

# IMAGINING DOWNTOWN: A GLOBAL COMPARISON

## Experts shared strong messages of collaboration and rethinking old spaces at Imagining Downtown luncheon

This year's Imagining Downtown luncheon brought three high-profile panelists to Edmonton to discuss changes and investments the City and property owners need to make to revitalize downtown and keep up with similar-sized cities in North America.

[Internationally renowned retail environment strategist Larisa Ortiz, President of the International Downtown Association](#) [David Downey and Trent Edwards, Brookfield Residential's President, Canada Land & Housing](#), presented their top recommendations and engaged in honest dialogue with the Edmonton Downtown Business Association's (EDBA) CEO, Puneeta McBryan.

**Here's your summary:**



## Downtown is Edmonton's and the region's identity and 'calling card'

"Downtown is your brand and it's what attracts businesses and visitors. If it [the downtown] is not working, it says something about whether everything else is working. Everybody in the region needs to acknowledge that downtown is important to them." – Larisa Ortiz

"The number of cities that are able to attract and retain talent that don't have a vibrant downtown, is zero." – Trent Edwards.

"[From my experience here], much of Downtown Edmonton is walkable, it's clean and it's safe. By and large, it's an extraordinary place. I think you're poised for growth." – David Downey



## Downtown needs more residents.

There are around 13,000 people living in our core, and other major North American cities have at least 25,000 residents.

Higher residential density:

- attracts more major retailers
- lifts the tax base through increased property values
- increases utilization and therefore service efficiency of existing City infrastructure like parks and public transit
- significantly improves real and perceived community safety

With hybrid work now the norm, it's time to rethink some of our office buildings. For example, The Downtown Calgary Development Investment Incentive Program catalyzed the conversion of office buildings to residential and other uses, like hotels, schools, or arts centres. The significant investment worked, with 6-million square feet of office space converted, boosting downtown Calgary's population and right sizing the office market. Panelists said Cleveland, Ohio ran a similar initiative and doubled its downtown population.

With MacEwan University and Norquest College calling Downtown home, there's also significant opportunity for affordable student housing conversions, which Trent Edwards noted, is easier than market residential.

### Quotables:

"Typically, downtown properties yield more tax value [per square foot] by a factor of 10 to 30 times greater than suburban development." – Larisa Ortiz

"I look at this downtown and I'm thinking 60,70, 80,000 residents." – David Downey

## Downtown retail is over-built

Panelists remarked that Edmonton is significantly overbuilt when it comes to retail space. For Ortiz, the Edmonton City Centre shopping centre's vacancy stood out as a significant factor in downtown Edmonton's overall challenges, and she warned that the vacancy level indicated a lack of sufficient demand and the shopping centre's delayed adaptation to the changing landscape of downtown. The Monday-Friday office population that the shopping centre was built for is diminished by at least 30% and consumer shopping behaviour has changed dramatically in the post-COVID era. When asked by a local reporter after the luncheon, Ortiz was honest in saying that she estimated that half of the mall may need to be demolished.

### Quotables:

"How do we right size that retail space, so that people that are trying to fill those spaces can create co-located beautiful spaces, and they're not spreading it all around." - Larisa Ortiz

## 'Downtown' is too big

Edmonton's downtown is 2.6 square kilometres with around 1,200 businesses. For comparison, Calgary's downtown is 1.8 square kilometres with more than 2,200 businesses.

The size stretches resources thin, and for the EDBA specifically, funding per square kilometre is the lowest of any big city downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA) in the country. This constrains the EDBA's ability to create meaningful impact on the downtown visitor experience.

The advice shared is to start small with concentrated investments like [The Dairy Block in Denver](#). Who takes this on? Panelists said ideally, it's the private sector, in partnership with the EDBA, with property owners identifying areas that have potential to provide multiple offerings and being willing to make the necessary investments.

### Quotables:

"Local private sector has that heart and soul and care about the place." – David Downey

"Visitors want to visit an area where things are co-located, and your experience is really nice and curated." – Larisa Ortiz



## Collaboration and sustained leadership are vital

Public, private, nonprofit, and post-secondary partnerships are what will move this all forward, because true downtown revitalization and development plans can't be executed in a four-year political cycle. Panelists commended the [Downtown Recovery Coalition](#), which already has many of these stakeholders working together.

Downtown Edmonton, or the larger Centre City area, also needs a dedicated economic development engine. Based on the model in other major cities, this can be the downtown BIA, but panelists noted it would require a changed funding model and/or new, dedicated economic development funding. The necessary change is a minor adjustment in the BIA Regulation in the Municipal Government Act, which would allow the Downtown BIA Board of Directors to levy all commercial properties, as opposed to the current model, which levies only the tenants and puts an inequitable burden on small businesses and leaves funding short.

### Quotables:

"Make sure that the strategy that we have here, to be successful, doesn't rely on the province and federal governments to save the strategy. This is local public-private partnerships, including post-secondary... Then look for the provincial and federal governments for different forms of funding and grants to help accelerate that strategy." – Trent Edwards

"The places that get it right continue to evolve their governing. Evolving the governance, looking at partnerships, and finding the money for tools; evolving [your funding] from business tenant driven to also include property owners. " – David Downey

"Downtown Management Organizations [like the EDBA] are really the stewards of what could be a really elevated downtown environment that creates a virtuous cycle that attracts businesses and visitors." – Larisa Ortiz