



COUNCIL STAFF REPORT

CITY COUNCIL of SALT LAKE CITY

TO: City Council Members
FROM: Allison Rowland
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DATE: January 21, 2025

RE: INFORMATIONAL: EMERALD RIBBON ACTION PLAN UPDATES

Item Schedule:

Briefing: January 21, 2025
Public Hearing: n/a
Potential Action: n/a

ISSUE AT-A-GLANCE

The Administration has updated its draft *Emerald Ribbon Action Plan*, which is designed to guide capital investment, operations, and maintenance along the Jordan River Corridor. The Department of Public Lands (DPL) plans to begin the first phase of improvements this year, drawing on \$9.0 million allocated to the project in the 2022 Parks General Obligation (GO) Bond and \$1.3 million in CIP and impact fees. Preliminary estimates for Phase One reach over \$16.6 million in today's dollars (see Section E below). Once the construction is complete, estimates for ongoing costs—operations and maintenance, including programming—which the Department believes would be partially covered by partnerships, would rise from about \$1 million per year to between \$7 million and \$10.5 million (see Sections F and H below). The transmittal from the Administration also includes a detailed Operations and Maintenance Plan. The Council is working with the Attorney's Office to determine which aspects of the Plan are appropriate for the Council to formally adopt.

The *Emerald Ribbon Action Plan* sets out a detailed and ambitious 10-year program to transform 772 acres along the Jordan River into an urban attraction and a major City asset. It is designed to address a broad set of objectives along the 10-mile corridor, including capital improvements, new programming, and improved river management techniques. The Plan sets out three sets of proposals:

- Policy and planning recommendations;
- A prioritized and phased list for improvements along the River; and
- An operational transition plan towards a more naturalized corridor.

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Based on an extensive process of resident engagement, implementation of the draft Plan would result in two major shifts in the City’s relationship with the Jordan River. They would result in a restored river that “more closely reflects its natural origins as a winding series of wetlands,” and a significant increase in spending for programming and activation of the corridor. This would be combined with the proposed capital investment in the new parks, trails, and natural lands to deliver both a significant increase in the amount of open space readily available to residents on Salt Lake City’s Westside neighborhoods, and a means to ensure that these areas remain safer and healthier for everyone.

The Council reviewed a previous version of this plan on September 17, 2024. An [Existing Conditions Report](#) for the *Emerald Ribbon Action Plan* was completed in December 2023. This report helped form the basis for the public engagement efforts, which were supported by the [Emerald Ribbon Plan](#) website. DPL intends to send a final version of the plan to the Council for potential adoption later this year.

Goal of the briefing: *Review and discuss the full draft of the Emerald Ribbon Action Plan.*

ADDITIONAL AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

A. **Background.** The *Emerald Ribbon* area runs approximately 10 miles along the length of the Jordan River within Salt Lake City, from the Regional Athletic Complex (RAC) to 2100 South. Combined with a 150-foot buffer from the river, it totals 772 acres of natural areas, parks, and golf, plus the RAC. The plan notes that across these neighborhoods, the average level of social vulnerability (a measure that includes income, race, lack of vehicle access, and housing instability) is higher than Salt Lake City’s as a whole (page 16).

The Jordan River serves as a key open space for residents of the City’s Westside. Public engagement undertaken for this Plan (see below) revealed that lack of safety and cleanliness were the most common themes mentioned when residents described their perceptions of the corridor. Significant recent City investments have helped improve this situation to some extent. DPL notes that the Park Rangers team, created in 2023, “has already become a key component of trail experience, offering aid, orientation, and a sense of safety.” In addition, in 2023, the Council funded six additional positions in the Department, and four landscape architects were shifted to Public Lands from the Public Services Department. The changes help significantly expand DPL’s ability to restore and care of the corridor’s natural ecology.

Public engagement carried out by the Department and its consultant team began in August 2023 and lasted a full year. It included stakeholder and community focus groups, public open houses, a youth workshop, and online surveys. By 2024, the Department had worked with over 1,000 Westside residents, organizations, and river-users more broadly, to help ensure the plan meets the priorities of the communities it will serve. Through this work, the Department identified the priorities elaborated on in the Plan:

“The key takeaways from this round of engagement were that people want to prioritize care for nature, would love to see an enhanced trail system, want to encourage activation in a thoughtful and sustainable way, and think that safety is a top concern.”

Plans that contributed to *Emerald Ribbon Action Plan* include:

- “Reimagine Nature” Public Lands Master Plan (2022)
- Blueprint Jordan River Refresh (2022)
- Public Lands Comprehensive Needs Assessment (2019)
- Westside Master Plan (2014)
- Jordan River Commission Best Practices for Riverfront Communities (2013)
- Salt Lake County Jordan River Trail Master Plan (2008)

- Blueprint Jordan River (2008)

B. **Plan Overview.** The goals and framework for the draft *Emerald Ribbon Action Plan* were developed from the guiding principles identified in public engagement stages. The Department used these to organize the recommendations in the current version of the Plan, which uses a multi-pronged approach to implementation and outlines the proposed implementation pathways and timelines based on technical considerations. An overarching goal is to more than double the restored and managed natural areas on the corridor, from 14% to at least 30%, or approximately 228 acres. Work towards this goal will begin with the restoration projects identified in Phase One and will continue over the next 10 or more years.

The Department also acknowledges the public’s increasing concern with safety on the Jordan River Corridor, along with concerns about under-maintained amenities, and poor water quality. The Plan recognizes that these problems must be overcome for the Emerald Ribbon to succeed as a thriving ecological and cultural place in Salt Lake City.

1. **Vision Statement.** “The Emerald Ribbon envisions a future Jordan River corridor that is a ribbon of **nature** through Salt Lake City, a community **crossroads**, and the **heart** of the Westside. It is a model of **care** for people, wildlife, and ecosystems.”
2. **Values and Guiding Principles.** Four values were identified based on the results of the year-long community engagement process: Nature, Culture, Connectivity, and Care. These were developed into the Plan’s five guiding principles, which are designed to help evaluate progress in implementation and ensure that the eventual results match the community’s overall vision. These principles are:
 - a. Celebrate the rich ecological and cultural diversity of the corridor
 - b. Connect the corridor to adjacent roads, trails, and waterways.
 - c. Cultivate collective care of the corridor.
 - d. Restore and enhance the river ecosystem as a peaceful refuge.
 - e. Create a safe and vibrant destination.
3. **Goals, Strategies and Actions.** Each of the five guiding principles is associated with a set of more concrete goals, strategies, and actions for the Department to undertake over the coming years. These range from capital improvements to new programming to improved management techniques. Each specific strategy can be viewed relative to the others in terms of cost, organizational complexity, potential project duration, and community impact. (See pages 109-16 of the draft Plan.)
4. **Key Locations.** Along with determining the overall structure of the plan, conceptual designs were created for five key locations along the corridor:
 - a. Rose Park Nature Area,
 - b. Cottonwood Park,
 - c. Fairpark Urban Core,
 - d. Modesto Park/Bend in the River, and
 - e. Glendale Oxbow.

These areas were identified in the earlier iteration of the plan based on their potential for becoming desirable and functional spaces for both nature and community. The Action Plan identifies initial work that can be done on each of these sites and lays out a general timeline for completion within 10 years. (See also Section C and D below.)

C. **Timeline.** The Department has developed the following broad timeline for the project.

| 2025 | 2026 and 2027 | 2028 to 2035 |
|---|---|---|
| - Groundwork and planning for implementation of transformational projects | - Implementation of Phase 1 priorities | - Complete bond priorities and move on to the remaining transformational projects |
| - Additional research on some strategies | - Transformation of manicured spaces to natural lands | - Pursue the more difficult long-term strategies |
| - Begin pilot program | - Short-term opportunities | - Evolve the new framework for care in a restored and activated corridor |
| - Begin Phase 1 Bond Priorities | | |

- ***The Council may wish to discuss with the Administration the feasibility of this timeline, given the scope of this project, along with the large number of Department projects planned for the coming years.***
 - ***What are the potential costs of an accelerated timeline? And the benefits?***
 - ***Are there ways to incorporate “just-in-case” scenarios or phasing in case parts of the project are held up unexpectedly?***
 - ***Would the Council like to request that DPL provide a comprehensive progress update on the Emerald Ribbon Plan at certain intervals (perhaps every two or three years)?***

D. **Conceptual Plans for Five “Transformational Projects.”** More detailed conceptual plans were developed for five sites in the Emerald Ribbon (see pages 114-156 of the Plan). These “transformational projects” were chosen to reflect the variety of experiences possible along the Jordan River corridor. Some of the proposed high priority projects will be completed at each of these sites in the next three to five years using 2022 GO Bond funding, but the long-term completion of these designs would depend on future availability of funding. The high-priority projects, along with their estimated costs, are provided in Sections D and C. Brief descriptions of each proposed project and their proposed prioritization follow.

1. **Develop a New Wildlife Area at Glendale Oxbow.** The Plan states that this area, located between the future Glendale Park and 2100 South holds significant potential for riparian, wetland, and upland restoration. The proposed project also includes improvements designed to make the area a gateway to the Emerald Ribbon, including a new trailhead with parking, which would be located on 2100 South and reached via a bridge over the Surplus Canal. On the west side of the river, a new trail would be added along with natural landscaping and new trees.

One issue that will need to be resolved is that the area proposed for parking is owned by the Golf Enterprise Fund. The Department plans to work with the Golf Division to explore options, including potentially buying the area to incorporate into DPL properties.

A second issue to be resolved is that private commercial and industrial operations encroach on public lands and infringe on the required buffers for the Jordan River on the east side of the river. DPL noted that staff works with Salt Lake County Flood Control, the Army Corps of Engineers, and

2. other public and private land managers to meet riparian protection and floodplain requirements. In addition,

“Encroachments by private property owners onto public land within and throughout the Jordan River corridor is a pervasive issue. The City’s capacity to proactively resolve these conflicts is low. Often, and this would be the case with a potential Glendale Oxbow project, they are resolved immediately before or during the process of designing and constructing an active, funded project.”

More broadly, the Department aims to mitigate illegal activities throughout the corridor with increased activation, partnerships for care, and education efforts. DPL believes that in the Glendale Oxbow area, increasing the natural habitat and wetland will naturally make the area less desirable for camping. For other undesirable and potentially illegal land uses, the Department intends to coordinate with other public safety-focused departments and entities to ensure their responses are appropriate.

3. **Reimagine Modesto Park and Bend in the River.** The Emerald Ribbon Action Plan notes several existing problems in this area, which covers both sides of the river between Fremont Avenue and Illinois Avenue. Primary concerns are related to safety and outdated amenities, with an uninviting and inaccessible south park edge along Modesto Avenue, and an under-programmed outdoor classroom (the Urban Treehouse) to the north. The proposal is to redesign the parks, building on the area along Fremont Ave, which serves as an entrance to the park, and is “a cherished community space.” The trailhead on Fremont Avenue would be renovated with amenities added along the trail, including a new boat ramp. On the Modesto side, a new ‘community porch’ would be created with shaded seating, a lawn, cooking areas, a nature playground, and art installations. The wetland area would also be restored.
4. **Center Nature and Activate Public Space in Fairpark.** The segment of the Jordan River between Fisher Mansion and Cottonwood Park runs through the highly industrial area between North Temple and 200 South, which is crossed by major railroads and the TRAX Green. Public engagement indicated a preference for more active uses and public spaces, with hubs for community events, water recreation, and nature education. In the short term, undesirable activity restricts the use of the Gadsby Trailhead as a gateway to the Jordan River corridor and the Fisher Mansion remains fenced off from the river and offers no trailside amenities. The plan focuses on providing safe and comfortable connections for trail users, businesses, and future residents, but for now, no capital improvement projects would take place in Phase One (see section --, below).

In later phases, the trail connection to the new Folsom Trail would be completed, to opening up the Jordan River Trail and Fisher Mansion to other trail users. The other critical priority is to complete the missing segment of trail which is located north of North Temple Street, which suffers from safety, visibility, and quality issues.

5. **Bring New Life to Cottonwood Park.** This park, at approximately 300 to 500 North, would be the most transformed among the five transformative projects, featuring an upgraded trailhead with artwork, signage, new restrooms, and a boat ramp; realigned trails and new nature walkways; and a ‘community porch’ on the southern edge, where recreation amenities would be concentrated. The plan also recommends “Improving connectivity, visibility, and engagement [to] significantly enhance the park’s usability and safety, creating a more cohesive and welcoming space for the community.” Over the longer run, the Plan proposes relocating the levee further from the river to improve visual and physical connection to the water, providing more space for the river to flood.

5. **Develop a New Nature Park near Rose Park Golf Course.** The Plan proposes a transformation of parts of the Rose Park Golf Course area, but no design or construction is proposed in as part of Phase One. DPL is in discussions about eventually transforming the driving range into a publicly accessible park and nature area. This could be undertaken when a levee along the western bank, which does not meet current regulations, is upgraded to meet higher flood levels and stricter standards. In addition, as in Cottonwood Park, there is potential to create more “room for the river” by relocating portions of the levee and developing wetlands. The first step would be a feasibility study for relocating the levee, which would include evaluating design and construction to meet regulations, estimating costs, and creating a timeline and risk management.

E. **Phase One & Bond Funding Priorities.** Phase One of the *Emerald Ribbon Action Plan* is designed to result in a geographically-balanced distribution of funds among the neighborhoods along the river. The idea is to ensure that the community sees investment throughout the river corridor, beyond the transformational project sites. The Plan includes Phase 1 estimates for both capital and ongoing O&M costs. These are based on costs at comparable parks around the country, and they are necessarily broad and subject to change at this stage. The estimates do, however, provide the general scale of the levels of investment required to enact this phase of the Plan. Soft costs such as design fees, permitting costs, contingencies and escalation are included in these budget numbers. For full methodology of cost modeling, see pages 102-103 of the Plan.

The Phase One priorities are intended to be completed within the next three to five years, beginning in 2025. So far, the Council has allocated \$9 million for capital improvements for the Emerald Ribbon project from the General Obligation (GO) bond that was approved by City voters in November 2022. The Department plans to supplement this amount with \$1.5 million in CIP which the Council has approved for this purpose. This funding would cover most of priorities identified for Phase One, but DPL notes that about \$5 million of additional funding would be necessary to achieve the vision set out in the Plan.

The Plan also alludes to additional funding sources that are currently underutilized or unavailable to the Department and suggests that these could be explored as implementation gets underway.

- ***Policy Question: The Council may wish to ask about how DPL plans to explore additional funding sources. For example, does the Department have the staff resources available to work on this, or would consultants be hired?***

1. **Phase 1 Transformational Projects.** Of the five transformational projects discussed in section D above, three are identified as the highest priorities for Phase One funding: Cottonwood Park, Modesto Park and Bend in the River, and Glendale Oxbow. These multi-faceted projects would include improvements to recreation amenities, ecological restoration, and trail connections. The Plan states:

“Projects were prioritized by area of highest need in the community, greatest opportunity in regards to natural restoration potential, and to lay the foundation for the ongoing implementation of the goals of this plan. The projects were also prioritized to ensure a balanced distribution of investment in regards to geography and project type (between highly activated parks, natural lands, and trail and safety). They are structured to ensure that they are feasible and will, coupled with effective ongoing management and thoughtful programming, make a tangible difference in the lives of residents within Phase One.”

Estimated Capital Costs for the Phase 1 Transformational Projects

| | Park | Restoration | Trails & Greenway | Total |
|--|---------------------|--------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| Wildlife Area at Glendale Oxbow | \$689,275 | \$1,417,496 | \$192,462 | \$2,299,233 |
| Modesto Park and Bend in the River | \$3,636,519 | \$391,896 | \$0 | \$4,028,415 |
| Center Nature and Activate Public Space in Fairpark | \$1,449,854 | \$0 | \$1,700,077 | \$3,149,931 |
| Bring New Life to Cottonwood Park: | \$5,347,822 | \$836,601 | \$962,308 | \$7,146,731 |
| Develop a New Nature Park near Rose Park Golf Course | \$0 | \$0 | \$0 | \$0 |
| TOTAL | \$11,123,470 | \$2,645,993 | \$2,854,847 | \$16,624,310 |

2. **Phase One Corridor-Wide Safety and Connectivity Projects.** These would mediate confusing and unsafe aspects of the Jordan River Parkway Trail, specifically at major three trail intersections: North Temple; 1700 South; and 900 South. Funding would also be directed to an overall way-finding and interpretive plan for the corridor. The Department proposes to fund these with \$1.5 million from the GO Bond.

Phase 1 Corridor-Wide Trail & Safety Projects

| | Bond Funding |
|--|---------------------|
| Wayfinding Redesign | \$700,000 |
| North Temple Street Intersection and Trail | \$700,000 |
| 1700 South Trail Intersection | \$50,000 |
| 900 South Trail Intersection | \$50,000 |
| Total | \$1,500,000 |

3. **Phase One Corridor-Wide Ecological Restoration Projects.** Eight locations have been identified for ecological restoration. These projects would add a total of eight acres of restored natural lands and Department proposes to fund these with \$1 million from the GO Bond.

Phase 1 Corridor-Wide Restoration/ Natural Lands Projects

| | Bond Funding |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Peace Labyrinth Open Space | \$150,000 |
| 900 South River Park | \$200,000 |
| 500 South Riparian | \$150,000 |
| Alzheimers Park | \$100,000 |
| Riverside Park | \$200,000 |
| Cornell Street Lift Station | \$125,000 |
| Fairpark/North Temple area | \$50,000 |
| Folsom Trail Connection | \$25,000 |
| Total | \$1,000,000 |

F. **Phase One Ongoing Operations and Maintenance.** The O&M cost estimates used methodology similar to the capital cost estimates, based on similar land uses in other cities. In practice, the total would depend on the level of programming, which is why the annual operating budget is a range of \$7 million to \$10 million. This would be a significant increase over the current spending on the corridor, which is about \$1 million per year. The Department expects that a significant share of this amount would come from external partners (see Section H, below). Note: The O&M Plan (below) states that 2 additional full-time rangers would need to be dedicated to the corridor within two years, and 8 additional FTES would be needed to manage natural areas in the corridor within 3 years.

| PHASE ONE PRIORITIES - O&M | | | |
|---|---------------|--|---------------------|
| | Size | Proposed Funding Range (Annual) | |
| Highly Activated Spaces/Parks (includes operations, programming, maintenance, and labor.) | 60-70 acres | \$3,500,000 | \$5,000,000 |
| Natural Lands (includes monitoring and ongoing management) | 260-280 acres | \$2,500,000 | \$3,500,000 |
| Trails & Safety (includes the assessment and maintenance of trail and greenway areas adjacent to the trail throughout the corridor) | 50-60 acres | \$1,000,000 | \$2,000,000 |
| Total | | \$7,000,000 | \$10,500,000 |

G. **The Operations and Management Plan.** The transmittal includes an Operations and Management (O&M) Plan developed to guide Public Lands staff in creating consistent and standardized practices across the corridor. It provides detailed guidance for restoring degraded aspects of the river and establishes standards for recommended plant communities, along with day-to-day and seasonal practices for different spaces, and setting a long-term target for care.

The O&M Plan includes research on ideal staffing ratios, which were determined to be roughly 1 FTE per 20 acres. The Department proposes to aim for this level of staffing for the Jordan River Corridor over the next 10 years, as the proposed new capital projects come online. This would translate to adding 14 FTEs to manage the full 282 acres of natural area on the corridor. Additional maintenance funding (equipment, vehicles, etc.) would be needed to support the specialized care needed for native planting areas.

H. **Partnerships and Governance.** The *Emerald Ribbon Action Plan* alludes to the need for additional work to identify ways to distribute both the financial responsibility and management of the Jordan River Corridor. It states, “It is rare today to see successful urban river corridors improved, managed, and operated purely by public entities,” (page 106). Specific examples are provided on the following page of the High Line Canal in Denver; Buffalo Bayou in Houston; and Joe Louis Greenway, Detroit. In each case, a dedicated external organization—and in some cases, more than one—supports the programming, fundraising, management and operations, or community outreach. Governance structures to help to bridge the public sector’s gap in capacities, raise funding, and ability to enliven the corridor with activation include public-private partnerships, conservancy models, and ‘Friends of’ groups. In short,

“An evolution of the governance model on the Emerald Ribbon is an important precursor to meeting the community’s demands in regards to improved maintenance and management practices. Investment in the long-term care of the corridor (and public communication about those investments) must go hand in hand with new capital improvements,” (page 159).

- ***Policy Question: The Council may wish to ask about how DPL plans to explore partnerships and governance models for the Jordan River Corridor. For example, does the Department have the staff resources available to work on this, or would consultants be hired?***
- ***Policy Question: The Council may wish to ask what role the Jordan River Commission may have in this governance structure.***

POLICY QUESTIONS

1. The Council may wish to discuss with the Attorney’ Office and the Administration the options for weighing the attractive amenities and services listed in this plan (and others like it) against other City budget obligations, including adopting a balanced annual budget. Questions might include:
 - a. To what extent does an “action plan” for City spending constitute binding promises to constituents? Does the Council want to include language in the plan to indicate that any proposed projects are subject to future budget availability?
 - b. How would the Council formally adopting this plan affect the prioritization of financial resources with other City needs?
 - c. Is there a risk that performance metrics and project calendars intended to track City progress on a given capital project could be interpreted as binding funding commitments for the Council?