

Submission to the Mayor's Office on Post-COVID Recommendations

ABOUT THE WINNIPEG CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Founded in 1873, The Chamber is Winnipeg's largest business organization, dedicated to fostering an environment in which business, and all Manitobans, can prosper. The Chamber's vision is for Winnipeg to be a competitive, technologically innovative city with a skilled labour force and modern infrastructure to support existing and emerging industries, and a city with a bright future.

Through its membership, The Chamber feels it can identify and provide valuable insight into currently held perceptions and concerns for Manitoba's future, as well as potential solutions. We are therefore pleased to present this submission on behalf of our 2,100 member companies that employ over 90,000 men and women in the City of Winnipeg.

BACKGROUND

The Chamber was asked by the Mayor's Office to assess the City's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and provide recommendations on steps the City can take to support the recovery of the business community.

Additionally, on April 21, 2021, City Council directed the administration to begin the process of developing a two-year recovery plan that includes existing and new measures to promote job and economic growth, equity, and resiliency. The plan should also include a re-imagining of the way the City delivers services, a focus on the downtown area, and options to accelerate the servicing of currently unserved employment lands within Winnipeg.

Throughout the pandemic the City has taken several steps to assist small businesses, notably:

- Temporary 15-minute loading zones in various locations throughout the Downtown and the Exchange District to allow for curbside pickup and delivery services
- One-hour complimentary parking at all metered locations throughout Winnipeg.
- An expedited process to allow for restaurants and licensed beverage manufacturers with tasting rooms to establish temporary patio spaces
- Digital submission of building permit applications
- A three-month deferral of property and business taxes in 2020 and 2021
- An Economic Support Grant of \$1,500 for small businesses and non-profit organizations
- Virtual delegations to City Council and committee meetings were allowed

While the City does have limited financial flexibility compared to other levels of government, the Chamber appreciates its efforts to assist the business community throughout the pandemic. In particular, the speed of new program development and the willingness to adopt digital tools was encouraging.

The Chamber has compiled the following recommendations based on the results of a member survey, feedback from other business associations, an environmental scan of COVID-related initiatives in Winnipeg and other cities, and consistency with existing Chamber policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adopt a “digital first” mindset

Pandemic restrictions required the City to pivot away from old paper-based or “stand in line” processes and towards more digital tools. For example, applications for the temporary patio permit were accepted online, and all building permit applications moved online as well. While this was a positive move – and in the case of building permits, one that was long overdue – it was only a half-measure. The application process for patio permits involved downloading a PDF, filling it out and emailing it back to the City. The entire process could easily be transitioned to a digital form that would reduce the steps required for applicants and improve workflow for city administrators. By contrast, the LGCA’s application process to add an outdoor patio area to a liquor licence was done through a simple online form. The City should continue to transition more of its applications online using the most streamlined process available, and new programs should be developed quickly with a “digital first” approach.

2. Continue with changes to on-street parking in the Downtown and Exchange District

It’s uncertain at this point what long-term impact the pandemic will have on work patterns. It’s expected many organizations will continue to allow employees to work at home to some extent even after all public health restrictions are lifted. Given that uncertainty, and the expected reduction in foot traffic for Downtown and Exchange District businesses, we recommend the City should extend the one-hour of complementary on-street parking and the temporary curbside pickup zones until September 2022.

3. Allow an additional deferral of property and business taxes in 2022

Many businesses have experienced significant changes to their cash flow over the past year. The Chamber’s Winter 2021 Business Conditions Survey showed that more than 50% of respondents said it would take more than a year for them to recover if they ever can. Allowing an additional extension to the payment period for 2022 taxes will give those businesses some additional cash flow flexibility.

4. Continue to allow virtual delegations at Council and committee meetings

Virtual delegations allow people to participate in Council and committee meetings from work, home or anywhere else, and don't require them to give up an entire day of productivity to sit in the Council gallery waiting their turn. This flexibility has also allowed a wider range of voices to participate in City Hall's decision-making process.

5. Establish the Economic Development Office as soon as possible

The 2020 City Budget included a commitment to re-establish an Economic Development Office within the city, however it still has not been operationalized. We think this office is critical to helping lead the City's post-pandemic recovery. In particular we think it should play a liaison role in guiding proposed major new investments (commercial, industrial, and residential) through the various decision-making points within the City.

6. Invest in servicing industrial land in CentrePort

The unserviced employment lands within the city's portion of CentrePort is one of the biggest untapped economic development opportunities within the province. The city should accelerate its current study of the costs and benefits of servicing this land, and work with other levels of government to obtain funding to move the project forward.

7. Explore options to eliminate the business tax

Winnipeg is the only major city in Canada with a standalone business tax, which creates a barrier to attracting outside investment to our city. The Chamber would once again encourage the City to work with the provincial government to explore options to eliminate the business tax, either through a long-term phaseout, a transfer of tax points, or merging it with commercial property taxes.

8. Set a goal of becoming the easiest city in Canada to set up a new business

Attracting and supporting new entrepreneurial ventures will be essential to our economic recovery from COVID-19. The City should engage in a mapping exercise to identify all the steps required to establish a new business in Winnipeg and streamline the process with the goal of becoming the easiest city in Canada to set up a business.

As had been recommended by The Chamber, the City recently committed to forming a Red Tape Working Group with members of various business organizations (including The Chamber), and we would encourage you to engage this group in helping to identify challenges to establishing a new business. We also recognize that making significant progress toward this goal will likely require participation from the province, but it should complement provincial economic development strategies.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic forced all governments to react quickly and find new ways of providing services and supporting businesses that were impacted by mandated closures. As the immediate public health threat fades, we hope that sense of urgency to modernize service delivery and to help small businesses survive and thrive continues. We feel these recommendations will help the City in that effort.