

Calgary



Spring 2023 Perspectives Focus Groups

Final Report
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Table of Contents

Research Summary	3
Key Findings	4
Conclusions/Recommendations	7
Background and Methodology	9
Views on Downtown	11
Awareness/Perceptions of the Event Centre	21
Festivals and Events	24
Perceptions of Public Safety	27
Views on Transit Safety	32



Research Summary



Most participants felt downtown is a less safe and less appealing place to visit today than in the past.

“I see a lot of people just standing and bobbing in one spot or sleeping on the street. And anytime I leave my vehicle in downtown, it gets broken into every single time. I can’t drive my truck on the street anymore. And if I do, it has to be completely clean because if there's something left inside, my window get smashed every single time.”

– *Downtown resident*

To make downtown better, participants wanted to see...



More people living in the area



More events/activities



More social supports like housing, addictions treatment and mental health support



Many believed Calgary Transit is much less safe to take than before – with several opting not to use this service at all.



Having peace officers address safety concerns on transit



Restricting access to platforms and stations

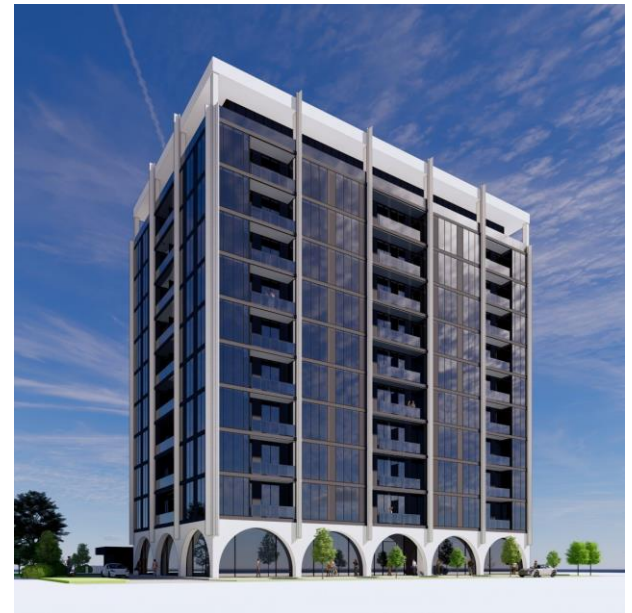
Key findings

Most participants felt downtown is much less safe today than in the past – as well as a less desirable place to go.

- Many participants – including those who live in or near Calgary’s downtown area – indicated they consciously spend less time going to downtown Calgary today than in the past. While some of this can be attributed to post-pandemic shifts in where people work, many stated it is because they no longer feel as safe there.
- Participants tended to describe downtown today as being dirty, unsafe or dull, with several noting it lacks vibrancy outside of weekday business hours.

Participants felt a rejuvenated downtown begins with having more residents.

- When asked to describe what they hope downtown looks like in the future, most described it as being a place where more people live, which they felt will encourage more businesses to stay open as well as make people feel safer.
- Participants also hoped this area would become more family friendly, as well as feature improvements that increase residents’ quality of life, such as public art and green spaces.
- While awareness of specific initiatives to improve downtown was relatively low, most were supportive of the idea of converting commercial office towers into residential buildings.



Key findings (continued)

Most saw the Event Centre as a positive thing for Calgary – although some were concerned about the cost.

- Overall, most participants agreed the proposed Event Centre is good for downtown Calgary and the city as a whole. Besides guaranteeing the Calgary Flames will remain in the city, many participants felt the biggest benefit will be ensuring Calgary attracts top-tier performers for arena concerts.
- However, many participants were uncertain about whether it is a good deal and expressed frustration at how much The City and Alberta government will contribute to this new facility. They indicated they would be more supportive if the Calgary Sports and Entertainment Corporation (CSEC) bore a higher share of the costs.



Festivals and events were viewed as an important component of downtown revitalization.

- Most participants agreed festivals and events will help breathe life into downtown and that some recent activities have brought them and others to the area.
- Many participants across all groups expressed a desire for having a greater variety of these types of events, as well as ensuring they are relatively open to the public and family friendly. Several pointed to Edmonton as a good example to emulate when it comes to creating a culture of festivals in Calgary.

Key findings (continued)

Many participants said they feel less safe in Calgary today – even if they know their perception of things being more dangerous may not fully reflect the reality borne out by police reports and other measures of crime severity.

- The prevalence of homelessness and drug use, as well as high-profile instances where someone has been attacked randomly, has contributed to a general feeling that Calgary – especially downtown – is not as safe today as it was before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Most participants agreed additional social supports, including addictions treatment and subsidized housing, are needed to solve this problem. Across the groups, participants recognized solving this issue requires a combination of both additional social supports and additional law enforcement. While those in suburban areas of southwest and southeast Calgary were more in favour of having more law enforcement deal with these issues, those living in other areas of Calgary felt social supports are much better suited to tackling these challenges.

Several participants noted they no longer use public transit, or use it much less often than in the past.

- Concerns about transit safety have discouraged many group participants from using transit to get to and from work or to do other activities. While downtown was seen as the epicentre of these issues, several noted they no longer feel as safe while riding the CTrain or at transit stations in more suburban areas.
- Many participants were in favour of restricting access to platforms and CTrain stations, as they felt this may help riders feel safer in these spaces. Although many did not feel dedicated peace officers have made a difference to date, several recognized that they can do so if they focus on dealing with or removing people who are causing problems rather than primarily looking for people who may not have paid their fare.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The City faces a difficult and long-term task in shifting public perceptions of safety.

- For many residents who took part in these focus groups, perception has become reality. Although many felt that crime rates may not be as high as they once were – and that they are highly unlikely to be the victims of a random violent attack – participants had a pervasive sense that they are in greater danger when they go about their day. This has caused them to shift their behaviour in certain ways, and these feelings are unlikely to go away anytime soon.
- Obviously, this is not an easy problem to fix, but it is absolutely necessary to address these sentiments if The City wants to increase transit ridership, revitalize downtown and enhance residents' sense of confidence in their community. The City is already doing a great deal to communicate and demonstrate how it is dealing with fears about public safety. It should continue to find avenues to show residents that their concerns are being taken seriously and that creating a city that is safer and more vibrant is its highest priority.
- When doing so, the emphasis should be placed on what front-line City staff and community partners (e.g. the D.O.A.P. team) are doing to address the issue. While people need to know the Calgary Police Service (CPS) is actively working to ensure people remain safe, its role may need to be somewhat de-emphasized to a certain degree – or else framed as working together with those who are providing necessary services to those experiencing homelessness, addiction or mental health issues. Elected officials should also continue to shine light on this issue, but perhaps play a less prominent role when it comes to showing what is being done as their involvement (especially if done in a public manner) seemed to make participants question if their efforts are truly sincere.
- As residents begin to see fewer people in crisis around transit and on city streets, they should begin to feel more confident about the state of their city. While this will take years – and significant work beyond what The City does – a prudent and patient approach should help begin to move public opinion in the right direction.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Clearly demonstrate how transit safety officers are making a difference.

- Many participants were aware peace officers have an increased presence on Calgary Transit. Many felt this should help address some of the safety concerns. However, many of the transit users in the groups indicated they have not witnessed these officers effectively addressing anti-social behaviour, including passenger harassment, drug use or other problems. Instead, some felt these officers have been more focused on fare inspection and writing tickets to those who did not pay their fare.
- No matter whether this sentiment is true or greatly exaggerated, The City needs to draw a clear link between the presence of these transit safety officers and how they are making the transit experience safer and more pleasant for riders. For instance, it may help to release statistics on officers' interactions, showing what they have done to address anti-social behaviour. Profiling these individuals and their work may also be one way to show how their efforts are making a difference.



Background and Methodology

Background

The City of Calgary conducts a bi-annual series of general population focus groups on a variety of different topics. The Spring 2023 Perspectives Focus Groups examined:

- How Calgarians feel about the current state of the downtown, including efforts to revitalize the area and the proposed Event Centre.
- Perceptions of public safety downtown as well as on public transit.

Methodology

Probe Research conducted a total of six (6) in-person focus group sessions with Calgary adults aged 18 and over. Participants were segmented based on which area of The City they live in, with one session specifically with those who live downtown (Downtown, East Village, Beltline, etc.), one session with those living in near-in central neighbourhoods (e.g. Kensington, Ertton, Inglewood, etc.) and four sessions with those living in more suburban areas. The table on the following page provides an overview of the characteristics of focus group participants.

These sessions were conducted at Qualitative Coordination in Calgary. Each session was approximately 110-120 minutes in length. The sessions were moderated by Curtis Brown of Probe Research, with observers from The City of Calgary in attendance for all groups.

A total of nine (9) participants were recruited for each session, with six (6) to nine (9) participants taking part in each group. Participants in these sessions received an honorarium of \$100 in exchange for their time and participation.



Background/Methodology (cont'd)

Group	Date	Time	No. of Participants	Area of Calgary	Other characteristics for recruit
1	Monday, June 12, 2023	5:30 pm	8	Downtown neighbourhoods	Mixed gender Mixed age Mixed education Mixed household income Minimum two (2) Racialized and/or born outside Canada
2		7:30 pm	6	Suburban southeast	
3	Tuesday, June 13, 2023	5:30 pm	6	Near-in downtown neighbourhoods	
4		7:30 pm	8	Suburban northeast	
5	Wednesday, June 14, 2023	5:30 pm	9	Suburban southwest	
6		7:30 pm	8	Suburban northwest	

Please note: The following findings are qualitative in nature. The work is exploratory as a result of the number of participants and the method by which the sample was drawn. The results should be regarded as directional and may not necessarily be projected to the larger population without further quantitative research.



Views on Downtown

Current Perceptions of Downtown

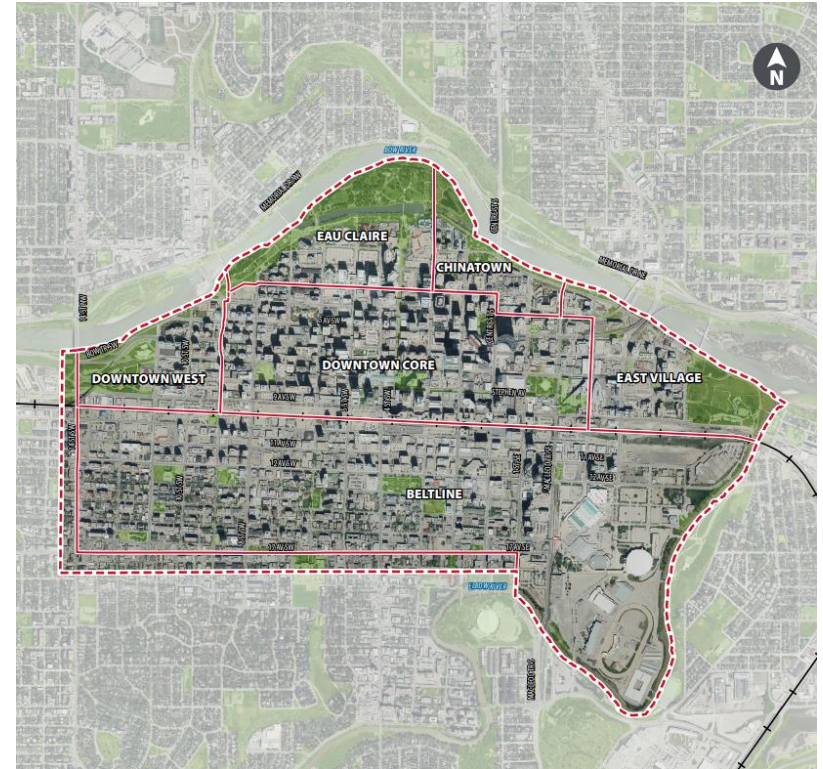
- No matter where they live within Calgary, participants indicated that during the past few years they have been spending less time downtown. This was attributed to two key factors:
 - The shift to working from home, as some participants noted that they either no longer work downtown, or only come downtown on certain days.
 - Concerns about safety in the area, as several participants indicated the presence of more people experiencing homelessness – as well as witnessing open drug use and other anti-social behaviour – discourages them from coming to the area.
- Those who still work for downtown-based organizations indicated they only go to the area on the days they are required to be in the office, with others indicating they typically only go for appointments with professionals (e.g. doctors, dentists, lawyers, etc.).
- Several participants indicated they only occasionally visit a bar or restaurant downtown. While some noted they go out less often because of rising costs or due to other commitments, those from more suburban areas noted they prefer to patronize restaurants and amenities in their respective quadrants or immediate communities rather than venture downtown. They saw several advantages to this, including not having to deal with traffic to and from the core, paying for parking – and of course, concerns about safety.

“I work from home predominately and sometimes I'm working downtown. But I haven't been downtown for a long time. There's just no reason for me to go. I was working downtown in my earlier time living in Calgary, but now there's no reason for me to go there anymore.”
– *Downtown resident*

“There are lots of homeless people in downtown. And it's usually not about poverty, but about mental illness from drug use. I see a lot of people just standing and bobbing in one spot or sleeping on the street. And anytime I leave my vehicle in downtown, it gets broken into every single time. I can't drive my truck on the street anymore. And if I do, it has to be completely clean because if there's something left inside, my window get smashed every single time.”
– *Downtown resident*

Where Exactly Is Downtown?

- It was also interesting to note that participants had different definitions of where exactly “downtown” Calgary is located.
- Even though The City defines their neighbourhoods as being technically downtown, those from core and near-in neighbourhoods like the Beltline did not consider where they live to be technically downtown. They (and some others in suburban groups) had a narrow definition of downtown that only includes the commercial core of the city.
- Those from more suburban parts of Calgary still distinguished to some degree between the commercial core and areas like the Beltline and East Village, but were somewhat more likely to group these areas together as being part of downtown/central Calgary.



“I live so far in the southeast, that everything sort of central Calgary is downtown for me.”
 – Southeast resident

“For me downtown is high-rises, the real condensed area.”
 – Southeast resident

Perceptions of Downtown Today

- Participants were asked to conceptualize what downtown is like today, as well as what they hope and imagine it will be like in five years. When describing downtown today, participants tended to use more negative words and phrases to describe the area:
 - Dirty.** Many participants in different groups described downtown as being dirtier than it once was, with more garbage and graffiti than there was in the past.
 - Unsafe/more crime.** In all groups, participants described feeling less safe in the area today than they did in the past. This was mainly attributed to the prevalence of drug use, especially methamphetamine, among people experiencing homelessness in the area. The unpredictability of these individuals, as well as high-profile stories of random attacks at train platforms and stations and near downtown buildings in recent years, meant that several participants tend to be more vigilant when visiting the area – or avoid it altogether.

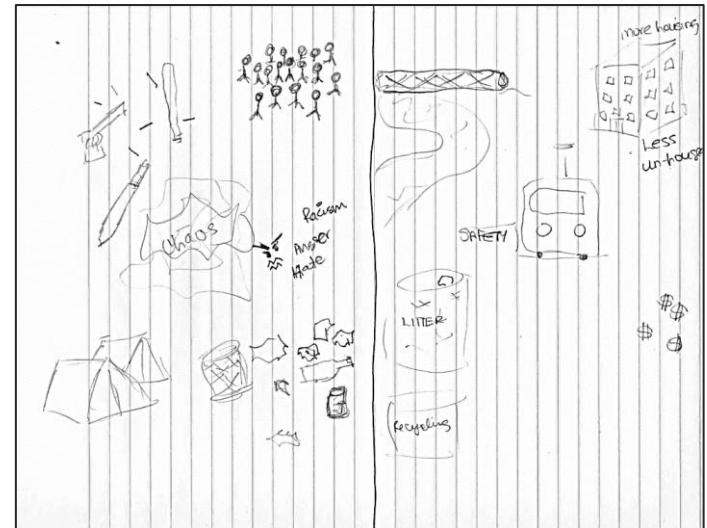


Illustration by a resident of northwest Calgary

“Ten years ago I was 13, taking transit for the first time in a school uniform that had a kilt. Taking transit by myself as a young girl probably not the safest option to begin with, but it still felt safer than maybe two years ago when I was waitressing taking transit by myself at midnight trying to get home.”

– Northeast resident

“There’s litter everywhere. There’s stains on sidewalks. I am a bit of a germaphobe, so I feel like I don’t want to walk my dogs down here. My husband was going to bring our dogs, and (he said) ‘I thought about the dirt and the filth of it, and I’m not bringing the dogs down there.’”

– Southeast resident

Perceptions of Downtown Today

“Coming to downtown is just a nightmare. I don’t want to take transit since it’s sketchy and takes forever. What if it’s shut down on the weekend like it is almost every weekend? And then driving, especially if there’s an event going on, you’re stuck on traffic on that 4th Street bridge for 50 minutes sometimes. It’s a nightmare.”

– *Northeast resident*

“There are so many different communities. We have many restaurants, live dances, festivals. Like going for walks by Prince’s Island Park, you can see so many cultures set up with different music and dancing. Downtown is multicultural.”

– *Downtown resident*

- **Bland/dull/lifeless.** In the different groups, participants indicated the central commercial core is somewhat dull, especially in the evenings and on weekends. Several felt that this is more noticeable today, as fewer people work in the area and there are more vacant spaces than ever before. However, many pointed out that even before COVID-19, downtown Calgary had relatively little street activity or nightlife and that in this respect, it is not like other large Canadian cities like Toronto and Montreal.
- **Traffic/construction.** Participants from more suburban neighbourhoods noted downtown is difficult to travel through, with traffic congestion at key points due to road construction or other issues.
- **Culture/diversity.** Those in the downtown session commented positively on the fact the area has a diverse population, as well as a range of different things to do.
- **Cost/Expensive.** A few participants noted that downtown Calgary is a somewhat costly place to live and that it can be expensive to eat and drink in area bars and restaurants.

Perceptions of Downtown Today

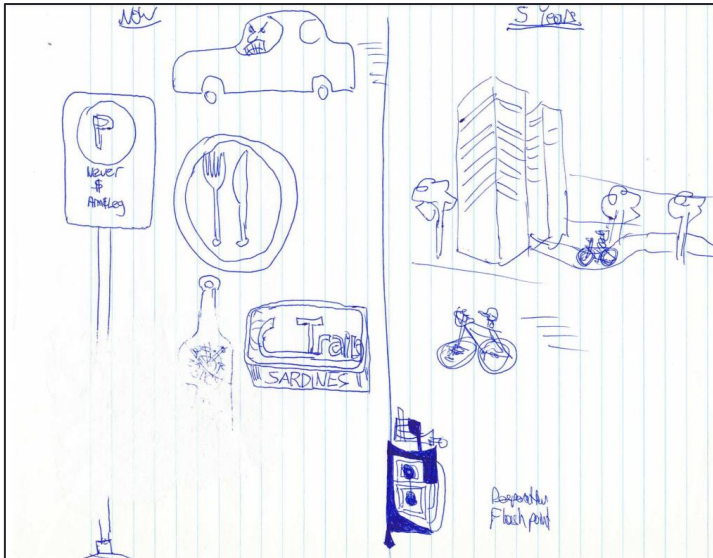


Illustration by a southwest Calgary resident

- Parks/greenspace.** Those from downtown or near-downtown neighbourhoods (as well as a couple of participants from the northeast) indicated there is a good amount of greenspace in the area, especially along the Bow River. They noted this makes the area more appealing, with the river area in particular being a draw that brings people to visit.
 - A couple of participants, however, indicated these areas do not feel completely safe.
- Other forms of transportation.** A couple of participants in the near-in downtown session mentioned how it is common now for people to get around downtown on rentable scooters, while a couple of suburban participants noted there are now bike lanes. Some liked the new bike lanes, while others indicated they make have taken away lanes from vehicles and contribute to gridlock.

“I think the Bow River has amazing potential for some nice walkways along there. And some of it’s been done, I think there’s a chance for it to be even better. I think we have to have a more positive East Village. Right now, the East Village is sketchy but it’s a place that we could emulate, we get some good things come out of it lately.”

– Northwest resident

“I think another idea that I appreciate and love about downtown is the improvement in the bike lanes that has happened in the last few years. And now that I think about it, a large part of my family’s visits, with five of us going downtown, is by bike.”

– Southwest resident

Hopes for the Future of Downtown

- When participants envisioned what they want downtown Calgary to look like in five years, the following were the most commonly mentioned elements of their ideal downtown:
 - A livelier, busier place.** Across all groups, participants envisioned more people living in this area. Having more people in the area was seen as a panacea that will directly fix a lot of the existing problems, including concerns about safety and the perception that the area is bland and lifeless. Many felt having more residents will lead to more businesses like shops and restaurants, as well as more activities and events. Several agreed that while people from other areas may not want to come downtown, having more people permanently in the area will support businesses. As well, several agreed the concentration and visibility of persons experiencing homelessness, drug addiction and/or mental health issues will be diminished to some extent.
 - A safer place.** In the same vein, several participants hoped that downtown Calgary will be safer, with many of the existing social problems addressed. While several participants were cynical about whether this will happen, several expressed hope that providing more social supports and taking steps to address safety on Calgary Transit and at stations/platforms will make people feel more comfortable about visiting downtown.

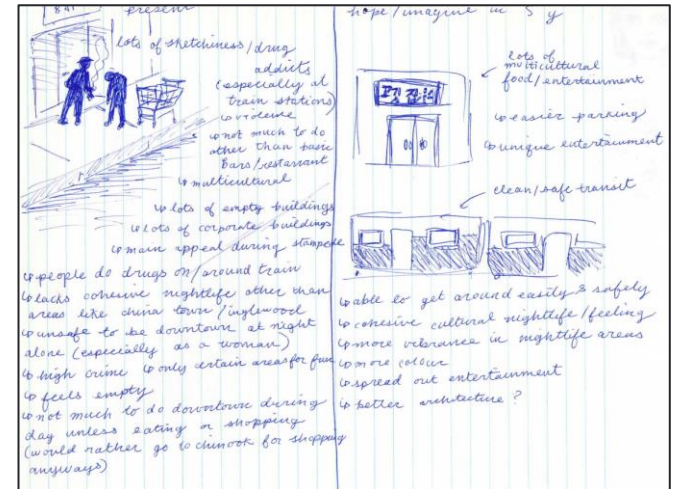


Illustration by a southwest Calgary resident

“It is super important for Calgary to have a healthy, happening downtown. When getting people together, you think of downtown, you want to go do something fun. It's like a meeting place, like live music and good food. When I go to events, typically I go downtown. Seeing things like the new arena or all these projects coming up that bring life to downtown. That's really exciting.”

– Downtown resident

Hopes for the Future of Downtown

- Other elements of this ideal downtown included:
 - A more “family friendly” place.** As participants imagined a safer and more vibrant area, they also expressed a wish to make downtown more “family friendly,” which they envisioned as being a place that will not only feel safer for a family coming from the suburbs, but also have amenities and events that are geared towards children and their parents.
 - More greenspace.** A few participants hoped to see more parks and greenspace that could improve the quality of life for those living in the area, as well as be a venue for festivals and events.
 - More public art and better architecture.** Although some criticized existing public art, others felt that having unique and appealing public art installations will add to the appeal of the area. A few participants also advocated for saving older buildings, as these were seen as adding to the character of the area.

“Public art installations make you want to be there more, I think. Just looking at it, you just appreciate it when you’re in the train or you just pass by it. It’s just a nice thing to see.”

– Southeast resident

“I love the old buildings, and it’s depressing how they rip down so many old historic buildings. How about salvaging what we’ve got and making them attractions in some way, shape, or form. Also having nice aesthetically beautiful and safe places to spend time like parks where we’ve got flowers, green spaces, and we don’t have people passed out and half dead on the grass at the park areas. So you actually feel like you can go and wander through this park and feel comfortable and enjoy a geographic or a structural beauty and history.”

– Southeast resident



Hopes for Downtown's Future

- **A new Event Centre.** Although this was described in more detail later in the session, a few participants explicitly mentioned that a new facility for hosting professional hockey games and concerts will help revitalize the area and draw people from all over Calgary to events.
- **Improvements to traffic/transportation.** Some were hopeful that downtown Calgary in 2028 will have less road congestion, with others indicating that the new Green Line and better active transportation options will help people travel within and get to and from neighbourhoods easily. More than anything, participants hoped they will be able to access downtown relatively easily and move through Calgary without experiencing significant gridlock.
- **Post-secondary presence.** A few participants mentioned that having Calgary's universities and colleges set up dedicated campuses downtown will help revitalize the area, as students will study and live in the area.



“It’s a bit of a focus on downtown as a certain university campus material. There’s (the University of Calgary) - they’ve got the old library as the architecture and urban planning faculty – and (University of Alberta) and Athabasca University. Even U.S. universities are putting some outreach campuses downtown. And that ties in I think with the utilizing the older buildings as student housing.”

– Northeast participant

Awareness of Current Initiatives

- Awareness of what is currently – and specifically – being done to improve downtown Calgary was relatively low across all the groups.
- Some participants were aware of the residential conversion program. Generally speaking, those who had heard about this thought it was a good idea, as they felt there is little benefit to having a large number of vacant office buildings if people will be working from home some or all of the time in the future. Many felt it would be better to convert these buildings into residential towers so there is greater potential to have full-time residents in the area.
- Participants were less familiar with specific initiatives to improve safety in the area, although a few mentioned that the D.O.A.P. team has been helpful in terms of addressing intoxication/drug use. A few participants noted they have seen more police officers patrolling in key areas, including along Stephen Avenue, but were uncertain about whether this was making a significant difference.
 - Specific findings regarding perceptions of public safety are covered later in this report.

“Personally, I think you’re losing a lot of tax revenue base by having towers sit empty. If you make the tax a little bit easier and just made it more welcoming for shops, for businesses, for residential, for all those things, I think the net effect would be more tax dollars into City coffers. And that would help all of us, because half the city is empty, but it still needs to be maintained, right? And they’re not getting any, or as much revenue from it.”

– Southeast resident

“Even when the big protests were going through Marda Loop and that area almost downtown, there were police all the time because of a lot of protesters. I just felt like that was well covered. I ride my bike every week downtown, do a big loop down the pathways and along the river, and there were four police officers that I passed on that trip just a week ago.”

– Northwest resident



Awareness/Perceptions of the Event Centre

Views on the Event Centre

- Overall, most participants had some degree of awareness of the latest proposal to build an Event Centre in Stampede Park, but did not have a deep understanding of the details beyond knowing that it will require a significant degree of City and provincial government investment.
- Across the groups, the consensus about the deal was generally positive. Most agreed Calgary needs a new arena to replace the aging Scotiabank Saddledome, as in each group a few participants noted that this facility is not only the oldest arena in the NHL, but also cannot accommodate the requirements for many touring concerts. Although some downplayed this, several participants noted they have travelled to Edmonton to see acts at Rogers Place because major acts have bypassed Calgary.
- Some participants expressed frustration at how long it has taken for the deal to come together, with several agreeing it should have been concluded several years ago.
- One of the other key benefits of this deal to participants is that it will ensure the Calgary Flames remain in the city for the long haul. A few participants indicated it would be a significant blow to Calgary's morale and civic image if it lost its NHL team because its owners could not get a new arena built in the city.



“I think the design itself was a little bit of an improvement over the original one. I mean, this is fitting into like the new entertainment district so there's going to be a lot of spinoff from the arena, from the concerts, and the hockey games and all of that. So, I think that's good.”

– Northeast resident

Views on the Event Centre (cont'd)

“I think it will be good for Calgary in terms of having a new space. But the amount of money that the government is providing is a little bit too much. I don't understand why the owners of the franchise can't be spending more money on it. And instead, it seems like they're winning from this deal and the taxpayers are kind of losing.”

– *Near-in downtown resident*

“Usually, these types of deals strap The City with a lot of tax revenue that needs to be paid and so I'm apprehensive. I'm cautiously optimistic in regard to how we're going to pay for it. That worries me a little bit. I know that the Calgary Flames are pitching in a little bit for it, but not nearly as much as I think that they probably should be.”

– *Near-in downtown resident*

- While most participants recognized and acknowledged the benefits of a new Event Centre, many expressed reservations about whether the City and Government of Alberta negotiated a “good deal” for this new venue. Several expressed frustration about the amount of public money that will be provided by the civic and provincial governments for this project, with many stating that a wealthy private enterprise such as Calgary Sports and Entertainment Corporation (CSEC) should pay for a greater share of the costs for this project.
- Participants had mixed views about the extent to which the Event Centre will revitalize downtown. Many agreed that it should spur more economic activity in the immediate vicinity of the proposed Rivers District and the broader East Village.
 - However, some questioned whether it will have a sustained economic impact outside of nights when there are sporting events or concerts, with one other participant citing research showing that publicly funded arenas and stadiums rarely generate enough economic activity to justify the amount of public money invested in them. A few participants also noted that even though this facility will be downtown, they questioned whether the venue will do much to revitalize other areas of downtown Calgary, as they expected its effect to be mainly on businesses within a short distance of this facility.



Festivals and Events

Views on Current Festivals/Events

- Across all groups, participants agreed that festivals and events are a key component of revitalizing downtown. Some pointed to recent events they have attended that have been positive experiences and that have done a good job of drawing people to the area. Events that were most likely to be mentioned included Lilac Festival and FrostFest.
- A few participants also mentioned long-standing activities like the Sled Island Music & Arts Fest and the Calgary Folk Music Festival as being important events drawing people downtown, with Prince's Island Park seen as an important venue for attracting visitors.
- A few participants also noted that smaller music events in Olympic Plaza have been enjoyable to attend and have given this area more life outside of weekday business hours.
- As with the broader conversation about downtown, some participants mentioned that parking and being able to get in and out of downtown easily are challenges that detract somewhat from these events.



“Lilac Festival (is) really good. They also help the local businesses. They get increased foot traffic and I don't see too much downside to that because you get people spending money. When people spend money it's a good thing for the economy, and especially if it's the downtown economy. If there were to be events every third weekend downtown, I'd probably go far more often.”

– *Near-in downtown resident*

“I went to FrostFest in the winter, February. They had street performers, food vendors, and some music at the Olympic Plaza. It was kind of spread out and you got to see all these glow in the dark lights on Stephen Avenue. I thought that was cool. A great way to get people out during the winter.”

– *Near-in downtown resident*

Desired Festivals/Events

- Participants advocated for having a greater variety of events downtown, including different sports, artistic and cultural activities that will draw families to the area. One of the key pieces of advice from some participants was to ensure that there is a variety of different types of events, as having similar activities will no longer be novel and people will not be as keen to attend if they remain static and unchanged.
- Several participants – especially those with children who live in suburban communities – stressed that there should be more events that are geared to families. While these participants acknowledged that activities geared to single, childless young adults are good, they are more likely to come downtown if there are activities that are child and family-focused.
- A couple of participants expressed the view that major events in Calgary tend to be more “corporate” and closed-off (for example, events during Stampede), and that having more events that are free to the public and easy to access will draw more people. In a few groups, participants pointed to Edmonton as an example to emulate, as this city was seen as having a major festival culture that draws people to its urban neighbourhoods.
 - Having said that, some participants noted building a similar culture of festivals and events is more challenging in Calgary because of the proximity to the mountains and the fact many people in the city choose to spend their time there on weekends rather than in the city.

“I did all that stuff 15 years ago. Coming to the Lilac Festival, Salsa Festival, Prince’s Island for Canada Day, etc. The main problem that I found is that they all were too similar. It was sort of redundant. There wasn’t really anything to do. We were like, what are we here for? Besides walking in a crowd and it’s way too hot and we want to go home.”

– Southeast resident

“The festival experiences that I’ve had in Calgary seem to be really corporately motivated. They put up fences everywhere and charge ticket access. I remember some children’s festival in downtown Calgary where you actually had to pay \$10-\$15 just to get past the fence. The philosophy of putting on festivals, whatever’s driving it, maybe it’s financial necessity or maybe it’s just a different approach, is vastly different between Calgary and Edmonton.”

– Northeast resident

Calgary



Perceptions of Public Safety

Perceptions of Public Safety

- No matter where they live within the city, participants in these different groups expressed a strong consensus that not only downtown, but all of Calgary is less safe today than it was three years ago. Although several participants acknowledged that police statistics may not show increases in crime rates or criminal activity, perception has become reality and they definitely feel less safe downtown than they did in the past.
- When asked to articulate what specifically has made downtown Calgary less safe, most attributed it to more homelessness, open drug use and people experiencing mental distress. Several participants spoke about how “unpredictable” people in this state can be, which has made them extra wary when they encounter someone experiencing these issues.
- Others indicated they have regularly witnessed anti-social behaviour, including drug use as well as people defecating, urinating or having sex in public spaces.
- Taken together, these lived experiences as well as media reports about random attacks on downtown streets and at train platforms have contributed to a strong perception or feeling that downtown is a more dangerous place. While many agreed the news media or social media may amplify or exaggerate the threat, many also agreed that this information fuels their feelings of the city being less safe than it once was.

“Homeless problems, drugs and theft. I’m just across (from) Peter Lougheed House where the park is, and I don’t feel safe taking my eight-year-old great niece down to the parks because you get accosted by the homeless people all the time.”

– *Downtown resident*

“I’ve been pushed down on the ground by someone on drugs. I’ve had swings taken at me because I’m telling people to get off our property. I don’t go out walking after about 9 p.m. anymore. I used to walk around whenever I wanted to in the morning and felt safe.”

– *Downtown resident*

“We do like to eat out, but none of it is downtown. To be honest, I’m quite affected by the poverty, homelessness, and the drug addiction. I’m really sensitive to that stuff emotionally so I find it distressing.”

– *Southeast resident*

Changes in Behaviour

- Besides going downtown less often, participants indicated they have changed their behaviour in several ways so that they feel safer when visiting downtown. This includes:
 - **Not taking transit and opting to drive.** Several participants – including some who live within or relatively close to downtown – indicated they no longer feel safe taking transit and are opting to drive to and from work and other activities.
 - **Parking closer to their destination.** Those who do drive indicated they try to park on the street right on front of where they are going, and avoid parking in parkades or surface parking lots that require them to walk a significant distance from their vehicle to their destination.
 - **Avoiding people who look to be in a state of distress.** As noted on the previous page, several participants noted they try to steer clear of people who appear to have taken drugs or be in a state of psychosis. These participants will cross the street or go somewhere else to avoid someone whom they perceive as being unpredictable.
- A small number of participants reported they have started **carrying pepper spray** as a personal safety measure when in the area. This includes one person who noted she was randomly attacked on a train relatively recently.

“I try to park my car as close as possible to whatever venue I’m going to. I actually feel safer parking my car on the street rather than even going into a parkade quite frankly. I feel like I can look around me. I don’t even like going into the City Hall parkade quite frankly. I like to be able to get from my vehicle into where I’m going to.”

– *Northeast resident*

“There are people bending at the back because they’ve taken tranquilizers and they can’t stand up anymore, and they’re just like flailing. And that seems way more unpredictable and that is when I start to change my behaviour and avoid them, since I feel like they’re so out of touch with reality that they don’t really know what’s happening.”

– *Near-in downtown resident*

Suggested Solutions

- In all the different groups, there was a strong consensus among participants that the most important thing that needs to be done to make downtown feel safer is to provide more **social supports** that will help those experiencing homelessness, drug addiction and/or mental health issues. Participants suggested a range of supports, including having more professionals (such as the D.O.A.P. team) who are trained to respond and provide support to those experiencing these issues. Some advocated for additional treatment options, including day programs that will be an intervention but are less intensive (and costly) than full-time drug rehabilitation programs.
- Another key component several participants suggested is to make sure there is more **low-cost/subsidized housing** for these individuals, as well as to ensure there are support programs available that provide “wrap-around” services.
- Participants had mixed views about **safe injection** sites. While many recognized they ensure people are not poisoned by tainted drugs and that they prevent death and serious illness, several participants felt the site at the Sheldon Chumir Health Centre in the Beltline became a hub for problems – and that having these sites elsewhere can be problematic for those living and working in the immediate vicinity. Some noted that drug dealers will set up shop near these facilities, while others said that they have not received a timely response when they have called emergency services about people experiencing overdoses or doing other activities that require an intervention.
- Those from southwest and southeast Calgary stood out for being more in favour of a **punitive/enforcement-based approach** to addressing these challenges. While participants in all groups also felt having more police presence in problem areas will help to some degree, those from southern suburban neighbourhoods were more likely to advocate for police to detain people who are intoxicated and more likely to be critical of what they viewed as a *laissez-faire* approach to drug use and anti-social behaviour.
- As part of this conversation, many agreed that The City needs to do more to communicate with residents about the efforts it is making on these fronts so people know The City is being responsive.

Suggested Solutions (cont'd)

- Several participants also advocated for other safety measures to be put in place, including **better lighting** and **more surveillance cameras** in higher-crime areas, as well as **emergency buttons** that people can use if they feel they are in an unsafe situation.
 - Although some agreed these buttons may be helpful, some questioned whether they would bring about a timely enough response if a crime was occurring. One participant mentioned pushing one during a situation and no one coming quickly enough.
- Some also noted that ensuring areas are **clean and free of graffiti** will also discourage these activities, pointing to the well-known “broken windows” theory of crime reduction applied in New York in the 1990s. Those who advocated for this hoped that if The City makes an effort to beautify areas and make green spaces and public plazas more enjoyable for users, this will address the problem to some degree.
- A couple of participants suggested having a **safe walk program** for people, especially those working and living downtown, would be helpful.
- Again, many participants agreed that if there are **more people** living in downtown Calgary, their presence will help deter crime and other anti-social behaviour. This was really seen as a critical component of fixing this problem, with more permanent residents (and visitors for events) providing eyes on the street and diluting the prevalence of those experiencing homelessness.

“Sometimes you don’t have enough time to (get your) phone out, but if you can run and hit an emergency button and an alarm went off, maybe that would startle somebody. It is more like someone’s trying to rob you and you have to get away really fast. Or, if people are coming towards you, you can hit something if you feel scared.”

– Downtown resident

“Assisting in walk home programs or something where maybe a girl could phone a line just to get assistance to her vehicle. I just think about when I went to university, I could call the security to help me get from point A to point B if I felt threatened. Things like that where maybe they’re helping just aid in situations before they get problematic.”

– Northeast resident



Views on Transit Safety

Views on Transit Safety

- Participants talked a great deal about transit safety when they discussed public safety in general. Overall, most participants agreed that Calgary Transit is no longer as safe today as it was in the past. One participant noted she had been attacked on the train recently, while others shared stories of witnessing drug use and other anti-social behaviour during rides.
 - Again, a combination of what people have experienced and witnessed as well as media coverage of stabbings and physical attacks on trains and at platforms have fueled this sense that transit is now dangerous to use, which in turn has deterred some people who used to be frequent transit users from relying on this service.
- When asked to describe where and when they have experienced safety issues on transit, several noted that the downtown stations along Seventh Avenue have become a problem area for homelessness and these behaviours, with a few also mentioning it is an issue near Stampede Park.
 - However, many indicated this is not just a downtown issue and has spread to other parts of the city. Some participants noted stations in suburban areas that are relatively close and accessible to downtown, such as Westbrook, Chinook and Marlborough, have become shelters for many people experiencing homelessness. Some from outlying suburban areas noted that they have started to see people who seem to be in distress in their areas, and this has caused them anxiety about whether their neighbourhoods are safe.

“You disengage with them right away – whatever you’re doing, looking at your phone, that sort of thing. But sometimes they get overly aggressive too. So, you can’t just ignore them totally because they might get infuriated by that kind of action. So you have to be somewhat dismissive but at the same time you have to look out for yourself – especially if there are three or four people that are approaching you.”

– Southwest resident

“People smoking crack inside the station and on the station platform, by the City Hall ... and doing the ‘fentanyl fold.’ I mean that doesn’t really creep me out, but they fold because they can’t hold themselves up.”

– Downtown resident

Solutions to Improve Safety

- Participants were asked to provide their input on some initiatives that have been undertaken to improve transit safety in Calgary, as well as asked to share some of their own ideas on what might encourage people to ride transit confidently again. These ideas included:
- Dedicated Peace Officers.** Most participants were aware that there are dedicated peace officers on Calgary Transit, with some knowing that provincial sheriff's officers had been brought in to help address this issue recently. However, many riders indicated that they have not seen these officers, with those who have encountered them noting these personnel seem to be more focused on handing out tickets for not paying fares and less focused on ensuring people are not using drugs or engaging in other anti-social behaviour. Although some questioned whether these officers have been effective, participants were supportive of their presence in a general sense.
 - A few participants indicated that even having **other, non-sworn employees** at stations and platforms may be helpful as these staff can help riders and those experiencing issues. Another suggested having staff serve as “friendly riders” on transit who can be safe people to ride with and help de-escalate situations.
- Only a few participants were aware the Mayor recently travelled on public transit to look into and highlight improvements to transit safety and the work of these dedicated peace officers. Most participants were somewhat dismissive of this initiative, as many felt it was a political “stunt” and that it will not do much to encourage more Calgarians to use transit again.

“There are pockets of transit that are more favourable than others. I’ve heard a lot about them increasing peace officers on the lines at train stations. I think they have a good infrastructure in place for that.”

– Downtown resident

“You could call them ‘friendly riders.’ Like two or three people who are in a group, and if you feel unsafe you could sit with them, and they’ll take you to your stop and make sure you get off OK. Kind of like a buddy system.”

– Northeast resident

Solutions to Improve Safety (cont'd)

- Other ideas included:
 - **Restricting Platform/Station Access.** Among participants, there was a great deal of support for the idea of restricting transit platforms and stations to riders, as many agreed this will keep people from spending the night in these areas. Those who have travelled to cities with subways, like Toronto and Montreal, noted these places do not have people sheltering in these spaces because access is restricted.
 - However, some questioned how feasible this is when the Seventh Street and other platforms are open at street level, while others felt restricting access will just mean people set up encampments outside these stations.
 - A few participants also suggested that closing certain stations at night (rather than restricting access altogether) may make a difference as it will ensure people do not camp out in or near these places overnight.
 - **Surveillance measures.** A couple of participants suggested it may also help to install more cameras at stations and on trains, with one even suggesting transit staff who remotely monitor the cameras could speak to people over a speaker telling them to stop engaging in anti-social behaviour. A couple of participants also said having **emergency buttons** in stations and on trains will make people feel safer.
 - **Offer incentives that encourage ridership.** Some participants felt that if Calgary Transit takes steps to increase ridership, such as making it free for people under the age of 12 or providing discounts for families, it will lead to more people using transit and discourage people from engaging in anti-social behaviour in these places.
 - **Communicate what is being done to make transit safer.** A few participants suggested The City needs to do more to let people know what is being done to improve safety on Calgary Transit so that it increases their confidence in the service and encourages them to ride again.