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Planning Initiatives and Local Community Resiliency

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Every individual, to some extent, was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic further exacerbated economic and social vulnerabilities in addition to creating health impacts worldwide. In a period of time amplified by negativity, individuals accepted rapid change in all aspects of their lives. Additionally, community and grassroots organizations internationally rised to the challenge and developed unique initiatives to respond to this rapid change. Strong community resilience alleviated social vulnerabilities, reduced negative health concerns and helped restore the functionality of the community.

In Edmonton and surrounding areas, two main themes emerged from local community resilience initiatives. The first theme included a focus on the health and well-being of individuals in the community. During the pandemic, the health and well-being of individuals has been a strong force for behavior change. With the added stress from the pandemic and the closure of public leisure facilities, more individuals turned to public greenspaces and amenities to cope with the negative externalities of the pandemic. Therefore, many community resilience initiatives and local planning strategies made use of the desire to be outside and active during the global pandemic.

The second theme involved a unity with charity and emphasis on locality. Numerous community initiatives included a charity component that allowed community members the ability to give back in various ways. Many community members felt helpless and a loss of control in their daily lives, and community initiatives represented a way that these members could participate and contribute to combatting the pandemic in a less daunting, low risk and safe way. Community initiatives helped fill gaps with the charity component involving donation of money and supplies, or volunteering time.

With Edmonton and surrounding areas exemplifying themes of health and a unity with charity, many positive community resilience initiatives and planning strategies emerged. I argue that the pandemic fostered positive opportunities for community participation, fellowship and locality that is an essential and collective response to any global 'disaster'. These opportunities can provide inspiration for community resilience that can continue in a post-pandemic world.

### **Theme of Health and Well-being**

#### *Example 1: Shared Streets and Mobility Lanes*

With the pandemic placing many restrictions on mundane activities like attending the gym or local recreation facility, The City of Edmonton piloted a 'Shared Streets' project at the beginning of the Pandemic in 2020 which offered a unique solution. In this project, 28 kilometers of roadways in the heart of downtown were sectioned off to include a larger lane for people to utilize active modes of transportation. These larger lanes provided residents an opportunity to spend time outside and remain active all while being safe and socially distanced. The shared streets were established in denser, more popular areas in the City of Edmonton including locations downtown and along the River Valley. The shared streets initially were intended for individuals who did not have access to a backyard or areas that lacked adjacent greenspaces. The option of active transportation allowed residents to get outside and be physically active during the pandemic. The initiative was proven successful that in 2021, the City of Edmonton allowed 10 similar streets to be designated as shared streets and mobility lanes. The shared streets were used by many downtown dwellers as well as other Edmontonians who frequented the areas, as a form of caring for their health and well-being.

*Example 2: Root 107 Pop-up Park*

Root 107, a local pop-up park located in downtown Edmonton, opened to the public in April 2021. The pop-up park is a temporary outdoor space for residents to use during the pandemic, and accompanies 1.33 hectares of open land that is located in the future site of the Warehouse Campus Neighborhood Central Park. In February 2021, The Downtown Business Association began thinking about experiences that can bring people downtown during the pandemic. The space was designed and built by Thirdspace Design Group and is part of Downtown Spark, a sequence of displays and experiences located in Edmonton's downtown core. Root 107 is an inclusive public space that is family and dog friendly. The pop-up park features murals from local artists, plants, creative seating areas produced from recycled materials, and a range of food trucks that are updated weekly. During the pandemic the importance of quality urban spaces became important in cities as individuals wanted to spend time outdoors and socialize while following public health restrictions. Additionally, Root 107 was successful at stimulating business downtown. Root 107 supports local food trucks, local artists and public design, in addition to supporting adjacent restaurants which offer exclusive Root 107 deals. Root 107 was an incredible local initiative that managed to prioritize the two themes of health and well-being and emphasizing locality.

**Theme of Unity with Charity and Emphasis on Locality**

*Example 3: Pandemic Planting Project*

The Pandemic Planting Project began in 2020 as a result of the pandemic, where local community member, David Benjestorf, thought of a method to combat food insecurity during the pandemic. Benjestorf decided to turn his 11-acre property in Sturgeon County, Alberta into a large garden that will help serve the Edmonton Food Bank. One of the most unique characteristics about the Pandemic Planting Project is that it relies on community members to volunteer their time in the garden. In the year of 2020, the project donated nearly 100 pounds of food to the Edmonton Food Bank. In the year of 2021, the incoming support and amount of food donated allowed Benjestorf to expand his space, making room for herbs and more vegetables. With an increase in production, neighbors in the community have donated two more acres of land for the project. The enthusiasm and support from the local community to provide food for others at a time where the most vulnerable need it demonstrates strong community resiliency.

*Example 4: Ritchie Community League Initiative*

Throughout the Pandemic, the promotion and push for community members to shop locally began more than ever before. The City of Edmonton promoted residents to shop local and developed the free #ShopLocalYEG toolkit for local businesses to use in attracting customers to shop safely. The tool kit included window signs, digital banners for social media amongst other supplies to support Edmonton-based businesses and encourage residents to shop safely.

A unique initiative began in the Ritchie Community League where a subscription service was provided to support local businesses in Edmonton. In January 2021, the league launched a subscription service that ranges from \$7 a month to \$200 a month. The service features unique discounts to local businesses and experiences. Approximately 20 businesses within and outside

the Ritchie community are participating in the initiative. Some examples include a community hall rental, a chef's table experience or free admission to community tours. The service also encouraged residents to shop more locally and support neighborhood initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, individuals do not need to be a resident in the Ritchie community to purchase a subscription.

### **What can we learn from community resiliency?**

There are numerous lessons to be learned from the community strategies seen across Alberta. As we look forward from the pandemic, it is important to consider these lessons to strengthen community resiliency for the future. One of the first lessons is understanding local vulnerabilities. The pandemic altered residents' everyday lives and more people began to understand vulnerabilities such as food insecurity or the need to support local shops. By understanding local vulnerabilities, initiatives can begin filling gaps within the system by providing support to areas that need it.

The pandemic has taught everyone the importance of supporting local initiatives and businesses as these contribute to the livelihood and character of a community. Urban and community planning must continue to support ideas and strategies that will facilitate local businesses. Supporting locally corresponds with the notion of designing with community in mind. This allows individuals to leverage community assets when needed. For example, continuing to build neighborhoods with local businesses and community leagues, downtown pop-up parks and events can allow people to feel more connected.

Lastly, encouraging volunteerism is a great way to have individuals connect with members of the community. Volunteering allows individuals to tackle challenges and make a difference, all while becoming a part of a community. The element of connectedness can help combat feelings of isolation and loneliness and can help increase community resilience as knowing members in a community can help those get through the unimaginable.

End of Essay

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