

DOWNTOWN ACTION PLAN

Recommendation

That the May 13, 2025, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE02813, 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	
City Plan Values	THRIVE		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	A rebuildable city Inclusive and compassionate Catalyze and converge	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Mobility network Community safety and well-being 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 • Bylaw 16521 - City of Edmonton Capital City Downtown Community Revitalization Levy Bylaw 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • June 15, 2021, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE00565, Downtown Vibrancy Strategy 2021 • February 6, 2024, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE01333, Closed and Shared Streets in Downtown • February 27, 2024, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE01232, Potential Work Plan for Rezoning Priority Areas • March 20, 2024, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE02234, 2024 Community Revitalization Levy Update - Downtown, the Quarters Downtown, Belvedere • April 29, 2024, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE02410, Bylaw 20814 - Entertainment District Bylaw 		

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- January 22, 2025, Financial and Corporate Services report FCS02831, Winspear Expansion Project
- March 5, 2025, Infrastructure Planning and Design report IIS02821, Downtown Workspace Optimization
- April 2, 2025, Urban Planning and Economy report UPE02907, 2025 Community Revitalization Levy Update - Downtown, the Quarters Downtown, Belvedere

Previous Council/Committee Action

At the December 10/11, 2024, City Council meeting, the following motion was passed:

That Administration develop a Downtown Action Plan by engaging with stakeholders and include:

- An overview of investment made in the downtown through the implementation of the Capital City Downtown Plan and Downtown Vibrancy Strategy, and any current planned investment by the City in 2025 and beyond.
- A review of existing downtown investment strategies and implementation plans to refine and prioritize future investments, including consideration of the Downtown Investment Plan.
- Identification of existing funding sources, potential partnerships, and timelines to implement actions in the Downtown Action Plan.
- Undertake a jurisdictional scan of Canada's largest urban-metropolitan cities to identify best practices and competitive factors to inform Edmonton's Downtown Action Plan.

Executive Summary

- Downtown Edmonton is the heart of the city and plays an important role in its economic growth plan.
- Downtown Edmonton's economy is crucial to the City's financial sustainability.
- Since the adoption of the Capital City Downtown Plan (CCDP) in 2010, Edmonton's downtown has undergone a remarkable transformation and growth.
- The Downtown Action Plan (Action Plan), Attachment 1, strikes a balance between improved core services, financial sustainability, growth, economic development and safety, ensuring both immediate impact and alignment with long-term strategic goals.
- The Action Plan's four goals are supported by eight actions and 45 subactions:
 - **Economic Growth** - increased property values
 - **Residential Growth** - increased residential population
 - **Vibrancy Growth** - more visitors, students and workers
 - **Business Growth** - reduced commercial vacancy
- The Action Plan is being developed and implemented through an integrated lens across all departments and in collaboration with strategic partners downtown.

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- This project will provide valuable insights and data to inform future updates to statutory plans, ensuring ongoing relevance and effectiveness.
- A comprehensive jurisdictional review of other Canadian cities, detailed in Attachment 2, assisted in creating the guiding actions. Key insights for Edmonton from this overview suggest that effective downtown revitalization takes various factors into account.
- Building on existing momentum for downtown will be a multi-year endeavour, with initiatives advancing over the next five years and beyond. This Action Plan will initiate prioritized actions based on policy direction, valuable input from partners and the potential impact on the downtown tax base, ensuring efficient resource allocation and driving tangible, measurable results.
- Approximately \$5 billion in combined public and private capital investment has driven downtown Edmonton's growth and vibrancy since 2015, with the City of Edmonton contributing approximately \$1.9 billion for downtown-focused projects, as outlined in Attachment 3.
- An additional \$4.6 billion has been allocated to major transportation infrastructure, including Valley Line LRT, Metro Line North and system-wide LRT enhancements, significantly enhancing downtown accessibility and connectivity.
- These combined investments represent approximately \$6.5 billion in direct and catalytic investment by the City, reinforcing downtown Edmonton's role as a vital urban center.
- The Downtown Action Plan proposes a substantial financial commitment of approximately \$553 million for the revitalization of Edmonton's core. Funding sources include:
 - Approximately \$511 million leveraged through the Downtown CRL, with roughly \$440 million contingent on the proposed extension subject to budget approvals.
 - \$9.5 million from the Downtown Action Plan (formerly the Downtown Vibrancy Strategy).
 - \$15 million dedicated to student housing through the Housing Accelerator Fund.
 - \$2.5 million allocated from the Funds-in-Lieu reserve for parkland acquisition.
- Administration will return to City Council through appropriate budget approval processes for any subactions currently unfunded.

REPORT

Edmonton's downtown is the heart of the city, serving as its economic and cultural engine, where history, culture and innovation converge, anchoring Edmonton's identity and civic life. It is the city's largest employment node, home to both the Alberta Legislature and Edmonton City Hall, and serves as a dynamic cultural hub. Each year, downtown welcomes millions of attendees to experience premier attractions such as Edmonton Oilers games, major concerts and special events at Rogers Place, live performances at the Winspear Centre and Citadel Theatre, exhibitions at the Art Gallery of

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Alberta and Royal Alberta Museum and the vibrancy of major festivals, signature public spaces, unique local businesses and renowned restaurants.

Beyond its cultural and civic roles, downtown is integral to achieving the vision outlined in The City Plan — a healthy, urban, climate-resilient city for two million people. As one of the City Plan's identified Priority Growth Areas, downtown supports Edmonton's Smart Growth objectives by concentrating population and employment in areas that maximize existing infrastructure, promote sustainable transportation and deliver stronger fiscal returns¹. Although downtown comprises less than one per cent of Edmonton's land base, it generated approximately 5.2 per cent of the City's total tax levy in 2024. Historically, this figure has reached as high as 10.1 per cent and averaged 7.6 per cent since 2010. This density of economic activity demonstrates the strategic importance of investing in a thriving downtown core.

Recent trends present clear challenges that require a proactive and coordinated response. Hybrid work patterns and an oversupplied office market have contributed to a downtown office vacancy rate of 19.6 per cent, while street-level commercial vacancies have reached approximately 33 per cent². Additionally, 93 per cent of recent population growth has occurred outside the downtown core, highlighting the need to realign development patterns with The City Plan's focus on compact, complete communities. Despite these pressures, downtown remains a resilient and diverse economic hub, supporting nearly 70,000 jobs across 1,632 businesses in key sectors such as government, finance, education, hospitality and the arts³. MacEwan University and NorQuest College serve as vital institutional anchors, with enrollments of 18,855 and 18,033 students, respectively⁴. Notably, five per cent of downtown businesses are Indigenous-owned, reflecting the City's broader commitment to economic reconciliation and inclusive growth³. However, challenges persist, particularly due to limited data on retail and commercial vacancies, underscoring the need for further analysis to inform future action.

The transformation seen in downtown over the past decade is rooted in the Capital City Downtown Plan (CCDP), adopted in 2010. This plan laid the groundwork for significant public and private investment, supported by the establishment of the Downtown Community Revitalization Levy (CRL). Through the CRL, projects such as Warehouse Campus Neighbourhood Central Park and Jasper Avenue New Vision have advanced the CCDP's 15-year vision. Looking forward, the CRL will continue to fund key initiatives including enhancements to Beaver Hills House Park, Michael Phair Park, green and walkable streets and the 103A Avenue Pedway. These improvements support The City Plan's goals for vibrant, people-focused urban places.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and lasting impact on the downtown area. While the CCDP provided a strong foundation, it could not anticipate the scale of disruption caused by the pandemic, specifically to downtown's economic activity and vibrancy. In response, the City implemented the Downtown Vibrancy Strategy in 2021, a targeted, two-year initiative aimed at

¹ Understanding Smart Growth Savings. Victoria Transport Policy Institute, 2025

² Colliers Office Market Report, Q4 2024

³ City of Edmonton Business Census, 2024.

⁴ MacEwan University and NorQuest College, 2024.

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supporting economic recovery and enhancing public space activation. This strategy delivered positive results, but now it is time to refocus on potential necessitating a new coordinated approach.

The Downtown Action Plan builds on this momentum. It is a focused, short-term implementation strategy designed to address current economic and social realities while aligning with the longer-term objectives of The City Plan. The Action Plan complements existing efforts under the CCDP and Downtown Vibrancy Strategy while providing clear, actionable priorities to guide the City's investment and policy decisions in the downtown core to help realize downtown's full potential.

Since 2015, approximately \$5 billion in combined public and private capital has been invested in downtown Edmonton. Of this, the City has contributed \$1.9 billion to downtown-specific initiatives, including \$1.5 billion in capital projects and \$406.2 million in operating support (Attachment 3). In addition, the City has delivered \$4.6 billion in major transportation infrastructure city-wide, including the Valley Line LRT, Metro Line North and broader LRT network enhancements. While these transportation investments benefit the city as a whole, they significantly enhance downtown's accessibility and role as a central mobility hub. Together, these efforts represent approximately \$6.5 billion in direct and catalytic investment, reinforcing downtown Edmonton's role as a critical centre for mobility, culture, business and community life.

The Downtown Action Plan is not an exhaustive list of all municipal activities occurring downtown, but rather a focused compilation of priority actions. Developed in collaboration with City Departments and key downtown partners, the Action Plan is intended to guide immediate investment and policy action. It seeks to balance essential services with fiscal responsibility and supports:

- **Economic Growth** with increased property values
- **Residential Growth** with increased residential population
- **Vibrancy Growth** with increased workers, students and visitors
- **Business Growth** with reduced commercial vacancy

Focusing municipal resources and partnerships on these priorities, the Downtown Action Plan will strengthen Edmonton's position as a thriving, resilient and inclusive city, aligning with the long-term vision outlined in The City Plan.

Process and Recommendations

The Action Plan identifies priority actions to implement immediately and continue over the next five years, aligned with the CCDP. This Action Plan reflects the greatest opportunities for the City to support investment and growth in downtown by leveraging existing budgets and resources.

The eight actions feature 45 subactions that will guide implementation. These actions were informed by existing policies and plans and developed collaboratively across City departments with input from strategic partners downtown and learnings from other jurisdictions.

The eight actions are:

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1. **Leverage the Capital City Downtown Community Revitalization Levy for Catalyst Projects:** Driving economic growth by investing CRL funds in high-impact projects that create a vibrant downtown hub.
2. **Invest in Upgraded Infrastructure:** Enhancing downtown's user experience through targeted infrastructure investments in roads, sidewalks and public spaces.
3. **Enable an Increased and Diversified Housing Supply:** Fostering a 24/7 community by increasing diverse housing options through strategic incentives and development.
4. **Create Safer Public and Private Spaces:** Improving downtown perceptions of safety by strengthening safety strategies, including enforcement and supporting community well-being.
5. **Enhance Cleaning, Maintenance and Beautification of Public Spaces:** Attracting businesses and promoting community pride by keeping public spaces clean and appealing.
6. **Demonstrate the Significance of Downtown's Economy:** Establishing downtown as a vital economic driver both globally and nationally through collaborative initiatives to draw in investment and talent.
7. **Increase Public Amenities, Programming and Activities:** Enhancing and enriching downtown by increasing public areas and community-oriented programming.
8. **Expand Downtown Districts:** Maximizing revitalization opportunities by strategically expanding and defining distinct districts to create catalytic change.

Community Collaboration

The City acknowledges strong partnerships are key to successful implementation of the Downtown Action Plan. The City will continue to seek and cultivate collaborations, recognizing the invaluable insights and contributions of diverse strategic partners, particularly through the Downtown Leadership Group as detailed in subaction 6.1 in Attachment 1. This approach emphasizes the importance of working together to achieve shared objectives, promote downtown and cultivate opportunities, with the City facilitating partnerships through strategic support and agreements. The expertise and capacity of external groups, including Downtown Revitalization Coalition, Edmonton Downtown Business Association, Edmonton Arts Council, BILD Edmonton Metro, BOMA Edmonton and North, NAIOP Edmonton, Edmonton Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Edmonton Community League, post-secondary institutions and other businesses, organizations and community groups, are incredibly valuable and offer remarkable opportunities for collaboration that we will continue to capitalize on.

Budget/Financial Implications

The Action Plan signifies a substantial financial commitment to the revitalization of Edmonton's core at approximately \$553 million. This funding is strategically sourced from various streams: \$511 million is leveraged through the Capital City Downtown Community Revitalization Levy, demonstrating a strong commitment to long-term development. This significant reliance on the CRL underscores its importance, and it is worth noting that extending the CRL's timeline is a complex process requiring both municipal and provincial approvals. This extension is particularly relevant as

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\$440 million of the \$511 million in CRL funding is contingent on the revised CRL Plan and the extended end date of 2044. Additional funding includes \$9.5 million remaining through 2026 from the Council approved Downtown Vibrancy Strategy multi-year service package, which will now be referred to as Downtown Action Plan; \$15 million is dedicated to student housing through the Housing Accelerator Fund; and \$2.5 million is allocated from the Funds-in-Lieu reserve for parkland acquisition. Five subactions remain unfunded at this time, totalling \$15 million required for future, to-be-announced initiatives. Importantly, budgets for subactions under “Action 2: Invest in Upgraded Infrastructure” are still under development and will be presented in subsequent reports. These reports will address “to be determined” budget items, potentially leading to unfunded service packages or capital budget adjustments for Council’s consideration during future budget processes, such as the 2027-2030 budget cycle. Further funding may also be secured through grants and incentives from other orders of government, supplementing the existing allocation.

Jurisdictional Scan

A jurisdictional scan of Vancouver, Calgary, Winnipeg, Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal was conducted to inform the Action Plan. The scan identified shared downtown challenges across these cities, including housing affordability, office vacancy rates and public safety concerns. Findings suggest that effective downtown revitalization requires a multifaceted approach. Key factors involve establishing a clear strategic vision, fostering community collaboration, coordinating cross-sectoral interventions, attracting targeted investments and implementing data-driven performance monitoring. These findings, detailed in Attachment 2, supported the development of the Action Plan and are reflected within subactions to develop a Downtown Leadership Group, a Master Plan and a dedicated Infill Infrastructure Fund Program.

Community Insight

The Action Plan did not include formal public engagement as it fell within the policy framework of the CCDP. However, insights were gathered from strategic partners downtown, including consideration of the industry developed Downtown Investment Plan. This included focus groups held in December 2024 and January 2025 with strategic partners and other interested parties representing various businesses, associations and other organizations from multiple sectors and with a variety of interests to collect input and ideas on enhancing downtown vibrancy, prioritizing actions and fostering partnerships. The feedback highlighted key themes and priorities, such as the need for improved safety, increased vibrancy, a stronger district identity and strategic investments in housing and infrastructure. These insights offer current perspectives on the existing policy direction for the Action Plan, ensuring that its actions and initiatives address the needs, challenges and opportunities present today.

GBA+

To ensure equitable planning and delivery of the Action Plan, a Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) lens will be applied to all catalyst projects, with the co-led Indigenous Economic Reconciliation Strategy serving as a key component in amplifying diverse voices. Each project will be assessed to determine who benefits and how to mitigate potential negative impacts on equity-deserving communities. Recognizing resource constraints, the City will prioritize projects

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that directly benefit these communities and avoid disproportionate harm, carefully weighing long-term economic benefits against immediate needs. Every catalyst project will undergo an individual assessment to determine its potential direct benefit or harm to equity-deserving communities, ensuring resource allocation aligns with the City's commitment to equity and inclusion in creating a vibrant and thriving downtown for all.

Environment and Climate Review

Revitalization and investment in downtown Edmonton through the Action Plan supports the City Plan's Greener As We Grow and Rebuildable City pillars. Increasing the population in the downtown area is likely to be beneficial from a climate change perspective because residents living in communities with a higher density emit fewer greenhouse gas emissions from cooling, heating and transportation due to concentrated infrastructure, access to transit and potentially reduced travel distances if co-located with amenities, programming and activities.

It is also possible to further consider climate risks and opportunities in urban planning and design, in the development of additional strategic policies and in the investments made within the downtown districts to protect public health and safety and ensure Edmonton's prosperity. The Action Plan could mitigate and adapt to climate risks while aligning with the City Plan's Greener as We Grow directive and supporting the City Plan's climate resilience goals by:

- **Reduction of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions** through catalyst projects that encourage active or public transportation, increased urban density and incorporation of climate-resilient infrastructure design as well as from the expansion of district energy initiatives.
- **Consideration of increased natural infrastructure** can moderate Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect, which is expected to increase in Edmonton. Increased tree canopy and other vegetative covers as part of public space enhancement and beautification in locations where catalyst projects expect to see increased vibrancy and, therefore, gatherings of large numbers of people for prolonged time, can help cool off surface temperature during hot days and minimize (UHI) related health hazards.
- **Sustainable growth that increases density and infill development** with convenient access to work and amenities in the Downtown area will minimize the City's ecological footprint as developments move away from single-purpose and harder to reach locations to the Downtown core.

Attachment 4 provides a detailed description of how the Action Plan aligns with and supports The City Plan's climate resilience goals, including areas that require additional consideration due to environmental and climate implications.

Attachments

1. Downtown Action Plan
2. A Jurisdictional Review of Canadian Downtowns: Revitalization Themes and Lessons for Edmonton
3. Downtown Investment Review
4. Environment and Climate Review

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