

# What We Heard

## 10 Year Celebration of Edmonton's WinterCity Strategy

City of Edmonton  
Emerging Economy

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**Edmonton**

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## Land Acknowledgement

The City of Edmonton acknowledges the traditional land on which we reside is in Treaty Six Territory. We would like to thank the diverse Indigenous Peoples whose ancestors' footsteps have marked this territory for centuries, such as Nêhiyaw (Cree), Dené, Anishinaabe (Saulteaux), Nakota Isga (Nakota Sioux) and Niitsitapi (Blackfoot) peoples. We also acknowledge this as the Métis homeland and the home of one of the largest communities of Inuit south of the 60th parallel.

This land is a welcoming place for all peoples who come from around the world to share Edmonton as a home. Together we call upon all of our collective honoured traditions and spirits to build a great city today and for future generations.

In 2019, Jacquelyn Cardinal of Naheyawin shared with the WinterCity team some of the Nêhiyawêwin (Cree) words that relate to winter, as well as the deep connections local Indigenous peoples have with the land. In her blog, Nêhiyawêwin: A Song From The Land, she explained the word for "city":

*"ôtênaw ᐃᑦᑦᑦᑦ (oo-tee-now)"*

*The Nêhiyawêwin word for city is ôtênaw which has the root words of ôtêh, which means 'heart', and ôta, which means 'here'. These hidden teachings share the true definition of ôtênaw to be the 'heart of the people' or 'where the people are'."*

We hope we have succeeded in keeping true to the spirit of ôtênaw, to keeping people at the heart of all of the WinterCity work.

## Executive Summary

This report summarizes the findings from the workshop held on October 31, 2024, celebrating the 10-Year Anniversary of Edmonton's WinterCity Strategy. The workshop engaged approximately 60 participants in round table discussions focused on the four pillars of the WinterCity Strategy: Winter Economy, Winter Life, Winter Story and Winter Design.

Key insights include the need for tailored economic support for winter businesses, accessible and low-cost winter activities to enhance community life, comprehensive communication strategies, including online media and other avenues, to share the winter story and thoughtful design elements, such as color and lighting to improve the winter experience in public spaces.

The feedback gathered will inform potential future actions, including establishing financial support for businesses to support winter activation, re-establishing the winter economy working group, supporting accessible winter recreation programs, updating the WinterCity Design Guidelines and further developing strategies for Winter Story and Winter Design. This report highlights the importance of addressing the unique challenges and opportunities of winter in Edmonton and outlines potential next steps to further enhance the city's winter offerings.

## Project Overview

Edmonton's [WinterCity Strategy](#) was adopted by City Council in October 2012, with a subsequent [Implementation Plan](#) in 2013. On October 31, 2024, the City of Edmonton hosted a half-day workshop and celebration of the Strategy, and shared [Tip of the Iceberg: WinterCity Strategy 10-Year Report 2013-2023](#).

Participants included representatives from festival and market organizers, community groups and non-profit organizations, local restaurants, ski resorts, and the University of Alberta, as well as former WinterCity Think tank members and staff from the City of Edmonton.

The event opened with a welcome from the WinterCity Planner and overview of the 10 Year Report. The WinterCity team recognized "Winter Champions," including Kate Gunn, Sue Holsworth, Isla Tanaka and former City Councillor Ben Henderson. The presentation concluded with a virtual presentation from Winter Cities institute founder Patrick Coleman.

The primary engagement portion of the workshop followed and consisted of five round table discussions (additional detail in the following sections). The event concluded with thanks to participants and networking.

## Public Engagement Approach



This event employed a workshop format to consult interested parties on issues pertaining to each of the four pillars of the WinterCity Strategy. Participants were identified and invited by the WinterCity team based on their expertise, knowledge, and involvement with the WinterCity strategy and related events over the previous decade. A workshop was chosen as the engagement approach as it combined the opportunity to celebrate progress and success across ten years' of WinterCity activation and engage with involved leaders on the future of the program.

Approximately 60 participants were split across six tables. The discussion centred around conversations based on the four pillars of the WinterCity Strategy:

- ❄️ **Winter Economy:** related to economic opportunities, challenges, and innovations in the winter context
- ❄️ **Winter Life:** related to community engagement, social activities, and overall quality of life during winter
- ❄️ **Winter Story:** related to cultural narratives, storytelling, and promotion of Edmonton's unique winter identity
- ❄️ **Winter Design:** related to infrastructure, urban planning, and design that enhance the winter experience

Participants were asked to discuss at each table some successes, challenges and new ideas for each pillar. The WinterCity Team also circulated during conversations to take notes. At the end of each discussion, tables shared key insights with all participants.

## What We Heard

### **Winter Economy**

Participants shared ideas for economic activities, including tourism packages that combine festivals with outdoor gear rentals and other connected activities. Cultural and culinary connections were noted as opportunities, such as connecting with neighbouring Indigenous nations and local restaurateurs. Participants also brainstormed unique winter opportunities, and suggested dark sky-related (e.g. stargazing, aurora borealis viewing) tourist activities and winter “glamping.”

Participants also reiterated that winter poses specific challenges that are not present in summer, and therefore that information and grants during winter from the City are valuable for enabling economic activity in all seasons. Participants suggested winter patio start-up or improvement grants as an option. Interest-free loans from the City were also suggested to support this development. Participants also stressed that small-scale commercial opportunities in the river valley and other parks (e.g. food trucks, beverage carts, equipment rental) should be facilitated and potentially supported financially through grant opportunities.

### **Winter Life**

Participants highlighted the importance that future work considers everyday life and activities in winter, rather than exclusively focusing on special events and high-cost activities. This included particular attention to supporting and facilitating active transportation options during winter through thoughtfully designed infrastructure and increased maintenance.

Participants also valued free or low-cost “try-it” programs for winter recreation activities to encourage participation. Financial investment and ongoing maintenance for winter amenities (e.g. ice rinks, ski trails) was also noted as important. Additional programming discussions included expanding the City’s Green Shack program into winter.

### **Winter Story**

While there was significant overlap between the Winter Life and Winter Story pillars, some themes emerged as unique to Winter Story around narrative and public perception.

Participants noted that Edmonton has a strong and growing winter brand, both within the City and abroad. Some attendees commented on the strong and high quality social media presence of the brand, while others also stressed the importance of communications outside of social media, such as traditional media or other outreach events (e.g. tabling at events, inclusion in other City communications materials, such as mail-outs). They also suggested media monitoring to track public perception of winter activities and evaluate the impact of City communications.

## **Winter Design**

Participants reiterated that applying WinterCity design principles remains critical for ensuring vibrant public spaces and economic participation in the local economy. In particular, participants emphasized repeatedly the importance of using colour in public spaces and the exterior of buildings. Participants shared they were disappointed in the lack of colour in recent City projects (e.g. Claireview Recreation Centre). The importance of light design for attractiveness and safety was reiterated by participants, as well as consideration for light pollution. Participants were in agreement that well designed winter lighting could exist without contributing to light pollution, and thoughtful winter design might decrease light pollution.

Participants also highlighted the social and economic benefits of art installations and other activation in public spaces during winter, suggesting that creating "Wintergram moments" for social sharing was valuable for promoting organic engagement.

Some participants noted barriers and delays when applying for development and patio permits and encouraged the city to enable and facilitate projects that use WinterCity design principles.

## **Recommendations**

Based on results from this session, key recommendations have been organized by WinterCity pillar below. This table is not exhaustive but provides a snapshot of key feedback elements.

Pillar	Key Feedback	Potential Actions
Winter Economy	Winter poses unique challenges to businesses	<p>Review the opportunities for a Winter Business Improvement Grant that can be used to create or improve winter patios or make other outdoor improvements (e.g. winter decorations)</p> <p>Establish a WinterCity Working Group focused on Economic Development to inform future City grants, programming, and other initiatives, and to provide opportunities for greater ecosystem feedback</p>
Winter Life	Accessible winter activities encourage engagement	Facilitate access for businesses and community groups to rental equipment (e.g. ice bikes, skates, skis) and provide educational programming in River Valley parks

Winter Story	Online and offline communications are vital to brand; consider how to evaluate impact	<p>Continue to maintain a social media presence and respond to changes and trends in the ecosystem</p> <p>Measure and monitor social media impact and reach</p> <p>Create an outreach strategy in addition to online communications to reach a greater audience and to enable greater story sharing</p>
Winter Design	<p>Essential to facilitating daily life and economic activity</p> <p>Some potential permitting barriers to applying winter design principles</p>	<p>Improve knowledge and implementation of Winter Design Guidelines and Policy internally through partnerships, education, and collaboration</p> <p>Continue to champion winter design in Edmonton and abroad</p>

## Conclusion

The feedback received from participants during this event reiterated the importance of considering the unique opportunities and challenges posed by winter in Edmonton, and the importance of incorporating them into work across the City. The discussions highlighted key areas for growth and improvement within the pillars of Winter Economy, Winter Life, Winter Story and Winter Design. The City of Edmonton is committed to leveraging this feedback to refine existing initiatives and explore new opportunities, ensuring Edmonton continues to thrive as a vibrant winter city for years to come.