

# Horseshoe Canyon Focus Group Recommendations

To Kneehill County Council (April 20, 2021)

## Mandate

Between November 2020 and February 2021, Kneehill County convened a Focus Group Committee (Committee) *“to assist with and make recommendations to Kneehill County Council on matters relating to Horseshoe Canyon, which will help guide future initiatives through the review of the Horseshoe Canyon Master Plan and its key recommendations as well as supporting documents and data.”*<sup>1</sup>

The Terms of Reference mandated the Committee engage stakeholders’ opinions, develop an understanding of the current situation, and prioritize next steps and future initiatives at the Canyon.<sup>2</sup>

## Process

Over the course of six half-day meetings, Committee members reviewed the Horseshoe Canyon Master Plan (Master Plan) content and held in-depth discussions regarding the future of Horseshoe Canyon.

Throughout the process, Committee members intentionally and systematically considered the contributions of the Master Plan’s strategies to the desired outcomes for the Canyon. Drawing on their areas of expertise and understanding of local context, Committee members developed a nuanced understanding of the strategies. This in-depth understanding of the Master Plan content and the local context shaped the final recommendations.

The recommendations in this document were agreed to by a majority of the Committee. Thank you to the Committee members for the contributions of their time and expertise.

Kneehill County	Community Members	Stakeholders
<b>Administration</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Bowen Clausen<sup>3</sup></li> <li>● Shelby Sherwick</li> </ul> <b>Council</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Faye McGhee</li> <li>● Jerry Wittstock</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dennis Dey</li> <li>● Bob Long</li> <li>● Kim Pliva</li> <li>● Cathy Price</li> <li>● Cathy Prohl</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Darryl Drohomerski</li> <li>● Devan Dekeyser</li> <li>● François Therrien</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> Horseshoe Canyon Focus Group, Terms of Reference.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Shelby Sherwick was Acting Manager after Bowen Clausen departed Kneehill County.

## Overarching Considerations

The Master Plan identifies three aspirational outcomes that will enable the Canyon to become a *“signature must-experience gateway to the Canadian Badlands”* by 2029.<sup>4</sup> Committee discussions extended the Master Plan definitions to produce more context-sensitive descriptions of the key outcomes.

### Positive visitor experience

- By providing infrastructure that supports people’s safety and well-being, the Canyon enables visitors across all life stages to have a memorable visitor experience with the natural Canadian Badlands landscape. Visitors’ personal responses to this immersive experience will vary across a wide range of interests and preferences.
- When encountering this unique landscape, visitors’ perceptions can be either enhanced or hindered through the management and development at the site.

### Economic benefit

- The unique Badlands experience at the Canyon positions it to generate some revenue for the County and its neighbours, but maintaining the Canyon and creating memorable visitor experiences requires resources.
- Returns on Canyon investments encompass tensions between funding and revenues, monetized and non-monetized returns, and impacts that are immediate versus those for future generations.
- Long-term stewardship of the Canyon requires immediate investments to ensure the preservation of its unique spirit of place.

### Responsible management

- Responsible management of Horseshoe Canyon is embodied through a stewardship approach.
- In the context of the Canyon, stewardship involves differentiating the types of development allowed at the Top and Bottom, and minimizing negative impacts of development on the Canyon and its neighbours.
- This recognizes the collective responsibility to preserve the site’s history and ecology for future generations through conservation approaches and visitor management.

The Master Plan strategies outline an interconnecting pathway to achieve the three Canyon outcomes. The strategies’ contributions to the outcomes are in a state of tension and dynamic interplay that is greater than a delicate balance or a hierarchy. In essence, action - or inaction – in one area may cause ripple effects elsewhere. The committee intentionally considered these interactions and impacts, both singly and holistically, when assessing the strategies’ contributions to the outcomes.

Action on the strategies will require the implementation of specific initiatives. While the operational level is beyond the Committee’s scope, throughout the discussions it became clear that the Committee’s expertise could provide valuable guidance for decisions about initiatives.

---

<sup>4</sup> Horseshoe Canyon Master Plan, 2019, p. 10.

**The Committee believes all decisions about initiatives should be assessed using the following questions:**

- **Does the initiative preserve the spirit of place at Horseshoe Canyon?**
- **Does the initiative sustain and protect the natural state of Horseshoe Canyon?**
- **Is the initiative economically and financially feasible and sustainable over time?**<sup>5</sup>

These questions are grounded in the core values identified through Committee discussions, including preserving the natural environment and historical resources for future generations; navigating the tension between preservation and development; managing risk; and taking a broad view of return on investment to include both tangible and intangible benefits. They also align with the aspirational outcomes for Horseshoe Canyon. As a whole, the questions work as filters to ensure the implementation of feasible and sustainable initiatives that maintain the spirit and natural state of the Canyon.

## Recommended Strategies

Recognizing that the specific entry points for action (initiatives) will be determined by Kneehill County Council and Administration, **the Committee identified the strategies they saw as contributing most strongly to the outcomes**, and prioritized three categories of stratagems at Horseshoe Canyon<sup>6</sup>. The items contained within each category (First, Next, Later) are not in priority or timeline order.

Time frames for each category and the specific initiatives that operationalize the strategies are to be determined by Kneehill County Council and Administration, as feasible within the context at the time.

### Strategies to Consider First

- Improve signage and wayfinding throughout the Canyon.
- Develop a compelling brand and logo to use in all aspects of Canyon promotions and operations and sell merchandise on-site.
- Provide washrooms at the top of the Canyon, which also requires the installation of associated utilities.
- Collaborate with NCC and adjacent landowners.
- Implement furnishing, fixtures and amenities, including Wi-Fi, at the top of the Canyon.
- Enhance the day use area.
- Implement parking fees by donation.
- Operate site staffing with onsite ambassadors.
- Actively manage visitors and visitor use of the Canyon.
- Rent temporary hosting spaces for special occasions.
- Establish a voluntary Friends of Horseshoe Canyon group.
- Continue to provide regular and preventative maintenance.

---

<sup>5</sup> Committee members' insights from the meeting notes could inform further work related to benefit cost analysis and financial feasibility of the strategies.

<sup>6</sup> Meeting notes from the six sessions reflect the reasoning for various strategies that arose in committee member discussions, including potential opportunities and constraints.

### Strategies to Consider Next

- Implement paid parking at the Canyon.
- Attract target markets to the Canyon.
- Develop trails around the Canyon rim.
- Ensure trail operations protect the Canyon bottom.
- Encourage private sector opportunities that ensure a reasonable return on investment for the County.
- Collaborate with nearby, regional tourism locations.
- Strengthen the focus on Indigenous relationships and history.

### Strategies to Consider Later, If at All

- Allow a diversity of overnight experiences to be operated by a third party.
- Collaboratively develop a paid parking passport with other sites in the region.
- Create a permanent visitor pavilion and hosting space.
- Enhance access to the bottom for visitors of all abilities.
- Implement furnishings, washrooms, fixtures and amenities at the bottom of the Canyon.
- Provide the necessary utilities at the bottom.

## Further Considerations

The Committee processes were intentionally grounded in evidence-informed, outcome-focused decision making. Building on this strong foundation, Committee members recognized that there are other considerations that could be applied to the categories to further refine decisions about strategies and related initiatives. They offered the following insights to Kneehill County Council and Administration.

Within each category, understanding of the strategies may be further refined as those that:

- Work together to generate complementary benefits or positive externalities.
- Require some manner of experimentation or further research.
- Connect with emerging opportunities in the economy.

Considerations that inform the timing of initiatives may include to what extent the action:

- Enhances maintenance that is already being implemented.
- Enhances existing systems that are in the process of being implemented in the management and operation of the Canyon.
- Generates sufficient revenues to cover the costs of implementation.
- Increases options for grants and funding.
- Provides benefits to the County as a whole.
- Has a high benefit-cost assessment, where benefits are much more than transactional activities (e.g., health benefits).

Continuous evidence-informed decision-making about development at the Canyon is important. Committee members wondered:

- How can research opportunities contribute to a deeper understanding of the Canyon?
  - For example, how can the determinants of a positive visitor experience be better understood?
- How will implementation of initiatives be evaluated?
- How will success be defined? What indicators will be used to track success?