

STRATHCONA COUNTY

COVID-19 RECOVERY TASK FORCE

Progress Report #2

2021 | February 23

INTRODUCTION

The three Strathcona County (County) COVID-19 Recovery Task Forces have been working towards addressing the key learnings and opportunities identified in the November 24, 2020 Progress Report. The Task Force engagement and research efforts identified four areas that require attention to support community recovery and resilience – *Economic and Financial Stability, Broadband Access, Mental Health, and Community Connections*. Each group has invested time to review these areas and the associated emerging opportunities and, identify actions that will support the short, medium, and long-term needs of the community. The Task Forces also benefitted from the implementation of additional engagement intended to monitor current trends and reveal further needs and supports (*see Appendix A*). Their efforts over the past four months have resulted in initiatives focused on:

- business retention, attraction, and expansion,
- housing,
- broadband access,
- social supports,
- outdoor activities and access,
- policy and legislation, and
- regional cooperation.

The following provides an overview of the ongoing work of the Task Forces and highlights where efforts will be focused going forward.

KEY INITIATIVES: November 2020 – February 2021

Economic and Financial Stability

Affordability and financial supports continue to be a focus for residents, community organizations, businesses, and the County. Since November 2020, the Task Forces have given their attention to addressing gaps and implementing initiatives that further support economic and financial stability efforts.

OPPORTUNITY	INITIATIVES
<p>Business retention, attraction, and expansion opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approval of the Industrial Heartland Incentive Tax Exemption Bylaw to attract more industrial projects to Alberta’s Industrial Heartland • Continued collaboration with developers to explore opportunities for attracting residents to Strathcona County • Continued delivery of seminars and training for small businesses • Continued review of tourism opportunities and linkages • Developed business relaunch tools, social media, and partnership video with Strathcona Industrial Association (SIA) • Developed and implemented the shop local campaign, including tips to support local businesses throughout the holidays and updating the small business directory • Delivered over 25 itinerary posts to support people to plan weekends and partake in local and safe activities
<p>Appropriate and stable housing opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In partnership with Heartland Housing Foundation and Social Framework Leadership Table, participated in the Alberta Rural Development Network Fall Estimations Project and completed the County’s first affordable housing estimate • Continued to review the Bridging the Gap program to support county residents in context of the pandemic • Utilized a Community COVID-19 grant from the Government of Alberta and Family and Community Support Services of Alberta to create a food gifts cards program, of which \$9375 in food gift cards supported 40 households facing food insecurity during the pandemic • Provided \$21,768 in grant funded utilities support through the community care program to 44 household

The Task Forces will continue to explore additional opportunities that support businesses and industries. They will also explore ways to address affordable housing options. This includes:

Business retention, attraction, and expansion opportunities

- continuing the interdepartmental review of the Contributions in Aid of Construction (CIAC) policy to support developer investment in the community,
- working on options to develop video vignettes to showcase services offered by the County as well as to assist businesses in navigating County services,
- investigating and planning for potential Triage Business Retention and Expansion Program, and
- continuing to develop workshops to support local businesses on topics such as subsidies, procurement, and financial literacy.

Economic diversification opportunities

- exploring options for a diversification review and digital foreign direct investment strategy, and
- working with large industrial proponents in the County to investigate available programs and gaps.

Appropriate and stable housing opportunities

- working with community partners to address recommendations in the Housing Needs and Demand Assessment Report and to develop a community-led approach to affordable housing.

Broadband Access

The return of students learning from home and implementation of further restrictions on gatherings and businesses amplified the need for equitable access to broadband and wireless services. The Task Forces have been exploring ways to support community access and, with Council’s recent approval to develop a Broadband Strategy, additional opportunities to advance implementation.

OPPORTUNITY	INITIATIVES
Advancing broadband accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implemented bookable study space and wi-fi access for students in public facilities • Continued interdepartmental planning for implementing the County Broadband initiative

Looking forward, the Task Forces will focus efforts on assessing possible solutions to encourage investment in infrastructure that will support access to broadband and wireless technologies, as well as enhance the County’s access in both the rural and urban areas.

Mental Health

As the pandemic stretches to the one-year mark, the mental health strain continues to be felt by members of the community and organizations that deliver support services. Over the past four months, the Task Forces have focused on increasing the reach and frequency of awareness campaigns to communicate available mental and financial supports, initiated several activities to support vulnerable residents and, explored enhancing community safety efforts.

OPPORTUNITY	INITIATIVES
<p>Advancing social supports</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Released video vignettes aimed at reducing stigma and normalizing support-seeking, reaching over 289,000 people using various social media platforms • Connected with Sherwood Park banks to provide information for social supports available to staff and community members • Increased signage throughout the community promoting social supports available • Continued supporting conversations with community groups and organizations to assess needs in the community • Allocated Community Change Grant funding to three community organizations to support social sector staff development and mitigate staff and caregiver burnout due to the pandemic • Delivered Traumatic Events Systems Training to approximately 120 County staff and Council, as well as representatives from 20 different community organizations • Continued work on the Three-part (Violence-Threat-Risk Assessment/Traumatic Events System/Suicide Prevention) Protocol to increase safety in the community • Applied for the Early Learning and Child Care (ELLC) Innovation Grant to address emerging needs and preparedness activities in the early learning and care sector • Continued communication of Healthy at Home program to caregivers, remote workers, and business owners to strengthen existing supports while addressing overall well-being, as well as linking events (e.g., Winter Freeze Fest) to the program • Continued collaboration with regional mayors on COVID-19 response and recovery efforts and communications

Supporting mental health and community safety remain a priority. Going forward, the Task Forces will direct efforts toward developing strategic and creative methods that assist residents. They will advance social supports by:

- developing a second series of awareness and communications vignettes to be released in 2021,
- preparing a report on options for developing a Community Safety and Wellbeing Strategy, including engaging with the Social Framework Leadership Table and the Drug Strategy workshop, and
- reviewing options to make Traumatic Events System training and Violence Threat Risk Assessment training more available to community members and County staff.

Community Connections

Considerable efforts have been made to provide community recreation and culture opportunities that align with gathering restrictions. With fluctuations in available facilities and programming, adaptations and new opportunities were implemented to help the community stay active and connected.

OPPORTUNITY	INITIATIVES
<p>Enhancing winter activity opportunities and access</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hosted the Winter Freeze Festival in December, with Celebration of Lights, sing-alongs, Santa convoy, free snowshoe rentals, and guided walks in both urban and rural Strathcona County • Hosted Family Day Activities • Maximized outdoor activities that foster inclusiveness and accessibility, while adhering to provincial guidelines to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Encouraging the community to try different winter activities by arranging access to equipment like snowshoes and cross-country skis o In collaboration with regional partners and other municipalities, launched education videos to encourage outside play on how to use outdoor equipment o Completed multiple floods on all outdoor rinks and skating pathways o Staggered the opening of outdoor rinks to meet demand and provide physical distancing o Limited number of people allowed at each site and developed an online dashboard to support residents in choosing available sites o Added more skating pathways in the community, allowing more people access o Added team training programs at the Strathcona Wilderness Centre in early winter, adhering to AHS guidelines o Added Broadmoor Public Golf Course for cross-country skiing and cleared more trails for walking • Collaborated with schools to support the Mayors Walk-Run • Adapted the Everybody Gets to Play initiative based on restrictions and encouraged outdoor activity options (e.g., snowshoes, cross-country skis, etc.) • Launched virtual programming for indoor recreation classes, with a particular focus on seniors • Delivered Home Activity Kits via social navigators • Developed a staged approach to return to individual training at designated facilities, in adherence to health guidelines • Improved RecOnline booking based on user feedback to best support community groups • Launched a blended family discount rate pricing to benefit families when activities are reopened

For the remainder of winter and into the spring, the Task Force will seek opportunities to support community organizations and offer accessible and safe community events and amenities.

Additional Efforts

The Task Forces have also been exploring policy, legislative, regional cooperation and communications efforts to facilitate the County’s recovery and resilience work. Going forward, these efforts will focus on:

Policy and legislative review

- conducting a regional and provincial scan to explore measures taken in other municipalities related to governance and recovery, including legislative and policy changes,
- exploring options for solutions-based procurement and social procurement, and
- supporting opportunities identified by the Red Tape Reduction Task Force.

Regional cooperation

- continuing to build advocacy efforts to support the needs of County residents at regional tables, and
- assessing options for regional conversations to share learnings in response to COVID 19.

Communications

- developing a report on the potential to create a Communications Framework that addresses the learnings from the pandemic, shares the County’s recovery and resilience work, and promotes the County as an attractive place, the live, work and play.

CONCLUSION

The Task Forces will use the results of the engagement and additional research to identify ways to address and support community recovery and resiliency efforts. They will continue to support initiatives and deliver recommendations to Council for their consideration and approval. 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 (November 2020 – February 2021):

- Agricultural Business Engagement Session
- Annual Summit: Accessibility, Community Living, Seniors and Youth Advisory Committees
- Strathcona County 2020 COVID Survey