



Wintercity
YXE

BACKGROUND REPORT





WintercityYXE Background Report

May 2021

The first step in creating great winter cities is recapturing the enthusiasm kids show this time of year. What child (of any age) doesn't welcome a fresh snowfall? What's more fun than skating, skiing, sledding, warming yourself up at bonfire, taking in an outdoor market or festival, or drinking mulled cider or wine with friends?

Project for Public Spaces





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Images used throughout this document were taken prior to COVID-19.



Question: What do you love?

Answer: The beauty of winter - the crisp bright sunny weather, big clear sky, stars, snow and river views.

Introduction

While winter can bring adversity, it can also spark feelings of determination, innovation and fun. It was in this spirit that WintercityYXE was created; joining a growing movement of cities intentionally studying, improving and welcoming winter opportunities. Inspired by Christmas markets in Copenhagen, heated sidewalks in Iceland, ice skaters on the Rideau Canal and, closer to home, Edmonton's growing winter city efforts, Saskatoon set out to find the good in winter.

We Saskatonians know to design our Halloween costumes to fit over a snowsuit. Snow, slush, cold and slippery surfaces often last for months, and are among the largest complaints about winter. What if they were also our biggest assets? What if we could harness the possibilities of snow, the beauty of ice, and winter was to be celebrated rather than endured?

Not only does a winter-friendly city mean improved quality of life, it also means a stronger economy and more security for our vulnerable population. In order for Saskatoon to become a true winter city, the lived experience must change.



This background document supports the formal WintercityYXE Strategy and outlines how the Strategy was developed. The strategy represents years of collaborative planning, research, community involvement and action.

Strategy development included these four steps, detailed below:

- 1) Building on the strength of existing assets;
- 2) Engaging the community in change;
- 3) Implementing actions; and
- 4) Developing the Strategy.



Building on the strength of existing assets

What we already do well

Our established successes offered a solid foundation of winter-friendly attractions, events and services on which the WintercityYXE Strategy would be built. Saskatoon’s community volunteers, businesses and municipal services that contribute to a positive winter season are among the winter assets detailed in this [report](#) to City Council’s Standing Policy Committee on Environment, Utilities and Corporate Services. In addition, we have highlighted some of Saskatoon’s winter achievements below.

Events

Many community associations host winter celebrations. These neighbourhood-led gatherings offer a welcome chance for people to connect and escape the winter doldrums. They also allow people to try out winter activities on their own doorstep and for little or no cost.

Saskatoon also has a number of large-scale winter events; proof that ‘festival season’ extends beyond July and August! [Tourism Saskatoon maintains a full list of festivals and events](#). A couple of events are:

- [Nutrien WinterShines](#) is a Saskatoon winter staple, growing from small beginnings to its current multi-day, multi-venue festival. The kiddie’s ice play area, fat bike race, ice climbing walls, sculptures and shinny festival are some of the outdoor faves, while the cupcake contest, chef’s soup cook-offs and pop up restaurants beckon from indoors.
- Winterruption embodies the spirit of winter fun and community with the goal of “giving people a reason to leave their house in the longest, coldest, darkest month of the year.” Music, theatre, comedians and cultural events like the storytelling teepee are presented in late January. The [Broadway Theatre](#), a host of media partners and the Regina Folk Festival host the event.

Activities

From winter play programs to birding to cross country skiing, Saskatoon has got your winter activity list covered. [See the list of activities](#) and read on for highlights.

[Optimist Hill](#) is a community triumph; this top-notch recreation area offers skiing, snowboarding, tubing and a village chalet. With a mission of making outside play easy and accessible for all, this is a welcome addition to Saskatoon winter life.

Also, many neighbourhoods have tobogganing hills that are perfect for a quick slide. Find a park near you on the [Toboggan Hills](#) webpage.

Community Associations operate more than 50 [outdoor rinks](#) throughout the city with a variety of programming, free use and warming shack availability. [Indoor rinks](#) offer public skating, parent and tot skating, lessons and other programming. With arguably one of the best views in the city, the downtown Cameco Meewasin Skating Rink @ Nutrien Plaza is a wintertime treasure. Offering skate borrowing by donation, heated washrooms and a cozy, fire-warmed changing area, this rink is a favourite for everything from date nights to family outings. Finally, over at the [Gordie Howe Sports Complex](#), the [Clarence Downey Speed Skating Oval](#) has room for beginners to speed skaters alike with multiple lanes and warm up and washroom facilities.

Root for the [Saskatoon Rattlers](#) in the Canadian Elite Basketball League, join [Rush Nation](#) in the National

Lacrosse League, cheer for [Huskie Athletics](#) at the University of Saskatchewan, and the [Saskatoon Blades](#) in the Western Hockey League. And, for those who want to join the action, fun-league curling, pick up shinny and Community Association-run indoor sports await.

If the South Saskatchewan River is on a ‘best of’ list, you can all but guarantee it is going to win. Best scenery, best place to jog, best place for a date; for many, it is the best thing about Saskatoon year round. Paths follow the river and connect points of interest, warm up areas and city landmarks. The [Meewasin Trail](#) is maintained throughout winter and offers outstanding access to nature and recreation.

In addition to the walking paths, Saskatoon has a network of cross country skiing trails. The [Saskatoon Nordic Ski Club](#) and the City of Saskatoon maintain trails in parks, golf courses and near the river, with both classic and skate skiing available. Getting active outdoors in winter offers a way to truly appreciate the cold season.



Attractions

Many of Saskatoon's attractions operate year-round, with the [Western Development Museum](#) a perpetual favourite, the [Saskatoon Forestry Farm Park & Zoo](#) welcoming visitors free of charge throughout the winter months and a mega list of activities offered at the [City's Leisure Centres](#).

[Remai Modern](#) is a museum of modern and contemporary art where visitors can view permanent and travelling exhibitions, check out feature films, catch programs like Riverview Yoga and Wine or drop in and create at the RBC Creative Space.

Visitors to the ancient gathering place of [Wanuskewin Heritage Park](#) can walk the trails, take a bison tour, enjoy the art gallery and take in one of many events.



Wanuskewin is a nationally-recognized interpretive centre that fosters education and respect for the land based on expressions of Indigenous culture, heritage and the arts. At [Nutrien Wonderhub](#), little ones can climb the Cosmic Commotion, make the northern lights dance and travel to an underground potash mine at Saskatchewan's only children's museum.

Operations

Behind the scenes, the City of Saskatoon works hard to ensure residents are safe. This is particularly true during freezing temperatures.

Residents can access information about winter road maintenance, winter driving tips and how to deal with burst pipes. The [Snow Angel Program](#) is a kindness encouraged by the City of Saskatoon where neighbours lend a hand to clear snow.

The [Cold Weather Strategy](#) is a partnership with emergency shelters, the Saskatoon Housing Initiatives Partnership and the United Way to protect Saskatoon's most vulnerable citizens. The Saskatoon Emergency Management Organization (EMO) posts alerts about storms, emergency warm-up areas and other vital information on social media.

These are just some of the initiatives in place to ensure that all Saskatoon's residents can experience safety during the coldest parts of the year.



In winter the socialising tends to move into people's homes. That's great if you have a large network, not so great for people who have newly arrived in our city. So I think getting more social activities open to more people in winter time would be a great initiative.

Daniel Firth, Project Manager for the Stockholm's Sustainable Urban Mobility Strategy

Engaging the community in change

The strategy takes shape

Shaking up how we plan, design, live, work and play in winter cities was Edmonton's 2015 Winter Cities Conference goal. Our delegates of City staff and Councillors took in the conference and returned with a sense of enthusiasm to launch Saskatoon's own strategy.

The Strategy development plan was unveiled in a March 2016 [report](#) to City Council's Standing Policy Committee on Environment, Utilities and Corporate Services. We modelled our plan after Edmonton's Winter City Strategy approach.

Four Strategy pillars were determined early in the project through stakeholder engagement:

- Winter Life - celebrating the fun and quality of life we can enjoy in freezing temperatures
- Winter Design - improving comfort and accessibility for all

- Winter Culture - embracing our northern location and all that winter brings
- Winter Economy - creating a more vibrant economy during winter

Later, these pillars were used to form the basis for the three Strategy themes: Winter Economy, Winter Culture and Life, and Winter Design.

2016 Engagement Activities - Starting the Discussion

The first of many public engagement efforts was a March 2016 breakfast event. The workshop included representation from First Nations and Métis community members, Community Association volunteers, seniors, business groups, performing arts, outdoor recreation groups, sustainable transportation advocates and major institutions.

The goal was to build enthusiasm for a Winter City Strategy and highlight its importance to Saskatoon citizens' quality of life. Many participants showed support, wanting to be involved in the plan's development as volunteers or by serving on committees.

The main takeaways from the initial group discussions were:

1. Existing assets would benefit from an easy-to-find database and more promotion.
2. People need to move around safely. A lack of safe pedestrian mobility options prevents people from getting out and active during winter.
3. There is strong desire for more winter events and festivals, like the 2016 [Guinness World Record snowball fight](#).

Learn more details about the results from the June 2016 workshop in the [report](#) to City Council's Standing Policy Committee on Environment, Utilities and Corporate Services.

2017 Engagement Activities - Forming Strategy Actions

To build momentum and awareness of WintercityYXE, comprehensive public engagement continued between January and April 2017. We had 770 people participate in engagement activities including:

- Stakeholder group roundtable sessions
- Online surveys
- Information on how to undertake a [Kitchen Table Talk](#)

We heard a strong desire for improved mobility, better infrastructure and facilities. In addition, we often heard that events and activities would benefit from additional support and better promotion. This important work allowed us to pin down topics, and identify quick wins and ways to improve winter life.

Age, mobility and economic situations are just some of the factors that influence lived experiences. Strategy action points reflect the shared winter city vision and will guide future actions.

Below is a snapshot of engagement feedback presented by topic. See the [report](#) to City Council's Standing Policy Committee on Environment, Utilities and Corporate Services for the complete feedback list.

Mobility

- Improve snow clearing on roads, sidewalks, residential areas and pathways
- Build pedestrian walkways
- Build narrow, walking spaces to create micro-climate wind-breaks
- Heat sidewalks at key business locations

Infrastructure and Facilities

- Warm-up shelters
- Winterized washrooms
- Add power/electricity/water to support outdoor facilities
- Add infrastructure for rental equipment where activities occur
- Support outdoor rinks
- Build boot rooms in public buildings



Winter Design

- Add colour, art (Indigenous art) and murals to outdoor facilities and in winter design
- Build an outdoor ice castle at the Delta Hotels Bessborough
- Introduce more dark sky compliant lighting to pathways, ski trails, in bus shelters and at bus stops
- Light up Civic Square trees year-round
- Replace aging decorations
- Set up temporary, seasonal businesses in Meewasin areas
- Build a portable stage for businesses to use for events
- Improve parking (more indoor parking lots, underground lots)



Support Existing Activities

- Invest in cross-country skiing (more trails, warm-up shelters, outdoor washrooms, facilities in Kinsmen Park)
- Increase partnership (e.g., Francophone community, Community Associations, First Nations and Métis communities, newcomers, seniors) to hold events and share cultures (e.g., Global Village at U of S)
- Sell hot chocolate at outdoor events like the Enchanted Forest
- Use existing parking lots for events (e.g., biggest street hockey tourney in Canada)
- Offer free/affordable equipment rentals near activities



Introducing New Activities

- More events (larger, community, cultural, family, annual New Years, fat biking, Indigenous events)
- More affordable events and activities
- Free or inexpensive equipment rentals (cross-country skis, fat bikes, sleds, skates)
- Heated restaurants and outdoor cafes
- Educate people about activities and how to do them

Encourage City to Accept More Risk for New Ideas

- Hold a light festival, displays (e.g., Victoria Butchart Gardens)
- Extend public art program to include a stage podium for concerts and performances
- Create a continuity of events throughout the year (mix of themes, brands, demographics, etc.)
- Hold more walking tours (e.g., Enchanted Forest)
- Open a pop-up or outdoor theatre
- Have businesses support art programs and vice versa (using coupons or similar)

In response to engagement activity results received in early 2017, a group of stakeholders volunteered to form the WintercityYXE Community Working Group. This group provided guidance to Administration on Strategy development, next steps and public engagement planning.

As part of our ongoing learning about other winter cities, WintercityYXE also sent four City representatives to Edmonton's 2017 Shake Up Conference. The conference focused on creating a sense of place in winter through urban design, how to create a feeling of warmth through lighting and activities like winter biking and festivals. Conference highlights were the hair-raising canoe luge rides and the knowledgeable speakers from across Canada, Europe and Asia.



But so long as winter weather is associated only with difficult driving conditions and burdensome shoveling, as happens with most TV weather reports, people in northern cities will continue to hole up in their homes or make plans for moving south.

Project for Public Spaces



Implementing actions

Prioritizing the blizzard of ideas

These early initiatives focused on improved mobility, infrastructure and improvements to events and activities. Soon after, the [Winter City Community Grant program](#) was established to support community-led activities that would enhance WintercityYXE goals. Some grant program highlights include the now annual Crokicurl instalment on Broadway Avenue and the Kôna – Wanuskewin Winter Festival. This winter salute to Indigenous culture has a lively roster of traditional activities like dog sled rides, drumming contests, log sawing, storytelling and jigging. Tea, bannock and a fish fry round off the day of culture and fun.

Other quick-win initiatives were tackled to generate interest and momentum, advance learning and move core strategy concepts forward. WintercityYXE quick wins were:

- Promotional support for local winter events and activities
- Borrowed warming huts placed at various winter events and along the Meewasin Trail (2018)
- Renowned lighting designer Sabine De Schutter’s winter lighting presentation and community stakeholder workshop (2018)
- Lighting analysis of River Landing completed by Stantec Consulting (2018)
- One-time funding of the decorative lighting program for new seasonal decorations on street light poles (2019)
- Ten ice sculptures were installed in the Business Improvement Districts (2019)
- Ice installation at the Western Peace Wall in the Broadway Business Improvement District (2019)

Understanding the Community

An April 2018 [WintercityYXE Opinion Survey](#) allowed City leaders to evaluate how best to develop a Strategy that would help residents, businesses and visitors embrace winter. The survey found that for 80 per cent of respondents, the cold weather was a barrier to participation in winter events and activities. Nearly half cited a lack of awareness of winter opportunities as a barrier.

However, the news wasn't all negative, with about 75 per cent of respondents agreeing that Saskatoon offers a number of opportunities for winter sports, activities, festivals and events. Sixty per cent agreed that Saskatoon is an easy city to get around in during the winter. This survey was a helpful gauge for developing the Strategy.

International Winter Cities Shake Up 2019 Conference

In 2019, community members successfully negotiated with the City of Edmonton to bring the International Winter Cities Shake Up Conference to Saskatoon. Council approved funding support for the conference in the [report](#) to City Council's Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services and Saskatoon was set to host.

The Shake Up Conference was a way to shine a light on WintercityYXE and to gain momentum in Saskatoon. In addition to raising awareness, the program was incredibly educational.

Mental health in urban winter streets, year-round cycling, lighting design and the Norwegian mindset for loving winter were just a few of the sessions held throughout the three-day event. The conference brought leaders and innovators from the winter city community together with hundreds of guests from 30 different cities and towns. Guest speakers came from Finland, Denmark, Japan, the United States and Canada.

The Winter City Café invited people to think about their lives in Saskatoon winter. For a complete list of the WintercityYXE engagement process feedback from the event, you may refer to various reports at saskatoon.ca/wintercityyxe.



Developing the Strategy

Community involvement remains as one of the biggest factors in shaping WintercityYXE. The initiative only succeeds if it includes, and works for, all of Saskatoon. Community members were asked to relate their winter experiences and suggest ways to achieve the shared vision through various engagement events.

Using the input from the community and Administration the strategy was refined and finalized through final stakeholder reviews, including:

- Community Working Group workshop (January 2020)
- Stakeholder and public pop-up engagement events (February 2020)
- Online survey (March 2020)

All feedback received during this stage can be found in the [What We Heard Report](#).

The [Strategy](#) was presented to the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services in September 2020.

Where we go from here

With the Strategy finalized in late 2020, an [implementation plan](#) was developed and presented to the Standing Policy Committee on Planning, Development and Community Services in May 2021. Keeping in step with the community's involvement with Strategy development, the community was also given the opportunity to provide feedback during the development of the Implementation Plan. All feedback received during this stage can be found in the [What We Heard Report](#).

For each Strategy action, the [Implementation Plan](#) includes information on:

- What support is in place to implement the action
- Which partners are best positioned to implement the action
- How success will be measured
- The expected timeline for implementing the action
- Funding needs, both current and future
- Community prioritization preferences



Appendix 1 – List of Committee and Council Reports

- [PDCS \(May 2021\) - WintercityYXE Strategy - Implementation Plan](#)
- [PDCS \(September 2020\) - WintercityYXE Strategy Report](#)
- [PDCS \(June 2019\) - Winter City Strategy Update Report](#)
- [PDCS \(December 2018\) - Winter Cities Shake Up Conference Engagement Update Report](#)
- [PDCS \(October 2018\) - Winter City Strategy Update and Winter Cities Shake Up Conference Request for Funding Report](#)
- [EUCS \(November 2017\) - Winter City Strategy Update Report](#)
- [EUCS \(January 2017\) - Winter City Strategy Development Report](#)
- [EUCS \(June 2016\) - Community Winter City Strategy Development Report](#)
- [EUCS \(March 2016\) - Winter City Strategy Preparations Report](#)



saskatoon.ca/wintercityyxe