

**Proposal for the Development of the
Youngstown Outdoor Learning Space (working title)
on the
Former Youngstown Golf Course Site
By Kelly Lewis**

Preamble/History

The junior high students at Youngstown School came up with the idea of building a fish pond on the site of the former Youngstown Golf Course site located north of the Special Areas Shop. Their initial idea was to create a space within walking distance of the school where fishing and other outdoor activities could take place. A group of students met with the village of Youngstown council outlining their idea and the concept was well received. Special Areas was also informed of their interest and a letter was sent to the school outlining next steps. (This document is attached to this document.) The site itself was explored by myself and three students in January to come up with possible locations for the pond as well as other possible activity sites. At the time, there was some snow cover and access to the entire parcel was not possible. After viewing the site from several vantage points, a number of ideas for activities on the site were discussed. These ideas coming from the students as well as other possible activities put forth through discussions between school administration and Prairie Land Public School Division (PLRD) management are presented below. The entire project will take several years to reach its full potential, but it is desirable to begin major earthwork as soon as possible in order for water to be secured and plants to be introduced. It will certainly become a draw to the village of Youngstown and the Special Areas.

Rationale

Access to technology and increasing required screen time is keeping students from exploring the outdoors and developing hobbies and interests which would find them spending time outside. *A key requirement would be minimizing student access to technology during the majority of activities on the site by providing lockable storage for devices near the site entrance, and providing digital cameras for recording their experiences.* Access to outdoor spaces for educational purposes is not readily available to most students in Alberta, but students in Prairie Land are fortunate to be in rural locations with many potential options to access these spaces. The many curricular benefits of access to outdoor spaces include science at all levels, outdoor education and various strands of Career and Technology Studies (CTS). Courses combining

online and practical components could allow students to obtain a hunter education certificate (necessary for first time hunters) and the Canadian Firearms Safety Course (necessary for use and/or purchase of firearms and/or ammunition). The site would also provide an outstanding opportunity to develop and offer activities which directly support First Nation Metis Inuit (FNMI) programming for students across the division. Physical education courses could also utilize the space for cross country running, game development and orienteering. Ability to access the site for various sections of English language arts composition as well general art courses would be possible. If well thought out, designed and constructed, the program offerings available to students across Prairie Land - and potentially all of the Special Areas - would be significant and make the site unique in the province. Career exploration in the areas of environmental sciences, renewable resource technology and other related career paths could be introduced to students through special events and guest presentations. Professional development for staff in a variety of areas could also take place on site. Access to the stocked pond could be made public and, with the possible addition of picnic tables, would be attractive to other members of the Special Areas. There would have to be consideration of fishery management and likely a catch-and-release expectation for the general public would be implemented. The pond would be touted as a “educational pond” where the experience of fishing for the first time is encouraged and ideally “catch and keep” would be limited for all users.

The greenhouse located at the Youngstown School would be a source of fish through the aquaponics program. Mature fish not used in the commercial sales of the greenhouse would be transported to the fish pond and they would become part of a catchable population. Students at the school would also be involved in the construction of many of the amenities needed on site, such as tables, benches, shooting platforms and windows, and signage. Where possible, students would be involved in the design, construction, operation and maintenance of the site. Building invested interest in the student population would go a long way towards developing positive attitudes towards the use and access of the property. The village of Youngstown will benefit from increased traffic, potential hosting opportunities for a variety of events, and an increased profile in the area and province.

Potential Development

The project has evolved from simply a fish pond into a comprehensive outdoor experience site. Anchoring the project will be the fish pond, but the following ***possible*** inclusions in the project would create a unique and highly beneficial experience in the many different curricular, co-curricular and extra curricular areas, as well as to residents of the Special Areas.

Fish Pond

A dugout type fish pond would be the big draw for the site. It would be stocked with trout and aerated to maintain a possible fishery through the winter. Winter fencing would have to be added at ice up to allow for safe fishing, or the better option would be to close the site during the winter and direct fishers to Blood Indian and Carolside reservoirs.

Before building a pond, a topographical survey would be needed to accurately determine drainages which would best support a fish pond. A core sample would be required to determine if there is adequate soil to support a dugout, or if a lined pond would be the best option to address sandy soil layers. The initial site tour looks like the south end would be the best location for access, parking and management. A floating fishing dock may be added to the site, but no swimming will be permitted. It may be desirable to fence the pond to direct and control access. Initial water for the pond would be sourced from nearby landowners and, ideally, it would be maintained through runoff and/or building on a spring-fed site. There is an existing dugout which appeared to be full during the January tour which brings up the possibility of it being spring fed. This would have to be investigated further.

Wetland

The north end of the property appears to have a small wetland already existing. Having a wetland in addition to a fish pond serves several purposes. The edges of the fish pond will be fairly steep and not conducive to bird use. A wetland has shallow edges, a myriad of plant life and waterborne creatures, and supports use by all types of waterfowl. The proposal is to scrape the wetland to a depth of approximately 16-24 inches in the middle and taper to the edges. Ideally, the shape would be a flattened horseshoe with a location for a viewing platform in the middle. Plant life would be added/encouraged to attract and maintain birdlife. The water may be initially sourced from nearby landowners, but investigation can be done which may make it possible to pump some water from the #3 lagoon to the project where it can be filtered by native plants - especially cat tails - and make it an example of sustainable use of waste water. Discussions have already been held with the president of Olds College regarding support from the Environmental Stewardship department. Ducks Unlimited will also be a source of information and support throughout the development of the wetland.

Orienteering Course

Map and compass work is challenging and a great workout when spread out over a large course. The proposed course would cover the entire site and provide students with an exposure

Orienteering Course cont'd

to the use of map and compass, as well as the use of GPS. Construction of the course would involve laying out a master course and placing corresponding markers around the site. Participants would receive one of a number of courses to follow and upon completing their course, they would check their route against the master course. Completing an orienteering course requires concentration, attention to detail, and a certain degree of physical activity.

3D Archery Course

Most schools in Prairie Land compete in the National Archery in the Schools Program. Competing schools often host archery tournaments with many of them having a 3D component. 3D archery involves shooting life-size foam representations of animals from the size of rabbits to elk. A course is proposed which would simulate actual hunting situations where competitors would shoot at targets from a variety of positions and locations. The majority of the targets would be shot in the wooded areas, but there would also be other open ground targets as well. A simulated tree stand in the form of an elevated platform would be built to provide a different vantage point for archers. The targets themselves would be brought out only during competitions and kept stored the rest of the time.

Live Cams

Part of the attraction of the Outdoor Experience Space will be the ability to monitor different parts of the site virtually. Live cameras will be set up in different spots which will be most likely to be visited by wildlife. Proposed locations include the wetland, various locations in the treed areas, and the fishpond. At times it will be possible to put out food sources to attract wildlife, as well as put cameras on nesting sites when accessible.

Walking Trail

The various components and attractions on the site will be connected by a walking trail. This trail will simply be a mowed trail connecting the parking lot (near the fish pond) to the other parts of the site. Signage will be posted in locations where various plants and animals may be found, as well as explanations of various environmental points of interest.

Bonfire Site

A permanent bonfire pit will be built with various benches and seating options available. This site will be utilized for a variety of activities and learning opportunities throughout the year.

Outdoor Learning Space

An area will be created with a variety of seating options, such as moveable benches, tree sections, grassy areas and terraced seating for use in lecture-type lessons. If feasible, an amphitheater-type arrangement will be designated for delivery of lectures and presentations.

Tipi Sites

Two or three tipi frames will be installed on site and left up for the majority of the year. This site will be the anchor for First Nation, Metis and Inuit education classes. Students from around the division will be rotated through the site at various times of the year to build their understanding of first nation teachings and ways of knowing.

Trees, Flowers & Vegetation

Creating a location where wildflowers indigenous to the prairies could be grown would provide an interesting focal point for the site. Flowers - along with native trees, grasses and sedges - could be identified and become part of a specific walking tour. Great care would have to be taken to ensure no noxious weeds or plants are introduced to the area.

Covered Learning Space/Camp Kitchen

A covered learning space with open sides will be built to act as a learning space for use during inclement weather. One end will be designed to support the presenter with a support to hang a whiteboard and/or teaching aids from and the other end will be designed to be used for cooking and food service. The space itself will hold a number of picnic tables for learners to sit at and to be used for meals.

Main Building

The construction of a main building - ideally log or machined log style - would create a year-round learning space for the site. This building would be used to do everything from hosting instructional sessions and meetings to providing a space for artists in residence and would provide year-round use. This would be supported by a sea-can for storage of maintenance equipment, archery targets, fishing gear, compasses, tipi canvases, propane bar-b-ques, etc. This building would also possibly contain lodging space for presenters for artist or author in residence programs, and guest instructors for various courses. This would predicate

Main Building cont'd

the need for power and water to the building. If development was to reach this stage, it would be possible to create a washroom block to support overnight camping activities.

Parking Lot

A graveled area for parking vehicles would have to be created. Depending on the possible locations of the amenities on the site, some rudimentary road construction may have to be done.

Ball Diamonds and Concession

The ball diamonds and concession which currently exist in the southeast corner of the property are currently sitting derelict. Although not part of the outdoor learning space initiative, revitalizing the area may encourage the town to renew their investment in the facility. The division would see the resurrection of the diamonds as something that would help create a full-service educational opportunity for Prairie Land students. Having access to these facilities centrally located in Prairie Land may encourage inter-school competition and connections. Having these sporting facilities available to the residents of Youngstown may rekindle previous events and activities.

Operational Maintenance

Prairie Land Public School Division would accept responsibility for maintenance and upkeep of the site. These responsibilities would include mowing, garbage collection, washrooms, weed control and insurance. If the development of the site intentionally extends into a position of becoming a significant attraction and benefit to Special Areas residents, discussions would have to be held regarding sharing any overlapping upkeep and insurance. If it works out that the site, the developments within and use are the full responsibility of Prairie Land, it would necessitate fencing and gating the property to eliminate unauthorized access. It would be advisable to develop a plan for fire suppression which may include the acquisition of a water trailer and pump to have on hand during camp use.

Funding

There are always grant programs for environmental initiatives. It may take some ongoing research, but partnerships with various colleges and universities would be a great source of support and information throughout the development of the site, as well as in development of programs.

Next Steps...

This proposal - once the Prairie Land board responds to it - will be taken to both Special Areas and Youngstown town council. The information gained from these meetings will dictate the next steps. The best case scenario would see a plan come together which would see movement on the surveying, any required permitting and building a work plan to move forward on.

Questions for Special Areas and Youngstown Town Council

The concept of developing this space along with the activities and development within require some foundational information from Special Areas. It is a project unlike anything undertaken in the Special Areas (to my knowledge) and has the potential to draw attention and recognition to the area and the village. We are unaware of what is and isn't allowed as part of the lease and what types of developments would be possible. If it is desirable to build the site with access for Special Area residents in mind, would it be possible to coordinate and share some of the construction and maintenance for the site? Where does the Special Areas stand on the development of a project which could create a moderate increase on the use of managed infrastructure?