



# REBUILDING DURING AND AFTER COVID-19

How PlaceMakers' Pandemic Toolkit can assist local governments

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## ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has exposed vulnerabilities in cities globally. Local governments have struggled to respond to the emergency, uncertainty, and ever evolving situation of the pandemic. One example of a valuable tool to help local governments is the Pandemic Toolkit released by PlaceMakers. The Toolkit outlines 22 actions to assist local governments in responding to the challenges associated with COVID-19 and improve long-term resiliency in cities. The positive response and interest globally has demonstrated the need for and value of this Toolkit. Ideas for implementing the Toolkit and examples of the Toolkit in action are provided for the Winnipeg context. When assessing the Toolkit against the academic literature, this study finds there is strong alignment between the actions in the Toolkit and recommendations in the literature. The strongest areas of alignment are in relation to equity, the economy, transportation, and cities' governance strategies.

# 1.0 / INTRODUCTION

As centers of population and activity, cities are vulnerable to disturbances and stressors. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the issue of urban vulnerability to the forefront. Since the start of the pandemic, the impact on cities and cities' responses has received significant attention from researchers and city-builders. Not only are they working to understand how cities have been impacted, but they are also asking what are the major lessons that can be learned for post-COVID-19 urban planning? In a way, the pandemic has created an opportunity to better understand how cities may be affected by stressors or disasters, and what actions are needed to minimize the impacts and enhance urban resilience (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020).

# 2.0 / THE CASE

## Background

PlaceMakers is an urban planning, design, and communications firm (PlaceMakers, 2021-b). After COVID-19 hit, PlaceMakers created the PlaceMakers Pandemic Response Compendium, an ongoing crowd sourced document cataloging pandemic interventions. Through the compendium, they were able to observe and contribute to best practices and interventions in response to COVID-19. They distilled those interventions and extracted 22 government actions from the compendium into the Pandemic Toolkit that was released in October 2020 (Borys, 2020). The Toolkit includes reality-tested strategies that are intended to help local governments respond to the difficulties created by COVID-19 and build urban resiliency (PlaceMakers, 2020). PlaceMakers' goal in creating the Toolkit is "for local governments to add to their pandemic responsiveness in ways that can provide quick wins for local businesses and community health. [PlaceMakers] hope is that the toolkit helps rebuild municipal budgets quickly, by supporting local businesses and residents and by reducing the bureaucratic process" (Borys, 2020).

## 22 Actions

The Toolkit includes 22 actions and corresponding regulatory or policy tools needed for implementing each action (Borys, 2020). The Toolkit is intended to prompt expedient implementation and target the risk of policy paralysis (PlaceMakers, 2020). In addition, it was designed to encourage customization to fit local priorities and processes (PlaceMakers, 2021-b). The 22 actions are:

1. Prioritize equity and justice.
2. Enable outdoor dining.
3. Develop outdoor café design guidelines.
4. Enable outdoor shopping, learning, and places of worship.
5. Allow in-home occupation.
6. Allow accessory dwelling units.
7. Allow accessory commercial units.
8. Enable pop-up bicycle lanes.
9. Expedite temporary uses.
10. Increase availability and access to nature.
11. Create open streets.
12. Implement the U.S. National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) Streets for Pandemic Response and Recovery.
13. Reconsider legacy rules on the number of unrelated persons who can live in a home or apartment.
14. Contract with community based organizations to provide early warnings of health threatening activities.
15. Develop a community engagement strategy.
16. Develop a tiny home code.
17. Implement a marketing campaign about how 'gentle density' looks and how it can support a range of people during times of crisis.
18. Enable mixed use and update the zoning map.
19. Develop a pandemic preparedness plan.
20. Develop and steward a Business Innovation Grant (BIG) to support business transitioning to pandemic – resilient models.
21. Provide a lifeline package of broadband services.
22. Develop a data dashboard to track and monitor pandemic data.

# 3.0 TOOLKIT IN ACTION

## Using the Toolkit in Winnipeg

Most of the Toolkit actions apply to both urban and suburban areas, but some actions work better in certain environments. For example, actions that support outdoor temporary uses are better suited for walkable urban environments. This is especially true in winter cities, where design that supports walkability - such as short blocks, street character, and human scale - is necessary for creating habitable environments. As noted by Borys (2016), "Walkability mitigates the most extreme climates by providing interesting places to warm up, linger, and connect. And plenty of options about how and where to turn around and circle back". Actions such as 2, 3, and 11 are best suited for these walkable urban environments, which provide more comfortable conditions for people to spend time outdoors.

When considering suitability for the Winnipeg context, most walkable places are located in the Active Core, as shown in Figure 4. The Active Core is defined "as a neighbourhood that has an average rate of active transportation, walking and cycling, 1.5 times higher than the overall average for the census metropolitan area" (David, n.d.). There are several examples of temporary uses in the Active Core that have occurred since the onset of COVID-19 (Figures 1, 2, 3). Some temporary uses have been permitted by the City of Winnipeg through an expedited temporary patio process, allowing restaurants and tasting rooms to establish temporary patio spaces (e.g, Figures 1 and 2). Figure 3 is an example of an unsanctioned temporary use, where a resident has implemented street furniture to create an open street.

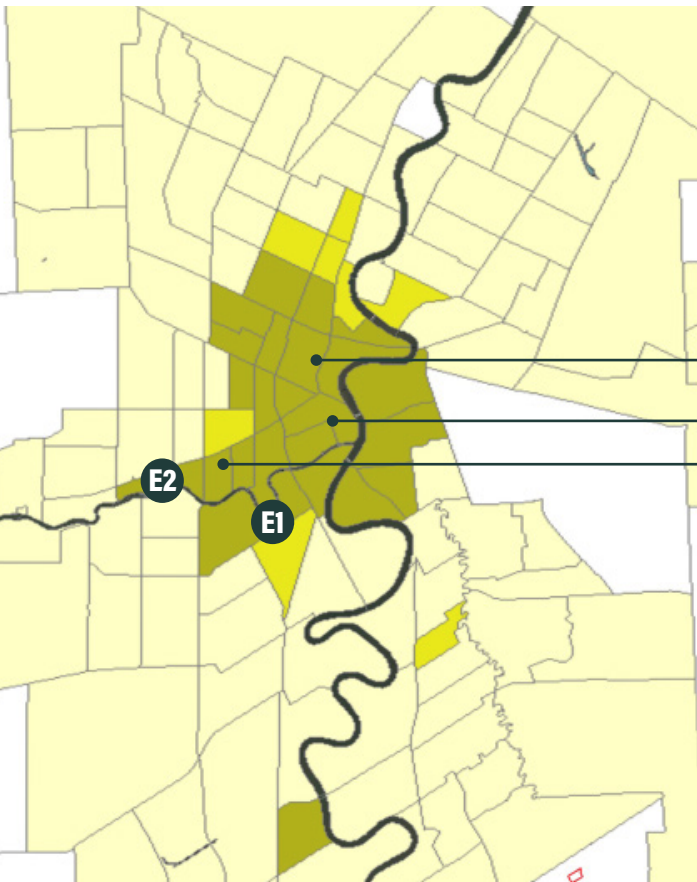


FIGURE 4 | Examples of Toolkit actions in Winnipeg's Active Core

- Active core
- Auto Suburb
- E1 Example 1
- Transit Suburb
- Exurban
- E2 Example 2

Action 2



FIGURE 1 | Temporary sidewalk patio in the Exchange District

Action 2

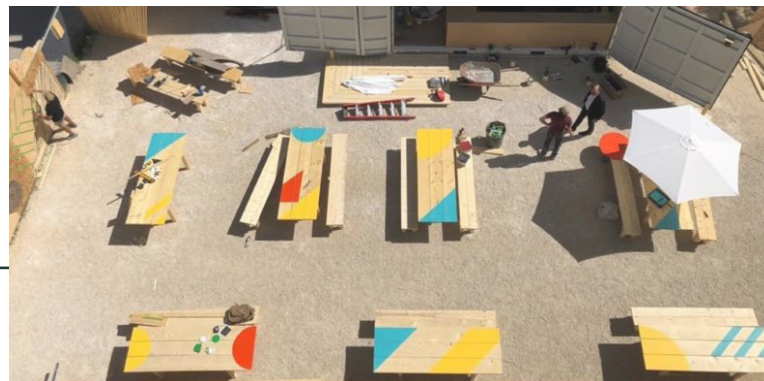


FIGURE 2 | Temporary pop-up beer garden located on Main Street

Action 9, 11



FIGURE 3 | An unsanctioned temporary open street on Arlington Street

## Toolkit in Action - Example 1 **E1**

The Serpentine Maze was a pop-up park built by local residents on the Assiniboine River in Winnipeg during the winter of 2020-2021. The park consisted of figure-eight shape walking paths through the snow; seating areas with movable chairs and “snowfa’s”; and installations such as berries and poetry frozen in blocks of ice, colorful ice globes, and discarded Christmas trees. The Maze was intended to allow people to socially connect while physical distancing. According to PlaceMakers (2021-a), the pop-up park helps implement three actions from the Pandemic Toolkit: 4) Enable outdoor learning (via the use of parkland), 5) Expedite temporary uses, and 10) Increase access to nature (via pocket parks). An outpouring of gratitude from the community demonstrated the value of creating these types of spaces, as noted by one visitor “The simple pleasures of this place renew my faith in humanity” (Borys, 2021).



**FIGURE 6** | The Serpentine Maze adjacent to the river trail  
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## Toolkit in Action - Example 2 **E2**

The City of Winnipeg implemented an Open Streets pilot project to provide more space for walking and cycling in response to COVID-19. In total, there were 10 residential streets with vehicular traffic limited to one block from 8 am to 8 pm seven days a week. An active transportation planner from the City noted that “Open streets allow pedestrians and cyclists to enjoy the road as a recreational route while maintaining social distancing” (City of Winnipeg, 2020). In a survey to City residents in September 2020, the response to the Open Streets was largely positive, with nearly 80% of respondents saying they had a positive or very

positive experience. The Open Streets pilot ended in September 2020, but the City is considering the potential implementation of Open Streets in the future and to make them more permanent with additional safety and beautification enhancements. This project demonstrates the implementation of several Pandemic Toolkit actions: 8) Enable pop-up bicycle lanes (via open streets), 9) Expedite temporary uses, and 11) Create open streets.



**FIGURE 5** | Wolseley Ave, 1 of 10 open streets in Winnipeg

## Response to Toolkit

Since its release, the Toolkit has received strong interest from the media and city-builders. PlaceMakers have been invited to participate in interviews and webinars across all platforms to discuss the Toolkit (PlaceMakers, 2021-b). The Toolkit has sparked global interest and has now been translated into 8 languages to increase accessibility. As stated by Hazel Borys, the level of support for the Toolkit “speaks to the quiet resolve of people globally committed to rebuild the local economic engines of households, businesses, and governments” (2021).

*“These 22 ideas were always the right things to do to support social equity, economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, community vibrancy and aging in place. COVID-19 underscores the urgency for all communities to focus on these levers for positive change.... This is a practical resource for planners, policy makers and politicians alike”.*

*— Angela Mathieson, city planner, CEO CentreVenture Development Corporation (PlaceMakers, 2021-b)*

# 4.0 / ANALYSIS

A brief survey of the recent academic literature highlights three key themes around the impact of COVID-19 on cities: environmental, economic, and social. The most prominent areas of alignment between the literature and the Pandemic Toolkit will be discussed here.

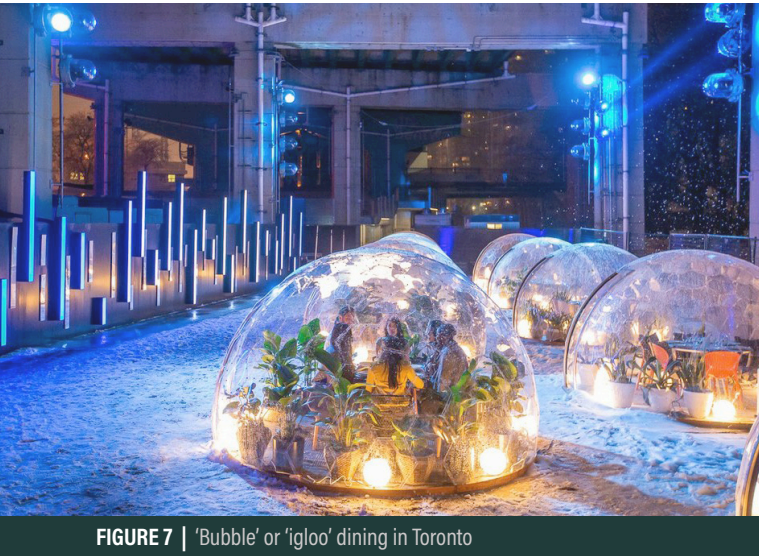


FIGURE 7 | 'Bubble' or 'igloo' dining in Toronto

**1** The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing inequalities. Those who have been hit hardest by the pandemic are minorities and people at the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum (Wade, 2020). Post-COVID-19, there needs to be more effort for inclusive planning to tackle existing inequalities. Addressing inequality challenges can also help improve resiliency to other disasters, such as climate change impacts (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020).

*Toolkit Alignment:* Action 1 – one of the broadest actions included in the Toolkit – speaks to the need for equity and justice in government strategies responding to the pandemic. The Toolkit gives the example of tools such as PHEAL: Planning for Health, Equity, Advocacy and Leadership, which is a policy platform emphasizing the need to empower and elevate the voices of communities that experience health inequities. The Toolkit includes many actions that can be viewed through an equity lens: providing economic support; improving access to amenities; creating housing options; and developing community-level initiatives and engagement. These strategies help to address social and economic inequalities that exist in cities and have been exacerbated by COVID-19.

**2** Shutdowns and restrictions have had a very negative impact on urban economies (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020). Findings thus far have found significant impacts on city tax revenues, citizens' income, tourism, hospitality, small and medium sized business, food supply chains, and migrant workers. Overall, the economic impacts have demonstrated the importance for cities to have diverse economic structures and local self-sufficiency (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020).

*Toolkit Alignment:* The Toolkit contains many targeted actions to support economic recovery. These actions expedite regulatory requirements to assist businesses and individuals, helping them to adapt quickly and create economic stability. Actions also support diverse income-generating opportunities, such as allowing people to work from home and ensuring internet infrastructure is sufficient for virtual work. These actions are targeted towards assisting businesses and individuals, but they benefit cities as a whole by improving economic resiliency and, to an extent, economic diversity.



FIGURE 8 | Temporary bike lane and "Room to Move" street in Vancouver

**3** Non-motorized transportation systems are more resilient to pandemics, as evidenced by the literature thus far (Teixeira and Lopes, 2020). Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir (2020) argue that "cities need to allocate more space to active transport modes and open/public spaces to ensure physical distancing" (12).

*Toolkit alignment:* Three Toolkit actions directly target active transportation strategies. All three focus on enabling temporary uses – open streets, pop-up bicycle lanes, and repurposing streets based on the stage of the pandemic – which are critical for providing safe, socially distanced transportation options and strengthening opportunities for residents to spend time outside. Beyond COVID-19, the literature discusses the importance of making these types of interventions permanent, as is being considered by the City of Winnipeg.

**4** The importance of city-level governance has been brought to the fore during COVID-19. Cities' governance strategies – long-term visioning, pre-event planning, early warning, and coordination of activities between sectors and stakeholders – have a critical role in timely and effective response mechanisms to pandemics and other disasters (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020). To improve urban resilience, cities must prioritize long-term visioning and plans for mitigation, absorption, recovery, and adaptation (Santos et al., 2020).

*Toolkit alignment:* As a whole, the Toolkit provides strategies for local and regional governments to respond to the many challenges presented by COVID. Adopting these types of tools and strategies will not only help cities respond to challenges now, but it will also help them become more resilient to future disturbances. Some of the more long-term actions, such as developing a pandemic preparedness plan and creating and maintaining a data dashboard for health/pandemic data, will allow cities to respond quickly and effectively to future shocks.



**FIGURE 9** | A skateboarder wearing a mask in Montreal

## 5.0 FINAL THOUGHTS

As noted in the PlaceMakers blog (Borys, 2020), colleagues have said that the Pandemic Toolkit should be undertaken by local governments with or without the pandemic. The actions help build connected communities that support wellbeing and economic and environmental health, and should therefore be adopted regardless of the pandemic. Generally, the actions in the Toolkit are largely incremental urbanist strategies (Borys, 2020). These types of strategies are well suited to the pandemic context, by outlining what should be done first and helping communities move onto the next step. The strategies outlined in the Pandemic Toolkit are strongly aligned with recommendations in the literature, especially in terms of providing immediate assistance. Implementing these strategies, and undertaking other long-term changes, are necessary to address the vulnerabilities exposed by COVID-19 and build urban resiliency.

*“Starting even before the COVID-19 pandemic, American life expectancy has been falling behind that of peer nations. We need to get serious about public health, and that includes those of us in the community design profession”.*

*— Kaid Benfield, attorney, LEED-ND cofounder, People Habitat author (PlaceMakers, 2021-b)*

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