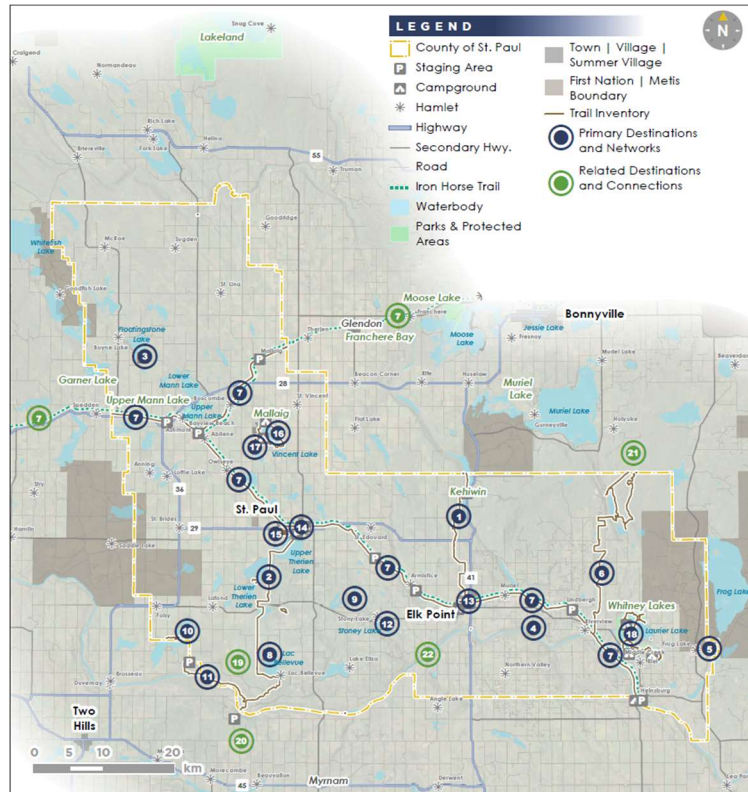


Insightful attributes of successful trail destinations that the STEP region can learn from.

1. *They offer trail experiences that are high-quality and unique compared to their competitors.*
2. *Their trail operations are well-planned, coordinated, and consistent. This, in turn, enables them to reliably provide quality trails and support exceptional experiences.*
3. *They offer highly desirable visitor services and amenities in the right locations, and at the right time.*
4. *They activate their trails through events, competitions, guiding and similar services.*
5. *Their trails and their trail visitors are proactively and effectively managed.*
6. *They generate market awareness and appeal in ways that entice visitors to visit.*
7. *Finally, and perhaps most importantly, successful destinations work diligently to ensure that the actual trail experiences provided to visitors aligns with, and delivers upon, the destination's brand promises and its reputation for quality.*

CURRENT STATE OF TRAILS AND TRAIL TOURISM READINESS (REPORT SECTIONS 4 & 5)

The project considered approximately 350km of terrestrial trails in 22 distinct regional trail systems/networks. Of these, a few are or near being “market ready” (i.e. of suitable quality and appeal to be marketed) when assessed against the [Trans Canada Trail’s Tourism Readiness Guidelines](#). **Most regional trail networks are not yet ready to welcome trail enthusiasts.**



Visitor Ready (or Near Visitor Ready) Trail Networks	Market Ready (or Near Market Ready) Trail Networks	Export Ready Trail Networks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Beauvallon Ferry Snowmobile Trail 3. Floatingstone Municipal Park trails 4. Town of St. Paul Pathways 5. Frog Lake Historic Site trail 11. Lac Sante River Trail 13. Town of Elk Point pathway 14. Town of St. Paul pathways 15. St. Paul Golf Course Nordic ski network 17. Westcove Recreation Area (summer) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Fort George / Buckingham House 7. Iron Horse Trail (but not yet for cycling) 17. Westcove Recreation Area (winter) 18. Whitney Lakes Provincial Park 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> None at this time
Trail Networks Not Ready for Visitors	Other Notable Areas with Significant Appeal / Potential (Trail Tourism Readiness Not Fully Assessed)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bangs Lake Snowmobile Trail (historic) 6. Garnier Lake Snowmobile Trail (historic) 8. Lac Bellevue Campground 9. Lac Delorme site 10. Lac Sante trails 12. Stoney Lake Campground 16. Vincent Lake perimeter trail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 19. Lac Sante Grazing Reserve 20. Myrnam snowmobile trail network (Two Hills) 21. Snowmobile connections to MD Bonnyville 22. North Saskatchewan River 	

SWOT ASSESSMENT OF THE REGION’S TRAILS FOR TRAILS TOURISM PURPOSES	
CURRENT STRENGTHS:	CURRENT WEAKNESSES:
<p>Natural Assets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North Saskatchewan River valley (including its views, south facing aspect, and Canadian Heritage River designation) • Whitney Lake Provincial Park 	<p>Travel Motivating Trails</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively low tourism readiness of existing trail networks (e.g. inconsistent or inappropriate trail tread quality, lack of clear objectives, condition of signage) • Some trail networks lack clear purpose, visitor experience objectives and management direction • Unsuitable IHT tread conditions for some trail activities, particularly cycling

SWOT ASSESSMENT OF THE REGION'S TRAILS FOR TRAILS TOURISM PURPOSES

CURRENT STRENGTHS:	CURRENT WEAKNESSES:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regional lakes (e.g. Vincent, Bellevue, Sante, Delorme, Stoney, Thérien, Floating Stone) Long summer days Dark skies Plentiful wildlife Public land (e.g. St. Paul Grazing Reserve) Uncrowded sites, roads, and destinations <p>Trail Supply</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interesting & topographically varied segment of the Iron Horse Trail Westcove Recreation Area Nordic network Formalized snowmobile network Trans Canada Trail is routed through the region on IHT Great Canadian Snowmobile Trail is routed through the region on IHT Developing town networks in St. Paul and Elk Point <p>Local Support & Volunteerism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong history of municipal interests working together (i.e. NE Muni-corr) Dedicated and interested core volunteers and organizations (e.g. snowmobiling, Nordic ski, running) Regional DMO support / interest in trails tourism Public support for a wide range of trail activities and experiences. <p>Cultural Assets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant Indigenous and Métis presence and history. Significant settlement history (e.g. Fort George/ Buckingham House) <p>Service & Amenity Assets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> IHT connectivity with Town of St. Paul, Town of Elk Point and some additional villages and amenities Villages/summer village 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Few trails take advantage of the region's exceptional North Saskatchewan River valley's scenic views (i.e. "the cows have the region's best views") Unsuitable TCT connections east of Heinsburg Limited trail duration and/or diversity (length, type, level of challenge) Limited loop opportunities and challenges to establishing these (e.g. connecting through private land) Limited connectivity between trail networks Limited existing overnight or multi-night trail-based opportunities to retain visitors within the region Constraints, challenges, impediments, and limited transparency to planning and formalizing quality trails and related tourism amenities on provincial Crown Land (e.g. grazing leases/reserves, highway right-of-ways, Provincial Parks) Busy highway infrastructure with significant heavy traffic (e.g. roads can be difficult to cross and have limited suitability as connectors for trail activities) <p>Market Access</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Distance from major population centres and regional airport <p>Visitor Amenities & Services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited and/or unclear purposeful in-town connectivity with services, tourism attractions and tourism service providers Limited ability to monetize and leverage tourism benefits (e.g. rentals, repair, accommodations with secure lock up) Inconsistent signage and gateway experience. Inconsistent or absent on-trail and convenience amenities Aging IHT infrastructure <p>Marketing & Activation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of accurate, informative, relevant and authoritative trip planning information Lack of activity / experience-based itineraries. Limited variety of trail-based events and competitions, including distribution of events across seasons <p>Visitor Use Management & Sustainability</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited investment and coordination in trail planning, development, management, visitor management, and maintenance <p>Trails Tourism Ecosystem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heavy reliance on volunteers; limited volunteer support and coordination and public sector investment Limited prioritization, coordination and collaboration across the region's administrations and trails tourism ecosystem outside of IHT (e.g. commitment to pursue trails tourism and investment in infrastructure required to support it)

SWOT ASSESSMENT OF THE REGION'S TRAILS FOR TRAILS TOURISM PURPOSES

CURRENT STRENGTHS:	CURRENT WEAKNESSES:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IHT staging areas, campgrounds, and amenities Regional campgrounds <p>Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attractive gravel roads near river valley Permissive OHV policies within municipalities Within 3-hour catchment of Edmonton market Some successful examples of trail events and activation (e.g. Iron Horse Ultra, Second-Chance Trail Ride) Regional proximity to municipalities with appealing destinations and interest in quality trails (e.g. Metis Crossing, Cold Lake MTB park, M.D. Bonnyville Nordic facilities) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inconsistencies in municipal and recreation organization capacity, coordination, communications, and roles in trail recreation Provincial public land and provincial park trail planning and designation processes are not yet clear or publicly available. Nor do these processes actively invite, engage, and involve local communities. <p>Other</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unreliable snow conditions Steep riverbanks and challenging river access Trail recreation is “out-of-scope” for some municipal recreation services and funding streams Established unfavourable reputation in some recreation communities of interest (e.g. significant negative IHT reputation within gravel cycling community)

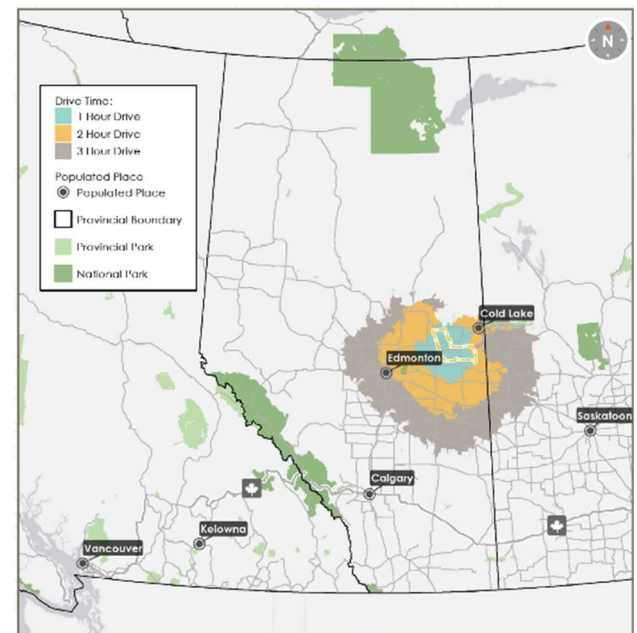
OPPORTUNITIES:	POSSIBLE THREATS:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop experiences that keep visitors longer in the region. Ensure formal trail systems take advantage of the region’s exceptional views, vistas, topography, and other unique natural and cultural assets. Strive to support and offer trails and trail services that are unique, highly activity appropriate, and of high quality. Diversify the range, variety, duration and loop potential of trail experiences (e.g. non-motorized; motorized; multi-day). Where appropriate, enable and support safe and respectful use of regional and provincial roads and rights-of-way for trail activities (e.g. separated trail, wider shoulders, designated cycling routes). Connect existing snowmobile networks to form long-distance looped trail experiences. Improve connection and integration of trail systems with communities and their relevant services (e.g. Town of St. Paul and Elk Point as service hubs). Actively work with the Government of Alberta to consider planning, formalizing and designating experience-focused trails on suitable public land and in provincial parks (e.g. emergent opportunities under the Trails Act, park planning, and recreation regulation review processes). Expand, diversify, and improve the quality of on-trail amenities. Ensure available amenities and services are proactively adapting to market shifts (e.g. e-bikes). Ensure the region’s proud and vibrant Indigenous names, themes, and stories are appropriately incorporated, shared and interpreted. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential for increased and attractive competition from other trails and destinations (e.g. improved routes in David Thompson region) Potential impacts from changing climate. Unforeseen or unexpected industrial impacts on existing trails. Latent negative public perception of trail-related impacts (e.g. trespass, environmental impacts of wheeled OHVs). Limited municipal access to emergent Crown Land trail opportunities.

OPPORTUNITIES:	POSSIBLE THREATS:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate, share and interpret natural history and post-colonial settlement stories and themes. • Expand, diversify, improve, and coordinate trail tourism related visitor services (e.g. accommodation, rentals, repairs, guided services). • Foster growth and development of trail-related knowledge, skills, policy, operations and capacity (e.g. policy templates, STEP member/staff training, volunteer training). • Develop and communicate specific, detailed, and targeted visitor information, itineraries, routes and experiences. • Leverage and action available trails and trails-tourism funding (e.g. provincial and federal). 	

MARKETS OF GREATEST POTENTIAL (REPORT SECTION 6)

The region’s success as a trails tourism destination will be predicated on the ability to identify target markets, understand their needs and expectations, design and develop a mix of trails and trail experiences that satisfies their needs and expectations, adapt to market changes, and to convince trail users within those target markets to choose our region over our competitors.

To maximize tourism benefits, to access larger markets and to access markets more likely to spend locally, it is recommended that the STEP region focuses on potential visitors outside of the immediate region within a 3-hour catchment area. Analysis suggests that snowmobile, cycling and OHV enthusiasts may offer the most promising tourism benefits. Realizing benefits, however, will only be attainable if (and only if) trail users can be attracted to the region.



TRAVELLING FORWARD TOGETHER: STRATEGIES, ACTIONS & MONITORING (REPORT SECTIONS 7 & 8)

Research, engagement, competitor reviews and field assessment have demonstrated that the region has the potential to spark and foster its reputation as a trails destination, but achieving the full potential will require diligent focus on advancing **five performance areas**. The report recommends **13 focused strategies** supported by **56 actions** to achieve this, including the following and others.



- **Expanding and establishing high-quality, designated signature routes** for cycling (bikepacking, gravel and e-bike/leisure), OHVs and snowmobiling with a mix of existing and new policy, cooperation and infrastructure.
- **Elevating the quality and tourism readiness of national level trails** (e.g. Trans Canada Trail) **and local trail networks** with specific enhancements (e.g. Beauvallon Ferry Snowmobile Trail, Fort George & Buckingham House Trails, Iron Horse Trail, Lac Bellevue Campground trails, Lac Sante River Trail, Town of Elk Point and St. Paul trails, Vincent Lake and Westcove trails, Whitney Lakes Provincial Park, Lac Sante Grazing Reserve and Bonnyville connections).
- **Elevating the quality of visitor experiences** with the right mix of accommodations and amenities, improved wayfinding aids and signage, and nurturing welcoming, trail-friendly communities and businesses
- **Actively attracting target markets** with a compelling trails destination brand and marketing, and by developing and activating attractive trail experiences.
- **Managing and understanding visitors and visitation.**
- **Building capacities within the STEP region's trail tourism ecosystem.**

The report concludes with a comprehensive recommended monitoring framework and approach to assess plan implementation progress and impacts.

