

Sturgeon County
COVID-19 Recovery Task Force
Final Report
August 2021

Task Force Mandate

At the May 12, 2020 Sturgeon County Council meeting, Council established the COVID-19 Recovery Task Force to make recommendations on actions the County could take to assist local residents, businesses, and not-for-profit organizations to contribute to the well-being, safety, and resilience of Sturgeon County as a result of the adverse social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Task Force was directed to engage with a broad cross-section of the community, seek feedback from residents and businesses owners in the County, make policy recommendations to Council, meet with other Council Committees, and have its members act as ambassadors, amplifying Sturgeon County's communications to the community to increase awareness of supports available to businesses and residents. As ambassadors, members were tasked with leading by example in de-stigmatizing businesses accessing financial supports from other levels of government and residents accessing mental health supports.

Task Force Membership

Task Force members were appointed by Council and include individuals with a vested interest in Sturgeon County's social and economic recovery. These members are connected to the community, collectively having a strong understanding of local economic and market conditions, social services provided in the County, and a demonstrated record of community service.

Public members appointed to the Task Force represent a broad cross-section of backgrounds and fields of expertise, including emergency management communications, strategic information technology, the oil and gas sector, the agricultural sector, and the construction industry. Public members include Shawna Bruce, Wayne Carey, Barry Flynn, Dan Majeau, and Ryan Vestby. In accordance with the Task Force's Terms of Reference, four members of Council were appointed to the Task Force, including Councillors Wayne Bokenfohr, Neal Comeau, Patrick D. Tighe, and Kristin Toms. By virtue of her office, Mayor Alanna Hnatiw is an ex officio of all Council Committees, including this Task Force.

At its inaugural meeting, Councillor Patrick D. Tighe was elected Chair and Mr. Ryan Vestby was elected Vice Chair of the Task Force.

Task Force Meetings

The Task Force met eight times between June 1, 2020 and June 17, 2021. As a Council Committee established by the *Municipal Government Act*, meetings of the Task Force were open to the public. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and under the authority of the provincial Meeting Procedures (COVID-19 Suppression) Regulation and Sturgeon County's Procedure Bylaw, all meetings were held virtually through Microsoft Teams.

In addition to items of significance identified below, each meeting included standing updates from Corporate Services on Sturgeon County's COVID-19 response including any local measures in place; from Economic Development Services on efforts to support local businesses in responding to the economic impacts of COVID-19; and from Family & Community Support Services on the County's efforts to support local not-for-profit organizations, community partners, and residents in addressing the social impacts of the pandemic.

In addition to receiving updates from staff on these topics, and to meet Council's direction through its mandate letters for Council Committees to work collaboratively, the Task Force also met separately with the Economic Development Advisory Board and the Community Services Advisory Board to share

information and collaborate in formulating recommendations on actions Sturgeon County can take to continue to support local residents and businesses.

Matters Addressed by the COVID-19 Recovery Task Force

In addition to sharing information at Task Force meetings and acting as ambassadors for Sturgeon County related to matters within its mandate, the Task Force received information and provided feedback on several items of significance, including those noted below.

Broadband Connectivity

The COVID-19 pandemic has expedited practices like working from home, virtual learning, and increased digital commerce. To ensure the continued growth of Sturgeon County, reliable internet service is a necessity, not a luxury.

The Task Force received information on Sturgeon County's broadband initiative. In parallel with public engagement with County residents and businesses on the existing challenges with rural internet, including speeds, reliability, and cost, the Task Force offered its support for a County investment to improve internet service for County residents and business owners.

Council has approved \$7.3 million in the 2021 budget for Phase 1 of the County's broadband strategy to be funded through long-term debt. This is a forward-thinking approach and a critical investment in the County's long-term economic and social prosperity.

Digital Customer Services

Public health restrictions imposed by the Government of Alberta, including a work from home order, required Sturgeon County front counters to close. This was common to most municipal governments in the Edmonton Metropolitan Region. Though implemented suddenly, this provided an opportunity to rethink how customer service is delivered.

The Task Force received information on the Digital Customer Service Roadmap project that was recently completed by County Administration. Recognizing that not all County residents have access to, or comfort with, digital technologies and that traditional forms of customer service including in person and telephone service will continue, the Task Force learned of the County's efforts to improve the County's digital service offerings, including website upgrades and more online self-serve options.

Digital customer service options are more cost-effective, efficient, and convenient for many County residents and business owners. These efforts should continue to be advanced ensuring continued engagement with County residents and business owners in addition to traditional customer service methods.

Tax Payment Flexibility for Residents and Business Owners

In 2020, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Council authorized the extension of tax penalty payment deadlines as many residents and business owners were challenged to pay their taxes on time due to the economic impacts of the pandemic.

The Task Force supported this measure, and in addition, supported efforts beyond the pandemic for the County to provide more flexibility for taxpayers who, due to personal or business circumstances, struggle with paying taxes in a lump sum on an annual basis.

The Task Force recommended amendments to Sturgeon County's Tax Installment Payment Plan (TIPP) program, which allows taxpayers to pay taxes in equal amounts monthly via automatic withdrawal from their financial institution. Recognizing that a taxpayer must be in good standing before enrolling in TIPP, and that it is in the County's interest to have taxpayers enrolled in the program due to the increased certainty of payment that it provides, the Task Force recommended changes to the program that result in tax penalties being waived after enrollment and the taxpayer signing an agreement to remain in good standing for a specified period.

Council supported this recommendation and passed an amendment to the TIPP Bylaw to allow program changes to take effect for the 2021 tax year.

Increased Engagement with Local Business Owners

The County's Economic Development department made strides to contact local businesses at the outset of the pandemic to understand how COVID-19 was impacting them, and to bring awareness to relief programs offered by the federal and provincial governments. This effort proved cumbersome, as although the County maintains strong connections to local businesses, there is not a single database of all businesses and contact information for them.

The Task Force discussed opportunities to encourage collection of information from local businesses in order to be able to communicate more efficiently with and to promote them. This resulted in a recommendation for Council to consider opportunities to collect information from local businesses for the purpose of improving communications and supports. This recommendation was approved by Council.

During the pandemic, with many businesses having to close their doors to in-person customers, there was a large increase in the use of online and social media marketplaces. The Task Force, along with the Economic Development Advisory Board, recommended that the County investigate an online platform to promote local Sturgeon County products. Council supported this recommendation.

Support of Local Mental Health Initiatives

As a result of COVID-19, many people experienced sudden disruptions to their work, social connections, and to their family routines. Various studies released during the pandemic revealed that a large portion of the population has experienced significant and enduring mental health impacts as a result.

The Task Force sought to advance efforts to de-stigmatize conversations about mental health by serving as ambassadors in a campaign called "It's Okay to Not be Okay". This campaign featured members of the Task Force and other community leaders promoting self-selected messages of encouragement. These images were shared on Sturgeon County's social media and received positive response from the community. This initiative was funded with a grant received by Family & Community Support Services.

This was but one small way to encourage people to speak openly about their mental health and to seek supports if needed.

Social Isolation of Seniors

The pandemic exacerbated the existing issue of seniors' isolation, which is particularly prevalent in a rural community. Provincial health orders requiring people to stay at home, coupled with many seniors' discomfort with technology or lack of access to reliable internet service, intensified this issue.

The Task Force learned of efforts through Family & Community Support Services to support seniors, including ensuring that they had meals and medications and that seniors without internet access could lend a device to have video calls with family and friends. It was noted in the joint meeting with the Community Services Advisory Board that a local school division has a program where seniors and students spend structured time with one another.

The County should consider how it can continue and even increase its service offerings to local seniors to ensure they remain connected and continue to make important contributions to the community.

Conclusion

Members of the COVID-19 Recovery Task Force appreciate Council's commitment to engaging residents and business owners in important conversations regarding Sturgeon County's recovery from COVID-19. With the dissolution of the Task Force, these important conversations about complex issues will continue among the Economic Development Advisory Board, the Community Services Advisory Board, at Council meetings, and in the community.

The Task Force thanks members of Administration for their efforts in providing information and support, for coordinating engagements with other Council Committees, and for communicating the Task Force's recommendations to Council for consideration.

The economic and social impacts of COVID-19 will be felt for many years. While many County residents and business owners continue to experience the enduring impacts of COVID-19, Sturgeon County is well-positioned to meet this challenge.