

STRATHCONA COUNTY

COVID-19 RECOVERY TASK FORCE

Final Report

2021 | April 27

INTRODUCTION

In May 2020, Strathcona County (County) established three Task Forces to guide the community's short, medium, and long-term COVID-19 pandemic recovery and resilience efforts.

Over the past 12 months, the Economic Resilience and Vision, Citizen and Community Supports and Recovery Governance Task Forces collaborated to guide policy, program and service adaptation that would best support the community during these unprecedented times.

DEMONSTRATING LEADERSHIP

Governance

Governance of the County has continued without interruption throughout the pandemic. All Council meetings have proceeded without any being cancelled and technology was quickly implemented to provide an online option for members of the public to attend Council, committee, and appeal tribunal meetings. Furthermore, the procedure implemented for public hearings is considered best practice offering options for virtual, telephone and safe in-person attendance. To date, the County has passed more than 50 motions related to pandemic recovery and resilience, either during a Council meeting or at the Emergency Advisory Committee. This includes the establishment of the three COVID-19 Recovery Task Forces. Subsequently, the Task Forces have supported the County's governance efforts during the pandemic by bringing forth several recommendations to Council.

Transparency

An emphasis on openness and ongoing communication about recovery and resilience work was a key focus of each Task Force. All Task Force meetings were public, and efforts were made to engage the public and subject matter experts to guide Task Force direction. Regular updates on restrictions and service implications, as well as available program supports and service options were shared through various County communication channels. Information on Task Force initiatives was communicated through the County's website, social media channels, and presented to Council.

Community Supports

Through the Task Forces' efforts, the County went beyond their focus on essential services and responding to the public health restrictions. Each Task Force looked for ways to enhance community connections and business and social supports. They engaged with community partners, residents, and businesses in the early months of the pandemic to identify key issues ([see Appendix 1](#)). These focused conversations, along with research efforts, helped them gain a deeper understanding of the impacts of the pandemic and identify four areas that required support: Economic and Financial Stability; Broadband Access; Mental Health; and Community Connections.

Information gathering, analysis and subject matter expertise, informed the development of Task Force recommendations that focused on:

- community safety and well-being;
- business retention, attraction, and expansion;
- housing;
- broadband access;
- social supports;
- outdoor activities and access;
- communications;
- policy and legislation; and
- regional cooperation.

The following provides a summary of initiatives undertaken over the past 12 months and highlights where efforts will continue to be made.

Economic and Financial Supports

At the one-year mark of the pandemic, economic and financial supports continue to be a top priority for residents, community organizations, businesses, and the County. While federal and provincial programs supported many in the short-term, the Task Forces heard that stability remains a concern.

Several initiatives were implemented over this past year to address economic and financial stability, including:

Business retention, attraction, and expansion

- local businesses support and attraction through virtual webinars, relaunch tools, business directories, You Can campaign, and shop local campaigns;
- policy adjustments to support business re-openings, invest in new energy and petrochemical opportunities with Alberta's Industrial Heartland Association, and establish the Industrial Heartland Incentive Tax Exemption Bylaw;
- collaboration with regional partners on sector development, economic lead generation, infrastructure projects for federal stimulus funding, and intermunicipal collaboration initiatives with Fort Saskatchewan, Sturgeon County, Bruderheim and Beaver County; and
- people attraction through implementation of the County's Tourism Strategy, working with land developers, and creating weekend activity itineraries to encourage stimulation of the economy.



Social supports and appropriate and stable housing opportunities

- utility and tax deferrals and reduced penalties;
- partnership with the Heartland Housing Foundation and members of the Social Framework Leadership Table to participate in the Alberta Rural Development Network Fall Estimations Project and completion of the County's first affordable housing estimate;
- review of market affordability in the County and opportunities to support housing needs;
- implementation of the Community COVID-19 grant from the Government of Alberta and Family and Community Support Services of Alberta to create a food gift card program that supported 89 households facing food insecurity during the pandemic; and
- continued operation of the Community Cares Program to provide assistance to 56 families requiring financial support during the pandemic to meet essential needs that are not covered by other public programs.

NEXT STEPS

Based on the work of the Task Forces, the County will continue to focus on economic and financial stability by:

- finalizing the review of the Contributions in Aid of Construction (CIAC) policy to support developer investment in the community;
- implementing the Triage Business Retention and Expansion Program;
- exploring options for an economic diversification review and ongoing implementation of the foreign direct investment strategy;
- working with large industrial proponents within the County to investigate available economic diversification programs and gaps;
- continuing to work with community partners to address recommendations in the Housing Needs and Demand Assessment Report and to develop a community-led approach to affordable housing; and
- continuing to explore alternative funding options with community partners to support the Community Cares program.

Broadband Access

Over the last year, the Task Forces heard from businesses and residents about the need for equitable access to broadband and wireless services in both the rural and urban areas of the community.

The Task Forces identified and championed initiatives to support and advance access through:

- the implementation of bookable study space and wi-fi access for students in public facilities;
- the Community Broadband Project; and
- assessing possible solutions to encourage investment in infrastructure that will support access to broadband and wireless technologies.

NEXT STEPS

Going forward, the County will leverage the Task Force efforts through implementation of the Community Broadband Project and consideration for the service and access needs of residents and, the commercial and industrial sectors.

Mental Health

Mental health and community safety has been at the forefront of the Task Forces' work. Members of the community continue to struggle with isolation and other challenges, requiring access to supports. Community organizations providing supports are also experiencing elevated demands for services. The Task Forces recognized an increased need for supports and that an effective response would positively impact community safety and well-being, now and into the future. They sought out strategic and creative ways to assist residents, including:

- enhancing awareness of available supports and overcoming the stigma of accessing these opportunities through communications vignettes, mental health messaging in social media, and increased signage throughout the community;
- delivering Traumatic Events Systems Training and Violence Threat Risk Assessment Training for County staff and members of local community organizations;
- addressing safety in the community through the Three-part (Violence-Threat-Risk Assessment/Traumatic Events System/Suicide Prevention) Protocol, and identifying options for the development of a Community Safety and Well-being Strategy;
- directing Community Change Grant funding to support initiatives focused on promoting social sector staff development and well-being;
- applying for the Early Learning and Child Care Innovation Grant in order to respond to needs of caregivers; and
- developing a community-led youth strategy for Strathcona County.

NEXT STEPS

The County will continue efforts made by the Task Forces to support mental health, well-being, and community safety, and the organizations and partners that deliver support services, by:

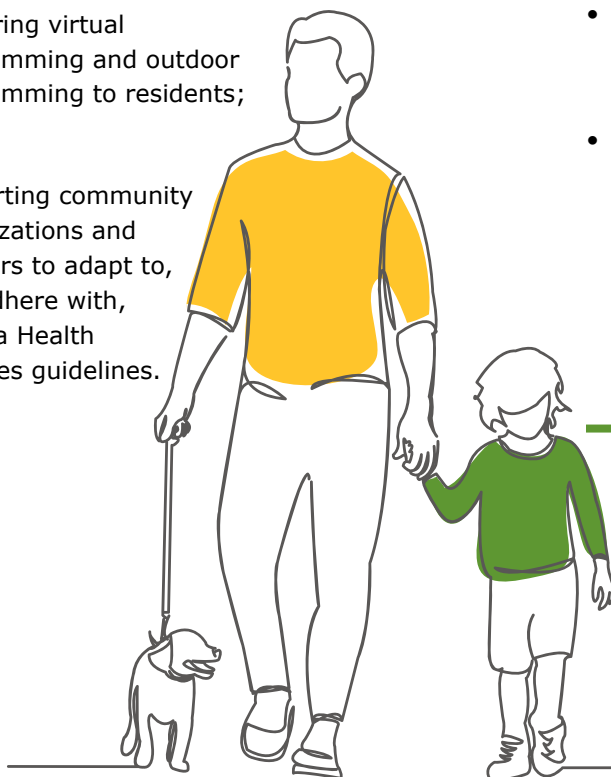
- continuing to implement the County's Diversity and Inclusion Policy to support safety, connectedness, and inclusion for all County residents;
- developing options for building a Community Safety and Well-Being Strategy, in collaboration with community leaders;
- continuing to offer Traumatic Events System Training and Violence Threat Risk Assessment Training to community members and County staff;
- continuing work to implement the Tri-Protocol focused on safety in the community and an effective response to traumatic events;
- ensuring access to supports, as well as destigmatizing support-seeking, by developing and delivering additional vignettes that depict stories of community, youth, small business owners, seniors, new moms, and families; and
- creating a regional Mental Health Campaign aimed to increase mental health literacy, identify practical tools and strategies for sustained well-being, and provide the community with an understanding of how to support one another and available resources.

Community Connections

The pandemic has caused a significant shift in the everyday lives of County residents. The Task Forces recognized the need to promote a sense of community and connection through recreation and cultural programs.

Efforts to adapt programming and provide new opportunities to help the community stay active and connected, included:

- supporting or hosting a series of events in alignment with gathering restrictions, such as Winter Freeze Festival, Family Day, Active School Challenge, Mayors Walk Run, virtual Arbor Day, modified summer events, and Seniors Wellness Day;
- increasing the availability of inclusive outdoor winter activities with access to equipment and adding more locations for skating, walking, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing;
- creating and distributing ChooseWell kits containing materials and information to support recreation and mental health, as well as reduce barriers to recreate;
- delivering virtual programming and outdoor programming to residents; and
- supporting community organizations and partners to adapt to, and adhere with, Alberta Health Services guidelines.



NEXT STEPS

The County will maintain the Task Force's focus on community connection by:

- supporting provincial reopening protocols for County facilities and building a capacity map for when spontaneous use is allowed;
- developing further outdoor programming plans for spring and summer;
- evaluating 2020/21 winter activities to incorporate into future programming opportunities; and
- developing a virtual program plan that adapts in-person programming to the virtual environment.



Additional Efforts

In the first quarter of 2021, the Task Forces identified the need for a regional and provincial scan to explore the measures taken in other municipalities related to pandemic governance and recovery, including legislative and policy changes. This aided in identifying best practices and lessons learned over the last year.

NEXT STEPS

The County will follow the guidance offered through the Task Forces and continue to explore governance, policy, legislation, regional cooperation, and communications efforts that support recovery and resilience efforts, including:

- retaining technological capabilities for virtual Council and committee meetings to support inclusive participation and transparency;
- exploring approaches to support voter participation in the 2021 Municipal Election;
- adopting Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) to modernize County processes;
- integrating regional sessions on pandemic recovery initiatives with the Councillor orientation program, following the 2021 Municipal Election;
- connecting with regional municipalities to explore ideas for collaboration and/or knowledge sharing on pandemic recovery and resilience, including approaches to a Community Safety and Well-being Strategy;
- continuing to communicate the County's ongoing recovery work and promote available programs and services;
- identifying opportunities to engage the public in the annual budget process and ways to advance virtual engagement; and
- developing a Communications Framework that addresses learnings from the pandemic and enhances the resilience of the community through business and people attraction opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The work done by the Task Forces has set the course for the County's ongoing recovery and resilience work. Best practices and the exploration of opportunities to foster economic and financial stability, citizen and community supports and recovery governance efforts will continue to be brought forward for Council consideration. For more information about the Task Forces and the County's continued recovery and resilience efforts please visit strathcona.ca.

APPENDIX A

Community Stakeholder and Subject Matter Engagement activities:

- Social Framework Leadership Table Meeting
- 13 Ways Inc Governance Session (with Doug Griffiths)
- 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
- Agricultural Business Engagement Session
- Annual Summit: Accessibility, Community Living, Seniors and Youth Advisory Committees
- Strathcona County 2020 COVID Survey

