

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
Business retention, attraction, and expansion opportunities	<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 • Initiated the Support Local campaign and launched ads before Christmas and in January. The campaign will run until the end of April • Delivered over 25 itinerary posts to support people to plan weekends and partake in local and safe activities
Appropriate and stable housing opportunities	<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 • Created a COVID Food Gift Cards program through which \$13,075 in food gift cards supported 55 families facing food insecurity during the pandemic • Provided \$22,768 in support to 46 families from the Community Cares Grant for utilities and essential expenses that are not funded by other programs

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,
- continuing to develop workshops to support local businesses on topics such as subsidies, procurement, and financial literacy, and
- working on prioritizing the Tourism Strategy Implementation Plan actions.

Economic diversification opportunities

- exploring options for a diversification review and 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 the implementation of further restrictions on gatherings and businesses amplified the need for equitable access to broadband and wireless services. Stakeholder engagement also highlighted a significant need in the business community. The Task Forces have recognized this important issue and the need to support broadband and wireless access. With Council's recent approval to develop a Broadband Strategy, Task Forces are exploring 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. Additional stakeholder engagement will be a key component of this work to ensure that the County has the technology infrastructure in place to support online commerce and learning.

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
Advancing social supports	<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 and mortgage brokers to provide information about programs and resources available to support 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 two 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 and work better through traumatic events Applied for an Early Learning and Child Care (ELLC) Innovation Grant to address emerging needs and preparedness activities in the early learning and care sector and to support building resilience during the pandemic 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 Continued collaboration with regional partners on an upcoming mental health campaign to normalize mental health conversations, reduce stigma, and strengthen coping skills Emergency Social Services placed a full page ad in the 2021 Chamber Connection Directory about FCS services available to support individuals, including those in the business community, who have been impacted by COVID-19.

Supporting mental health and community safety remain a priority. Going forward, the Task Forces will direct efforts toward developing strategic, evidence-based, 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, in partnership with the RCMP, 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
Enhancing winter activity opportunities and access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hosted the Winter Freeze Festival in December, with Celebration of Lights, sing-alongs, Santa convoy, free snowshoe rentals, at home activities, 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, launched education videos to encourage safe outside play, while following provincial restrictions 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 the 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 • Developed Home Activity Kits as a resource for Social Navigators to use as needed • Developed a staged approach to reopening as many programs and activities as possible, given the most current Alberta Health guidelines • Improved RecOnline booking based on user feedback to best support safety and the needs of the community • Launched a blended family discount rate pricing to better support affordability

For the remainder of winter and into the spring, the Task Forces 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, in alignment with Council's Strategic Plan, to address the learnings from the pandemic, communicate the County's ongoing recovery, and promote the services and opportunities available to residents and businesses.

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