

STRATHCONA COUNTY

COVID-19 RECOVERY TASK FORCE

Progress Report

2020 | November 24

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few months, the three COVID-19 Recovery Task Forces have been adapting and implementing changes that reflect the way Strathcona County can best serve the community in its recovery and resilience efforts. Each group has spent time engaging with community stakeholders and subject matter experts (*see Appendix A*) to identify emerging themes and opportunities for the municipality to support short, medium, and long-term needs of the community. These focused conversations, along with research efforts, have helped to gain a deeper understanding of the impacts of the pandemic.

With this knowledge, several initiatives have been implemented and the Task Forces have identified key themes that require attention. These will guide the development of recommendations for COVID-19 response efforts.

KEY LEARNINGS

The Task Force engagement and research efforts have identified four areas that require attention:

Economic and Financial Stability

- Affordability and financial supports remain the top priorities for residents, community organizations, businesses and the County as the economy and financial stability continue to be impacted. While federal, provincial, and municipal programs have supported many in the short term, the County has heard that financial needs of individuals and businesses continue to rise in relationship to the uncertainty of the pandemic for the medium to long-term.
- The oil and gas sector continues to be impacted with the number of incorporated businesses and employees remaining on a decline.¹
- Stable housing is top of mind as the economic impacts of the pandemic put a spotlight on the need to work collaboratively to provide an inventory of accessible and affordable homes for seniors and other residents of the County.
- The percentage of County businesses that are classified as small (1-49 employees) remains steady at more than 96%.² Their orientation towards the local or regional economy creates less volatility in comparison to the larger oil and gas sectors however, physical distancing requirements have impacted their operations, staffing and increased the need for retention and expansion supports.

Broadband Access

- With an increase in the number of people working and studying from home, the need for equitable broadband access has accelerated. The closure of, and then limited access to, many public buildings that typically offer free Wi-Fi service, as well as the implementation of social distancing measures, have exacerbated this issue. This has impacted many residents' access to supports, as well as small businesses looking to adapt their enterprises to the online environment.

Mental Health

- Some members of the community are struggling with feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and a general sense of foreboding and fear as the pandemic continues. Awareness of available supports and overcoming the stigma of accessing these opportunities continues to be a necessity in the community across demographics. Organizations with a mandate to offer social supports to the community are also experiencing staff and caregiver burnout due to increased demand for these services. Trends indicate that as financial stability and mental health wanes, there is the potential of negative impacts to community safety and well-being for residents, resulting in increased conditions for violence and crime.

Community Connections

- Welcoming new residents, families, professionals, or newcomers to the County continues to be a priority for the community. In 2014, nearly three-quarters of County residents indicated feeling a sense of belonging.³ County residents are also supportive of diversity, with nearly 62% indicating that diversity is either extremely important or important (2019).⁴ Initiatives that attract people to the community and build connections are needed both during and after the pandemic.
- In 2017, a strong percentage of County residents (72%) also indicated being moderately physically active or physically active.⁵ With the onset of winter, the need to encourage and provide services and programs to encourage outdoor activity has become a significant need. County recreation and culture programs, facilities, and outdoor amenities such as parks, trails, and other spaces are key contributors to resident quality of life. As demand for outdoor space grows, management and programming of spaces becomes paramount to ensure public safety. Monitoring visitation trends and ensuring appropriate amenities are in place to encourage physical distancing will be key.

INITIATIVES TO DATE

Several initiatives have been implemented to address COVID-19 impacts.

AREA OF FOCUS	INITIATIVES TO DATE
Economic and Financial Stability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utility and tax deferrals and reduced penalties (March – September) • Advocacy through the Federation of Canadian Municipalities for national utility corridor • Collaboration with Edmonton Global on sector development and economic lead generation • Collaboration with Alberta’s Industrial Heartland Association on new energy and petrochemical investments • Support of Small Business Week through virtual webinars on marketing, finance and online goods and service delivery • Policy adjustment to support business re-openings by allowing patio expansions and changes to occupancy loads • Identifying transportation infrastructure projects for federal stimulus funding (i.e. fleet, sidewalk, trail, and recreation centre improvements). • Creation of new COVID-19 business directory for takeout, curbside pick-up, gift cards etc. • New business relaunch tools and information on available government grants, loans, and financing are available on the municipal website • A list of personal protective equipment suppliers in the County for businesses to access is available on the municipal website • Shop local and support local campaigns initiated in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce in spring 2020 and November/December 2020 • Implementation of Business Success “You Can” videos • Implement homeless estimation study beginning in November 2020 • Enhanced regional relations through formal intermunicipal collaboration initiatives with Fort Saskatchewan, Sturgeon County, Bruderheim and Beaver County • Evaluate affordability and access to recreation and culture facilities • Weekly travel itineraries on social media to drive residents and visitors in supporting local business • Blog which highlights how local businesses have adapted to change • Continued business and industry support via phone, digital tools, or by appointment from a group of economic development professionals
Broadband Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify bookable public space study locations for youth
Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased reach and frequency of awareness campaign to communicate available mental and financial supports for residents • Explored a community safety and wellbeing approach in collaboration with community partners and the RCMP • Initiation of the development of a three-part protocol (Violence Threat Risk Assessment; Traumatic Events System; Suicide Prevention) in order to prevent harm and minimize trauma in the community • Directing current grant funding to support staff wellness and well-being

INITIATIVES TO DATE cont'd

AREA OF FOCUS	INITIATIVES TO DATE
Community Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of community partnerships to implement free and sponsored outdoor winter activities to encourage people to be outside • Addition of Broadmoor Golf Course as a cross-country ski venue • Addition of outdoor leisure ice surfaces • Funding support for individuals and families to take part in community recreation and culture programs • Liaise with community groups to support compliance with Alberta Health Service guidelines • Review of current legislation to enable more outdoor events and activities in a variety of locations • Amendment of meeting procedures bylaw to allow for virtual meeting participation by Council and members of the public • Exploring survey questions to seek additional input from the public

OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE

Over the coming months each Task Force will focus their attention on targeting gaps in, and exploring opportunities to, continue recovery efforts to build long-term resilience strategies that meet the needs of the community. These efforts will focus on:

Business retention, attraction, and expansion opportunities

- Strategies to support existing business and industry sectors and shovel ready development in collaboration with the Alberta’s Industrial Heartland Association (AIHA)
- Continued collaboration with regional business and industry associations on sector development strategies and lead generation to expand community investment opportunities
- Identification and implementation of advocacy opportunities to other orders of government in support of infrastructure projects
- Increasing awareness of local business openings and expansions

- Continue to offer free educational virtual events for business support
- Initiating a review of the Contributions in Aid of Construction (CIAC) policy to support developer investment in the community

Economic diversification opportunities

- Exploring opportunities to collaborate on the advancement of the knowledge and agriculture sectors
- Identifying opportunities to support existing business and industry sectors to foster diversity within and outside of their value chain

Advancing social supports

- Continuing to reduce stigma and normalize support-seeking for all County residents
- Continuing to develop strategic and creative methods to reach vulnerable residents at multiple points in their journeys when they require support

- Continuing to create opportunities for robust community conversations about needs and priorities
- Continuing to explore further opportunities to support staff wellness and well-being
- Recommendation to provide a report on options and possible next steps for developing a Community Safety and Wellbeing strategy
- Developing a three-part violence threat risk assessment, traumatic events, and suicide prevention protocol
- Adapting the Healthy at Home program to include mental and physical well-being activity ideas and resources for caregivers, remote workers, and business owners to strengthen existing supports while addressing overall well-being
- Continuing to meet the communication needs of County residents, such as seniors and youth/young adults

Appropriate and stable housing opportunities

- Continuing to work with housing associations to advance regional affordable housing initiatives
- Developing a community - led approach to affordable housing to address all demographics
- Exploring adjustments to the Bridging the Gap program to consider mortgage supports

Advancing broadband accessibility

- Implementing bookable study space for students in public facilities with Wi-Fi access
- Promote broadband efforts by supporting policy or legislative changes, as required, and advocating with federal and provincial governments
- Consider broadband recommendations coming forward during Budget 2021

Enhancing winter activity opportunities and access

- Continuing to offer free sponsored events and create affordable community events and programming that are accessible to all ages and abilities and meet physical distancing requirements
- Exploring partnerships to provide outdoor activities equipment access (e.g., skates, toboggans, cross-country ski rentals)
- Continuing to update tourism guides and itineraries targeted at specific groups and demographics (e.g., seniors, couples, and families) to encourage residents and visitors to explore the County
- Supporting sporting organization cohorts to continue skill development activities throughout the winter

Policy and legislative review

- Reviewing the County’s policy and legislative framework to identify other bylaws or policies that may require change to facilitate recovery and resilience efforts
- Implementing recommendations from Red Tape Reduction Task Force to improve development permitting processes and supporting technology
- Exploring policy and legislative opportunities to address municipal environmental stewardship implications related to current and emerging public health and safety practices
- Exploring market sounding techniques to invite vendor and supplier services that are innovative, creative and feasible

Regional Cooperation

- Implementing a series of conversations to explore collaborative recovery and resilience opportunities and advocacy initiatives

CONCLUSION

The Task Forces will continue to meet monthly to discuss and prioritize opportunities and craft recommendations for presentation to Council. As recommendations are considered, additional engagement with the community to gain insight and input on specific recovery and resilience initiatives will be identified. Information about these opportunities and updates on the activities of each Task Force can be found at strathcona.ca.

APPENDIX A

Community Stakeholder and Subject Matter Engagement activities to date:

- Social Framework Leadership Table Meeting
- Doug Griffiths Governance Session
- Sherwood Park & District Chamber of Commerce engagement session
- Industrial Operator Engagement Session
- Economic Development & Tourism Advisory Committee (EDTAC) Joint Task Force Meeting
- Residential and Land Developer Engagement Session
- Small and Medium Business Engagement Session

APPENDIX B

References

- ¹ Strathcona County Regional Economic Dashboard. [Strathcona County – Incorporations](#).
- ² Strathcona County Regional Economic Dashboard. [Strathcona County – % Small Businesses](#).
- ³ Strathcona County Regional Dashboard. Strathcona County
- ⁴ See above.
- ⁵ See above.