

What We Heard Report CRL Extension Options

Executive Committee reports UPE02445 and
UPE02446

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Edmonton

INTRODUCTION

Edmonton City Council's Executive Committee asked Administration to consider options for extending the deadlines for the Downtown Community Revitalization Levy, the Quarters Downtown Community Revitalization Levy and the Belvedere Community Revitalization Levy (CRL) beyond their current expiry dates. The motions asked for options for new catalyst projects in the CRLs and, in the case of the Quarters and Belvedere, to identify if the CRL boundaries could be altered. This document outlines the engagement and learnings for these two reports.

Public Engagement Summary and Results

Project Overview

As a result of the Council enquiry, the project team engaged with key interested parties, developers, industry, community league and within the Administration on what possible barriers or investments could be managed or put in place that may further encourage greater or new investment into the CRL areas. The results are shared below.

Key Takeaways

- Continued concern about safety and disorder in the area (real or perceived). While this is recognised, a distinction was made that many of the disorder issues are not actionable by the CRL. The consulted parties acknowledged this but felt it was important to recognise how critical this issue is to attract future investment.
- There is a need for more residents and strong support for student accommodation and support activities.

What We Heard - Downtown

The areas of concern were safety, housing needs, streetscape/public realm improvements and infrastructure.

Broad Consensus

- There is a need to bring more people Downtown to support existing retail and public spaces and consensus on addressing this through having more people living Downtown (transition away from relying solely on office workers).
- We need to explore ways the City can prioritize safety and security issues, and change negative public perceptions.
- Downtown is important and economic investment in the Downtown is the most financially responsible investment.

- Infrastructure that supports public activity, including streets and open spaces, should be a base-level in the Downtown and not a nice-to-have. Poor condition infrastructure reflects negatively on Downtown.
- More recreational opportunities are needed.
- The CRL is an important tool and should be extended.
- The CRL should contain a variety of projects, to reflect the needs of today and in 20+ years.
- Downtown needs a holistic approach that brings together all interested parties, municipal programs and levels of government. The CRL is just one of many tools. Other tools also need to be explored.
- Celebrate the success of the Downtown (and the CRL) to date. Particularly the Return on Investment (ROI). Many projects currently under construction would not have been possible without the program.

CRL Direction

- Support maintenance with capital investment in failing infrastructure
- Extend CRL - containing a variety of projects, to reflect current and 20+ years of opportunities
- Need holistic approach
- Recognise many projects that exist resulting from CRL investment.
- Support more recreational opportunities and open space

Streets

- Streetscapes and open spaces will always be an important part of how people perceive Downtown, particularly the edges - trees, benches, and places to linger.
- Street in poor condition create a negative impression and impact public safety.
- There are several funding tools available to improve the streets Downtown and they need to be aligned under a single vision.
- Currently, many streets are in poor condition and those that have been improved create a patchwork effect as they are completed over long periods.
- Currently, there are gaps in street improvements downtown. Streetscaping improves the look and comfort of pedestrians.
- There are items outside, or partially outside the boundary that are declining assets that negatively impact the attractiveness of downtown. For example, Rice Howard Way.
- We need to take better care (maintenance) of our streets, especially Jasper Ave.
- Have a greater focus on safety - both real and perceived. People choose to walk along streets that feel safe and will detour away from places that don't. For future streetscapes include a CPTED lens and incorporate elements that improve public safety.
- Funding should match the importance of these streets as the highest priority - and how does this align with other priority growth areas?
- Improve tree canopy for aesthetic and climate resilience reasons.

CRL Direction

- Continue Green and Walkable programs - streets and open space - focus on key growth nodes
- Support for a downtown vision on streets and functions to help prioritize or guide future projects.
- Support maintenance with capital investment in failing infrastructure
- Consider projects that affect the CRL area but may be outside the boundary

Future Housing Development

- Exploring ways the City can incentivize housing starts through the CRL, primarily to de-risk the large investments required. Target specific demographics- ie. seniors or students.
- The biggest barrier to development is financing. Developers rely on funding and the numbers currently don't work to develop housing without an incentive.
- Rents are currently not high enough in a relative sense - typically, downtowns are able to charge a premium for rent which is not the case in Downtown Edmonton.
- Construction costs are high, as well as demolition and abatement.
- If the goal is to get more people downtown in the short term, an incentive is needed.
- Need incentives to prioritize the downtown and quarters over anywhere else in Edmonton.
- There have been few housing starts since the City ended the 2021 housing incentive and a second phase of this program would spur more development.
- Student housing is needed, but no post-secondary institution nor developers are building it.
- There were also mixed comments on affordable housing. Currently 40 per cent and is successful. However, it artificially reduces the rental rates which is a concern when financing.
- There is a lower demand for luxury housing than in other downtowns.
- Attendees discussed alternate ways to create a housing investment (RE: UPE02298 Council report), and whether some types of incentives could be approved and implemented in the short term.
- The downtown population needs to triple for it to be successful from an economic perspective.
- Discussion on Provincial rules and regulations around CRLs funding housing/tax breaks.
- Ways for the City to de-risk residential/commercial demand/vacancies.

CRL Direction

- Develop a housing incentive program
- Support any infrastructure needed for more residential units in specific areas

Infrastructure Improvements

- Improving drainage and other infrastructure over time will continue to support redevelopment.

CRL Direction

- Continue Stormwater drainage servicing catalyst programs
- Support any infrastructure needs for new development in core areas

Other/Specific Projects

- The planning and development processes for the Downtown are generally seen in a positive light, and there are numerous areas where projects have been improved upon due to design regulations.
- Downtown needs strategic investments to attract more people.
- Some concerns regarding the ROI for Winspear as a catalyst project or its prioritization over other catalyst projects.
- The desire for focused efforts on the cultural district assets and other key active nodes
- District Energy would be generally supported.
- Discussion of consolidation of efforts in the Downtown and whether the City can take a more active role in enabling this. (E.g. Municipal Development Corporation)
- LRT entrances are a safety concern and need to be held to a higher standard (lighting, safety, attractiveness)
- Support for easier or better transit and active mobility opportunities

- Need more public washrooms, and they need to be better and have wayfinding.
- Office conversions are not attractive right now due to high construction costs.
- The City Centre Mall is a declining asset which impacts the general success of the downtown.
- Ways to support existing attractions downtown, including the arts facilities.
- Street-level retail is “archaic” (facing inwards). Need to turn some of the inside to the outside, to make people more comfortable at the street level.
- Retail incentives - for businesses to take a risk on ground-floor/street-oriented retail. This would be better than vacancies.
- Recognised the weak links to the River Valley and neighbouring districts.
- Small-scale public amenities and pocket parks support residents and make downtown attractive to families and visitors.
- Bike infrastructure- lanes, bike parking and shower amenities at key locations to support year-round cycling.
- Alley renewal and activations
- Improved wayfinding as well as key branding and placemaking opportunities
- A downtown recreation centre.
- Land assembly for a future school.
- Continues maintenance of existing assets (such as 24-year-old 104 Street)

CRL Direction

- Advance Winspear as part of a broader Arts District category to link the cultural assets as a major downtown draw
- Advance District energy
- Include transit infrastructure (from BRT to SUPs, LRT entrances to bus terminal)
- Public washrooms (can support already)
- Retail incentives needed to activate the public realm
- Network upgrades (top of the bank etc)

Arts District

- There are plans to connect the Citadel to Jasper Ave, but nothing around the AGA. It would be better if there were an integrated plan to make the street from Jasper Ave to the AGA as an “arts district”.
- Heated sidewalks in the Arts District?
- Open the Citadel, library and other buildings, onto the streets
- Create a more distinctive Arts District area- sidewalk treatment, planters, awnings, and sidewalk furniture.
- More places to sit outside
- Citadel LRT entrant- needs improved lighting and safety features
- Farmers market
- Artist housing (acting troupes from away need options for longer-term rentals)
- Need for a flexible, collaborative arts space and studios

What We Heard- Belvedere

Broadly, it was felt most of the work had been done, and with land sales starting to happen, it was felt nothing much else was needed besides the need for more security.

- The barrier to market development is the perception of the area

- Everything in the CRL plan has been done and done well
- There were new lights put up around 66 Street and the area is “wonderful”
- Social services in the area are creating issues that may affect potential developers
- No more linkages are needed between 137 Ave and 129th Ave
- In five years the land there will be more saleable
- Rental rates are currently Ok, but not fantastic
- The area is not currently very inviting (a lot of construction)
- The land is already serviced (CRL-funded infrastructure), but that hurts the CMHC appraisal process)
- A nearby playground might incent JL Holdings to build more 2-3 bedroom apartments in their development
- A dog off-leash could also be helpful
- Security is a cost right now
- A better “sense of arrival” would be nice
- Affordable student apartments are being built by Yellowhead Tribal Council (pilot project for them)
- Would like commercial units on the main floor or wrap-around services for the tenants

CRL Direction

- No changes needed

What We Heard - Quarters

Broadly the main area of concern was related to safety and limited market demand in the area.

Broad consensus

- There is a challenge between what the CRL can do and what is fundamentally needed. What is the social economic development paradigm that will bring this area to life? What levers are needed? The inertia in the area is too great
- Do a lot of events, they have a good rate of return (Chinatown food tours, etc)
- Could a tax deferral be funded by CRL?
- Need more housing and more security
- Incentives for housing
- Improve people’s perception of safety
- Could do smaller tactical projects- garbage containers, lighting, paved alleys, more trees, CCTV cameras, etc
- Not going to attract seniors or families until the reputation changes
- Need to be bold and have many people working together on the problem (“like the arena”)
- The City has made many improvements in the Quarters and development will take more time.
- The Quarters will only be successful when Downtown is thriving.
- Any investment in the Quarters should focus on housing (incentives), at the edges (97 Street and Jasper Avenue)
- Recognise good work already done, nice to finish the remaining key visionary elements

CRL Direction

- Develop a housing incentive
- Support any infrastructure needed to support residential units in specific areas
- Explore programming opportunities

What We Heard- Post Secondaries

- Post-secondaries are looking for developers who will dedicate some floors of their building to students but don't want to build themselves. Mixed-tenancy would be good.
- Student housing should be walkable to the school- or on direct transit
- Affordability is important
- Next 15-20 years there will be more international students
- Post-secondaries Interested in district energy, in the future
- MacEwan would like a fieldhouse/soccer field near the campus
- Invite students to participate in downtown events and activities (via the student associations)

What We Did

The recommendations and ideas from the engagement sessions were evaluated. Ideas that were aligned with the CRL provincial guidelines and the City's CRL plans were included as recommendations in the two Executive Committee reports.

For the Belvedere CRL, engagement confirmed that all of the original CRL projects are complete and that no further work or projects could be identified. In the report, the recommendation will be to allow the Belvedere CRL to run its course.

Public Engagement Approach

How We Engaged

Interested party engagement included meetings with small groups of people or individuals. Information was presented in a format appropriate to group size (more structured for large groups, somewhat less structured for individuals). The presentations included:

- The function of a CRL, the background of the existing CRLs and the process for changing/extending the CRLs;
- The limitations of catalyst projects that can be funded through the CRL (e.g. municipally held, infrastructure projects) and a summary of existing catalyst projects;
- Current issues restricting development in the Downtown and long-term issues to consider (both site-specific and across the Downtown); and
- Public amenities that could support residents or visitors to the Downtown.

After this information was presented to the attendees, standard questions were asked. These were allowed to evolve, depending on the knowledge and insight of the person/group being engaged. In one of the larger group meetings, participants were put into small groups. In all sessions, at least two CRL members attended and at least one CRL member recorded notes.

Who Was Engaged

- Development Industry/Developers

- Autograph Group
- Avison Young
- B&A Planning
- Beljan Development
- BILD - Edmonton Metro
- BOMA - Building Owners and Management Association
- College Woods Development
- FCX Developments
- Five Oaks Development Group
- Gather Co.
- IDEA
- JL Holdings
- Josan Properties
- Langham Development
- NAIOP- Commercial Real Estate Development Association
- Oilers Entertainment Group
- Rosehill Management
- Sparrow
- Stantec
- Yellowhead Tribal Council
- Post-secondary institutions
 - MacEwan University
 - NAIT
 - NorQuest College
 - University of Alberta (did not attend but received post-meeting notes)
- Community organizations
 - Downtown Edmonton Community League
- Business improvement organizations
 - Chinatown Transformation Coalition
 - Downtown Business Association
 - Downtown Recovery Coalition
 - Edmonton Chinatown Business Association
 - Edmonton Downtown Business Association
 - Fort Road Business Association (who consulted the Belvedere Community League)
- Arts and culture organizations
 - Alberta Art Gallery
 - Citadel Theatre
 - Edmonton Public Library
 - Winspear
- City of Edmonton business units
 - City Architect
 - Community Services, Civic events and Festivals

- District Planning
- Economic Investment Services, Downtown Vibrancy
- Housing and Homelessness
- Integrated Infrastructure Services (Building Great Neighborhoods, Planning and Design,
- Edmonton Transit Services, Planning, LRT Operations and Maintenance
- Planning Coordination (Development Services)
- Planning and Environment Services, Transportation Strategies,

What We Asked

All of the engagement meetings followed the same basic format. Members of the CRL team presented information that explained what the CRL is, how it is governed and what types of projects are acceptable according to provincial guidelines. Following that, the CRL team asked those present variations on the following questions:

- What are the existing barriers to development?
- What type of projects would be most beneficial for growth and development over the next 20-plus years?
- What types of public amenities are most helpful? Where should they be?
- How can we encourage more people to move Downtown/into the Quarters?
- What new catalyst projects would encourage development or bring more people to these areas?

What Happens Next?

The CRL team with assistance from the City's legal and financial services, will evaluate the ideas that surfaced through these engagement sessions.

The project team thanks all the participants in this engagement for their time, thoughtfulness and participation.