

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL-SCALE COMMUNITY AMENITIES, RECREATION AND LEISURE SPOTS DOWNTOWN

RECOMMENDATION

That the October 11, 2022, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE00948, be received for information.

Requested Council Action	Information Only		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work as we work to achieve our strategic goals.	Urban Places		
City Plan Values	BELONG + LIVE		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	A Community of Communities	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Community Safety and Well-Being 15-Minute Districts
Corporate Business Plan	Transforming for the Future		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Downtown Public Places Plan • Downtown Vibrancy Strategy • Breathe Edmonton's Green Network Strategy • Bylaw 16521 - Capital City Downtown Community Revitalization Levy • Bylaw 15800 - The Quarters Downtown Community Revitalization Levy • Neighbourhood Renewal / Alley Renewal • The Chinatown Strategy: Energizing a Prosperous Future • Downtown Core and Transit Safety Plan 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UPE00565, Urban Planning Committee, June 15, 2021 • UPE00228, Urban Planning Committee, August 23, 2022 • UPE01333, Urban Planning Committee, Q4, 2023 		

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Previous Council/Committee Action

At the November 30/December 1/8/10/14/15/17, 2021 City Council meeting, the following motion passed:

That Administration work with the Downtown Edmonton Community League, the Chinatown and Area Business Association and the Downtown Business Association, to identify opportunities for small-scale community amenities, recreation and leisure spots downtown, and return to Committee with a report outlining proposed amenities and associated funding requirements.

Executive Summary

- The City Plan provides the direction to preserve and strengthen the role of Centre City as Edmonton's principal employment and residential node, regional economic and urban mobility hub, traditional meeting place and celebration space.
- Existing area plans provide specific directions to create public spaces that enable a wide variety of recreation activities and address existing gaps.
- A number of planned infrastructure improvements and new investments are underway.
- While there are not significant gaps, there is potential for the creation of spaces for wellness for Edmontonians downtown.
- Administration has outlined a pilot project to support and leverage existing opportunities in the short-term.
- Administration engaged with Business Improvement Areas and community groups to discuss opportunities and support required.

REPORT

Small, community amenity spaces are important strategic investments in Edmonton's downtown. These spaces provide an opportunity for recreational activities to occur, ranging from social (passive) recreation to more structured physical activities including sports and organized recreation. They also provide opportunities for community wellness and connection. This is described in The City Plan as "physical, social, intellectual, creative and spiritual pursuits that enhance personal and community wellbeing," and they form a key function of wellness. Providing space for these wellness activities benefits public health and social services, but also supports numerous other important community factors, including vibrancy, safety, liveability and economic benefits.

Small-scale recreation amenity spaces improve the overall wellness of downtown residents. Improving access to wellness activities in the downtown area supports a stronger, more resilient downtown community. The densification envisioned for downtown requires an urban approach to spaces that enable wellness activities that can be smaller, more creative, and respond to a more urban lifestyle choice. Investing in a more well-rounded community can attract more people to live downtown and contributes to the overall revitalization of the downtown area. In

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL-SCALE COMMUNITY AMENITIES, RECREATION AND LEISURE SPOTS DOWNTOWN

addition, providing more amenities to support existing residents enables downtown to be a more viable option for families to remain, and seniors to age-in-place.

Many City policies and guidelines currently seek to respond to existing gaps in recreation and wellness provisions in the downtown area. The implementation of these policies is having the desired result, however, there are also many opportunities that could be leveraged to make improvements in this area.

Current Approach

There are numerous public and private activities and amenities downtown aimed at improving public life and attracting people to the area, as detailed in the Downtown Vibrancy Strategy and the Downtown Core and Transit System Safety Plan. Many of these activities contain a small-scale amenity or recreation component, even if it is not their main focus.

While social recreation activities in the downtown area are commonplace, there are fewer opportunities for organized physical recreation and unstructured play. This includes activities that require a large amount of space, such as team or field sports. Urban centres typically provide limited opportunities for large, single purpose recreation spaces that may be found in suburban areas, and focus instead on small and medium-scale activities to suit a more urban location. These can include outdoor court-style spaces, wayfinding to promote running or cycling routes and indoor or outdoor exercise equipment.

Amenity spaces with a focus on physical recreation are typically provided by private businesses, residences and organizations in the downtown area. Public spaces including parks, streets and civic buildings, while not exclusively designed for recreation, function as publicly-accessible recreation spaces. The downtown area currently has 46 parks and open spaces, as well as a network of pedestrian priority streets. These spaces enable a variety of informal recreation activities to occur, as well as programmed activities, such as farmers' markets, small festivals, or seasonal community gatherings, all which contribute to the wellness of urban residents and visitors.

Placemaking activities and other temporary improvements enable existing public spaces to function as recreation spaces. Placemaking is a multi-faceted approach to the planning, design and management of public spaces. Placemaking capitalizes on a local community's assets, inspiration, and potential, with the intention of creating public spaces that promote people's health, happiness and well-being. Placemaking activities downtown include programming such as exercise classes or equipment for self-directed recreation. These activities are currently provided in key downtown locations by the Edmonton Arts Council, the Downtown Business Association of Edmonton and many other small organizations and businesses.

Neighbourhood and arterial renewal and other City-driven infrastructure improvements provide opportunities to improve public space during the design process. Enhancements as part of this process often bring these spaces up to current standards, or to an improved level of finish such as complying with the Downtown and The Quarters Downtown Streetscape Design Manual. Engagement with the community during the project planning phases and using their input provides a specialized lens toward what improvements can be made to most effectively improve

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL-SCALE COMMUNITY AMENITIES, RECREATION AND LEISURE SPOTS DOWNTOWN

the community to meet their needs. A current example of this is the ongoing design of Warehouse Park, which is envisioned as a green public space to serve the downtown community. While this park does not have a specific recreation focus, its design will enable a broad spectrum of wellness activities. These include quiet spaces for passive activities to occur, spaces to participate in social wellness (such as a park pavilion and playground), and more structured spaces such as a hard-surfaced sports area. Warehouse Park is in the concept phase, with design work to be completed in 2023 and construction planned for 2024. The park is scheduled to open to the public later in 2025. Further public engagement is taking place this autumn.

Existing Plan Direction

A wide variety of existing plans and policies provide direction to improve access to wellness activities. The City Plan directs numerous outcomes, intentions and directions that support wellness, particularly in public spaces. As Edmonton densifies, equitable access to recreation spaces and an active transportation network will become increasingly important. Through existing plans and policies, many improvements have been made, or are planned, which seek to address any current and growth gaps in access to traditional recreation amenities.

Breathe: Edmonton's Green Network Strategy, provides direction to create public recreation spaces under the function of wellness. Both spaces for wellness, and a network of these connected spaces that support the wellness function, “promotes healthy living and fosters wellbeing through diverse kinds of recreation, mobility and environments.”

The Downtown Public Places Plan was developed in June 2020 to address the provision of open space in Edmonton’s downtown. It provides an analysis of the existing open space network (including streets), and direction on how public places should be acquired, designed, programmed, and managed to support a vibrant, sustainable, well-designed and accessible downtown. The Downtown Public Places Plan contains specific recommendations for improving wellness in the downtown area, such as expanding opportunities for nature and unstructured recreation, providing spaces for passive leisure activities, and collaboration with organizations to develop outdoor spaces to complement existing indoor facilities.

Most recently, the Downtown Vibrancy Strategy was finalized in June 2021 in response to the pandemic’s impact on downtown. It contains 20 actions which provide funding to short-term placemaking initiatives. Of these 20 actions, seven have the potential to physically improve access to urban wellness activities. The program’s total budget was \$5 million for the current intake and is allocated to businesses and organizations through individual grants.

Stakeholder Engagement

Based on stakeholder engagement and feedback with the Downtown Business Association of Edmonton, the Downtown Edmonton Community League, the Chinatown and Area Business Association, and the Chinatown Transformation Collaborative Society, broad themes for small-scale community amenities, recreation and leisure spots downtown emerged:

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL-SCALE COMMUNITY AMENITIES, RECREATION AND LEISURE SPOTS DOWNTOWN

1. Placemaking and short-term initiatives - including community programming (temporary or permanent). This approach supports community initiatives and could have a high short-term impact.

2. Dedicated public spaces - acquiring and adding to the inventory of permanent amenities which can provide greater recreation focus, and be located where there is greatest community need.

3. Supports for private spaces - supporting indoor and/or private amenities. This may include spaces for indoor activity, particularly in winter. However, this option may not achieve other desired benefits such as vibrancy and public safety.

Additional details of these approaches including examples and estimated funding requirements are shown in Attachment 1.

Opportunities for Small-Scale Amenities

The current approach to providing amenity space generally seeks to address any existing and planned gaps in the provision of recreation spaces and thereby improve the overall wellness of Edmontonians.

While there are not significant gaps, there remains potential for the creation of spaces for wellness for Edmontonians downtown. Many of the most successful spaces for wellness in the downtown support more than just wellness. These are often multipurpose spaces with another focus, such as spaces designed to travel through, to live, work, shop and play. A broad range of existing City spaces in the downtown contribute greatly to wellness, from Churchill Square to the downtown bike network.

Administration is proposing a pilot project to further opportunities for small-scale community amenities and leisure spots downtown.

Pilot for Up to Four Small Court-Style Activities

To enhance existing downtown amenities, a pilot project could be implemented in 2023 to create additional downtown amenity spaces. The pilot project would both provide immediate short-term wellness improvements and also create vibrant small social spaces in currently underutilized lots. This project would enable testing of future short-term small-scale improvements as an ongoing implementation action.

Administration proposes to develop up to four small court-style activities (such as basketball) located in currently undeveloped locations. Paint and signage could be used to encourage other informal activities, including exercise, art classes and children's games. This would include social wellness such as spaces to sit, as well as planters and colour for mental wellness and to beautify downtown. This aligns with other work, including the Downtown Vibrancy Strategy. The locations would be determined based primarily on:

- Proximity to other amenities and accessibility;
- Cost to implement and maintain; and

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL-SCALE COMMUNITY AMENITIES, RECREATION AND LEISURE SPOTS DOWNTOWN

- Current site conditions.

Each location would include at a minimum, coloured asphalt, one basketball hoop, painted lines, benches, planters and a drinking fountain. The overall cost of the one-time pilot project is estimated at \$400,000. Analysis for ongoing maintenance costs, additional resources to sustain the new inventory, as well as operational impacts, will be completed for each location.

Budget/Financial Implications

The pilot would be developed with a budget of \$400,000, for which new/additional budget and identified funding source would be required.

No dedicated budget exists specifically to support small-scale community wellness amenities in the downtown area, but some programs exist where it might be possible to add another lens to consider amenity or wellness opportunities. This could apply to programs such as the Green and Walkable catalyst project, the Downtown Vibrancy Fund, streetscape and road improvements or through development policies where community contributions or better urban design is sought to ensure an active public realm.

COMMUNITY INSIGHT

In development of the proposed approach, Administration engaged with the following stakeholders: Downtown Business Association of Edmonton, Downtown Edmonton Community League, Chinatown and Area Business Association, and the Chinatown Transformation Collaborative Society. These four groups were contacted directly, and Administration would continue to engage with them on this subject based on any subsequent Council direction, as they are stakeholders that Administration has ongoing relationships with. Additional stakeholder groups would also be engaged throughout the implementation of any wellness improvements, including special interest groups and downtown residents. Further engagement may be necessary should any improvements be brought forward, dependent on the function and location of the improvement.

Some high level themes heard during engagement included:

- Urban areas are different, and need to respond to a wider variety of needs
- Prioritize amenities where there is already activity and where people want to be
- Great design and programming are needed to activate these spaces
- The need for seniors' communities and activities for seniors in the area, as well as activities for families with young children
- There is potential to improve availability and access to recreation spaces as private and public developments occur
- Identify temporary improvements that can be activated in the short-term

The Downtown Edmonton Community League (DECL) provided the results of a recent needs assessment survey. The survey highlighted gaps in community amenities for downtown residents. Amenities that residents felt were missing were those that prioritized social and passive recreation (wellness) activities, including spaces to socialize, people-watch and shop. Residents indicated that in order to attend traditional large-scale recreation facilities, they need to travel

OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL-SCALE COMMUNITY AMENITIES, RECREATION AND LEISURE SPOTS DOWNTOWN

outside of the downtown area. Lack of community recreation spaces is seen as a barrier to living downtown, particularly for families and seniors.

Historically, DECL organized popular community recreational activities, which were suspended due to the pandemic. Spaces that were utilized included indoor and outdoor public spaces, as well as larger open spaces in neighbouring Rosedale and Louise McKinney Riverfront Park on Grierson Hill.

The Downtown Business Association of Edmonton (DBA) provided many examples of businesses and community organizations seeking to improve recreational amenities in the downtown area. The DBA also currently delivers programming and temporary placemaking improvements, such as the upcoming improvements to Michael Phair Park on Jasper Avenue and 104 Street.

The Chinatown and Area Business Association and the Chinatown Transformation Collaborative Society of Edmonton provided personalized initial feedback. Many community groups and cultural organizations currently provide indoor recreational activities for the local community, and could benefit from new/improved safe outdoor spaces or performance areas.

GBA+

Recreation and wellness spaces provide an opportunity to apply a broad GBA+ lens, and should consider a wide variety of user needs. While traditional recreation facilities may focus on access to physical wellness, GBA+ analysis may identify gaps in wellness activities which support the diverse needs of all users. For example, preferences for spaces that provide organized sports and active recreation opportunities versus intimate gathering areas can differ between teenage boys and girls due to a variety of reasons. Specific application of this lens may require a shift in focus from traditional sports spaces, to spaces for more informal recreation for all demographics, particularly women, girls and gender minorities.

Administration will continue to explore how the GBA+ process could be further incorporated into future wellness downtown improvements through the implementation plan and needs assessment. Specific GBA+ design requirements would be determined at the implementation stage, dependent on the function and location of the improvement.

ATTACHMENT

1. Implementation Actions and Approaches