

OLD STRATHCONA PUBLIC REALM STRATEGY

Recommendation

That the October 8, 2024, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE02353, be received for information.

Requested Action	Information Only		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals.	Urban Places Climate Resilience		
City Plan Values	LIVE		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	A Community of Communities A Rebuildable City Greener as we Grow	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Mobility Network 15-minute Districts Climate Adaptation and Energy Transition Arts and Culture Economic Growth
Corporate Business Plan	Transforming for the Future		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of The City Plan • Mass Transit: Implementing for 1.25 Million People 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • February 4, 2020, CR_7819, Bylaw 19126 - Amendment to the Strathcona Area Redevelopment Plan • August 27, 2024, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE02216 Mass Transit: Implementing for 1.25 Million People 		

OLD STRATHCONA PUBLIC REALM STRATEGY

Executive Summary

- The Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy is a vision for publicly-owned land in Old Strathcona over the next generation, intended to guide decision making over time.
- It includes seven key actions and recommended improvements to publicly-owned lands that will create new and improved parks, opportunities for affordable housing, ways to travel to Old Strathcona, and contribute to the City's climate resilience objectives as Edmonton's population grows to two million people.
- The Public Realm Strategy will involve making choices and trade-offs. To move more people in and through the area more sustainably, bus rapid transit will be added on Whyte Avenue, sidewalks will be widened, and there will be a phased reduction and repurposing of vehicle parking.
- The strategy is expected to be implemented over several budget cycles in alignment with policy objectives and funding availability.

REPORT

Old Strathcona is a unique and vibrant cultural hub, tourist destination, main street, historical area and home to thousands of Edmontonians. It is a Priority Growth Area and is forecast to experience significant population growth as Edmonton becomes a city of two million people. Its “public realm” consists of publicly-owned streets, sidewalks, parks and plazas. The public realm will need to grow, adapt and improve to accommodate this rising number of residents and visitors.

The Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy aims to build on the area’s existing vibrancy by:

- providing new and improved public spaces
- increasing opportunities for more housing
- adding new ways for people to get to and enjoy the area through mass transit and active transportation
- contributing to Edmonton’s climate objectives

The strategy implementation can be phased over several budget cycles and aligned or coordinated with other City initiatives. The strategy will inform the transformation of the public realm in Old Strathcona over the long term in consultation with residents and interested groups.

Need for a Public Realm Strategy

The “planWhyte” study (2018) identified the need for a Public Realm Strategy.¹ Subsequent planning work, including The City Plan and the draft Scona District Plan, highlights the need to adapt public spaces.

Old Strathcona is a key part of The City Plan’s Whyte Avenue/99 Street Priority Growth Area with two primary corridors. The draft Scona District Plan projects that when Edmonton reaches two million people, the Scona District population will have more than tripled in population. Given Old Strathcona’s amenities, it is expected to accommodate a significant portion of this growth. The projected population increase will mean additional demand and pressure on open spaces in the

¹ edmonton.ca/public-files/assets/document?path=planWhyteStudyFinal_aug242018.pdf

OLD STRATHCONA PUBLIC REALM STRATEGY

area. Open space improvements will help contribute to The City Plan's "Greener as we Grow", "Rebuildable City" and "Community of Communities" Big City Moves and provide a multifunctional green network in alignment with Breathe, the City's green network strategy.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted business activity in Old Strathcona, creating a need for measures that support economic recovery and vibrancy. Expanded sidewalk space for outdoor commerce and pedestrian flow is important to create more inviting places to shop and visit. The future addition of bus rapid transit on Whyte Avenue will also require more sidewalk space to facilitate safe and efficient access for transit riders without infringing on pedestrian flow or business activation.

Another driver of the project was the opportunity to leverage City-owned land for housing in light of urgent housing needs in Edmonton. Old Strathcona's non-market housing ratio is relatively low. According to the City's Affordable Housing dashboard, there are 196 affordable housing units in Strathcona², which is less than four per cent of the neighbourhood's overall total of 5,100 dwelling units (2021 Census³). This is significantly lower than the City of Edmonton's Affordable Housing Strategy 2023-2026 long-term target of 16 per cent affordable housing in every neighbourhood across Edmonton.

A forward looking strategy for how publicly owned land should be planned, and its future use, can help provide guidance for any internal or external proposals for the Old Strathcona area.

Process and Recommendations

The Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy launched as a project in August 2022 and was developed in three phases on the foundation of Council-approved policies and priorities, public engagement and technical analysis.

The strategy contains seven key actions and recommended improvements to guide a new future for parks, publicly-owned parking lots, plazas, sidewalks, streets and alleys:

1. *Create a District Park.* Transform the gravel parking lot currently leased to the Old Strathcona Farmers' Market into a signature destination with all-age play elements, spaces for picnicking, gatherings, interactive art and natural landscapes.
2. *Create a Gateway Greenway.* A north-south shared pathway, buffered from Gateway Boulevard, from Saskatchewan Drive to Whyte Avenue.
3. *Create an Urban Plaza.* A vision that lands currently owned by the Government of Alberta and occupied by a used car lot and parking lot will be transformed into a welcoming entrance to the district park and greenway from Whyte Avenue. The plaza would be designed to accommodate rail service (streetcar and/or passenger rail), provide transit connections, and be a place to meet or rest.
4. *Improve End of Steel Park & Support Mixed Market Development of Parking Lot.* A mixed-market development that includes affordable housing units on the City-owned parking lot west of Ritchie Mill will align with The City Plan, complement the building types along Saskatchewan

² [City of Edmonton Affordable Housing Dashboard](#). Updated April 30, 2024. Cited July 23, 2024.

³ [2021 Federal Census - Edmonton Neighbourhood-Level Place of Residence](#). Retrieved November 2023. Cited July 23, 2024.

OLD STRATHCONA PUBLIC REALM STRATEGY

Drive and retain views into the river valley. End of Steel Park will continue to serve the open space needs of its nearby residents, will be improved with the creation of the Gateway greenway and other open space enhancements, and will interpret a broader range of history.

5. *Support Development next to Connaught Armoury.* Low or mid-rise residential development, designed to honour the heritage character of the provincially and municipally protected Connaught Armoury, on the property's parking lot.
6. *Pedestrianize 83 Avenue.* Starting with seasonal closures to an eventual permanent closure to cars, the pedestrianization of 83 Avenue between Gateway Boulevard and Calgary Trail will support the avenue as a people and active modes space that is regularly programmed for festivals and events.
7. *Prioritize Pedestrians on Whyte Avenue.* Widening sidewalks to provide more space for people to move as well as for businesses, trees, greenery and other amenities that enhance the overall experience on Whyte Avenue. Wider sidewalks will complement the addition of dedicated lanes for bus rapid transit.

See Attachment 1 - Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy, Section 3 for more information on the key actions and additional recommendations.

Phased Changes to Parking

To foster vibrant urban places, address climate goals, support housing affordability, accommodate modal shifts and enhance livability in Old Strathcona, trade offs are required. Reducing and repurposing vehicle parking is one of the key trade-offs required to realize the proposed improvements. This includes the removal of some on-street parking spaces and phased reductions to publicly-owned parking lots. Such changes would support The City Plan's target to have 50 per cent of trips made by transit or active transportation.

The changes to parking will be phased gradually and aligned with the addition of parking alternatives. When implemented, dedicated bus lanes for mass transit on Whyte Avenue and elsewhere in the city, along with faster and more frequent transit service, will provide a new way for many people to reach Old Strathcona. For those who may still need or prefer to drive, parking options will remain available. The strategy outlines ways to manage the remaining parking supply, including a parking wayfinding system with real-time data and ensuring that accessible parking spaces are near key destinations. Additionally, drop-off and pick-up zones will be incorporated to support those using rideshare, taxi, or friends and family members for transport.

With modal shifts planned, traffic volumes on Whyte Avenue are expected to be reduced given the reduction in travel lanes. Emergency vehicle access will be maintained and could even be enhanced as a result of the dedicated bus lanes.

Passenger Rail

On April 29, 2024, the Government of Alberta announced the preparation of a Passenger Rail Master Plan for the province. This Master Plan is expected to be complete in approximately one year (summer 2025) and could have significance for Old Strathcona. No actions will be taken in connection with the District Park, Gateway Greenway, or Urban Plaza (Actions 1-3) that could

OLD STRATHCONA PUBLIC REALM STRATEGY

constrain passenger rail options until the Master Plan is completed and its implications for the area are understood.

Budget/Financial Implications

The Public Realm Strategy itself does not include specific budgets or funding requests. It is a tool for Administration and Council to prioritize capital projects and other actions that will have their own budget requirements over time. For example, Action 7 will be aligned with the funded concept planning for the Mass Transit B2 route (from 99 Street to 109 Street) to ensure a comprehensive pedestrian-focused streetscape / corridor design. The actions will also be linked to capital renewal funding where possible and Administration will identify additional potential funding opportunities over time to implement the strategy.

Community Insight

The Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy reflects insights and feedback of area residents, business owners, a Community Advisory Committee and other Edmontonians. Nearly 5,000 individuals provided input over three phases of engagement from August 2022 to April 2024 through pop ups, surveys, online and in person activities.

The input gathered in Phase 1 and Phase 2 informed the development of the draft strategy. The feedback included excitement for the strategy and what it sets up for decades of future growth in Old Strathcona. Respondents indicated that they were in favour of the enhancements to parks, the addition of dedicated transit lanes, and the creation of more housing, especially affordable housing.

The reduction of parking and its impacts was the most frequent concern heard. Some respondents expressed that parking reductions might discourage visitors to Old Strathcona, especially seniors, those from other parts of the city or region, and people with mobility considerations. The Old Strathcona Farmers' Market and some performing arts organizations and their supporters also expressed concern about the impact of parking reductions on the viability of their operations. The Old Strathcona Business Association, however, is supportive of parking reductions in the context of planned bus rapid transit service and long-term public realm investments. The business association has found that visitors who walk, cycle or use public transit provide the best economic value to its businesses.

Other concerns included traffic impacts related to changes to Whyte Avenue, the cost of building and maintaining new open spaces, safety, and the need to support vulnerable or houseless Edmontonians before making public realm improvements.

The feedback received from Phase 3 engagement informed refinements to the Public Realm Strategy, including clarifying that parking reductions will be phased, adding detail on parking wayfinding, and improving information about the steps and timing of the strategy's implementation.

Attachments 2, 3 and 4 provide a full summary of the What We Heard engagement feedback.

As the strategy is implemented, Edmontonians will have additional opportunities to be engaged in the design of specific actions listed in the strategy.

OLD STRATHCONA PUBLIC REALM STRATEGY

GBA+

The governance and development of the Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy was guided by the City's commitments to involving people affected by the decisions it makes and seeking diverse opinions, experiences and information to represent a wide spectrum of perspectives. The City's GBA+ framework guided the project to consider identity factors, reduce barriers to inclusion and ensure equitable outcomes.

Administration designed engagement activities to mitigate barriers to inclusive engagement. Examples included:

- For the general public who may not be familiar with City led planning projects, Administration provided unique ways to learn about the strategy.
- For residents, including youth, individuals with families or seniors, Administration provided online and in person activities offered on weekdays, weekends and at various times of day.
- For the diverse stakeholders representing or advocating for specific communities within Old Strathcona, Administration invited groups to participate on the Community Advisory Committee and responded to any invitation to meet with or present to interested parties.

The project's Community Advisory Committee (CAC) was established as a diverse and collaborative group of area stakeholders to contribute to the work on the Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy. They contributed by attending meetings, providing feedback from their perspectives or generating awareness among their networks.

The GBA+ framework provided inspirations for the project's guiding themes of 'Mobility & Movement', 'Open Space & Activities', 'Comfort & Safety' and 'Inclusion & Equity'. The themes informed how public spaces need to be easily reached by and accessible to everyone, without barriers, to ensure everyone is able to feel welcomed, comfortable and safe. The guiding themes helped to frame the feedback received from engagement, giving insight into people's experience with existing spaces or what they desired in new and improved spaces.

The guiding themes and the GBA+ lens also informed the development of the key actions and considerations as the new and improved spaces need to also serve the diverse needs of families, seniors, individuals with different mobility needs or individuals experiencing homelessness. See Attachment 1 - Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy, Section 1.3.5 and 3.2.1 for more information.

Environment and Climate Review

The planning, design and building of publicly owned land to achieve livability, accessibility and vibrancy, must align with the intentions and directions of The City Plan to achieve climate resilience and to contribute towards becoming a low carbon future city.

As the Public Realm Strategy is implemented, there will be environmental and climate opportunities for consideration. Three areas for environment and climate considerations are:

1. *Parking lot repurposing initiatives:* Environmental planning and the built environment are central to urban climate resilience as they influence how people live, work and play, which in return can shift the urban growth pattern. Repurposing the surface parking lots provides

OLD STRATHCONA PUBLIC REALM STRATEGY

opportunities to reimagine climate resilient developments options for the next designated uses. To better align with The City Plan and achieve climate resilience goals, the neighbourhood level developments, and public realm improvements that are part of the repurposing initiatives may be considered in terms of their carbon budget, and alignment with density targets for redevelopment areas. These considerations can help demonstrate the City's climate leadership commitments through all aspects of city planning, development and decision making and enable the continued implementation of transformational climate actions at various scales to achieve climate resilience.

2. *Provision of green networks:* Green networks benefit the environment, wildlife and people. As part of the implementation of the Public Realm Strategy, opportunities exist to diversify the uses of the open spaces and parks to incorporate Indigenous heritage needs. Opportunities also exist to plan and manage the human and wildlife interactions as ecological connectivity along Gateway Boulevard improves wildlife habitat, and improving multi uses of this space and the parks along the network. Both the greenway and district park will also reduce the impacts of urban heat island effect through tree shade.
3. *Mobility/bus-based mass transportation:* The Public Realm Strategy aligns with the planned bus rapid transit (BRT) route along Whyte Avenue between 109 Street and 99 Street. To complement the low carbon mobility option offered by having the BRT in this busy corridor, and to support climate resiliency into the future, encouraging multimodal hubs, incorporating vegetation as part of sidewalk infrastructure next to bus stops, and electric vehicle (EV) chargers, could be considered. Vegetation will contribute to the intent of providing ecological benefits through enhanced green infrastructure in the area. Having widespread EV charging infrastructure for personal vehicles supports the City's goal of transitioning to electric and other zero emission vehicles by 2050.

Detailed considerations under each of the three areas are discussed in Attachment 5.

Attachments

1. Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy
2. Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy - Phase 1 What We Heard Report
3. Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy - Phase 2 What We Heard Report
4. Old Strathcona Public Realm Strategy - Phase 3 What We Heard Report
5. Environment and Climate Review