

# Promoting sustainable and vibrant retail environments: An investigation of Edmonton, Alberta

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**R Soans**<sup>a</sup>, RJ Summers<sup>a</sup>, D Collins<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, Human Geography, University of Alberta, AB, Canada*

Different forms and locations of retail developments present various levels of support for sustainability and public space elements. Like many North American cities, the retail environment in Edmonton, Alberta, has undergone vast changes through the last century. The post-war suburban shift and rise of automobile-dependence challenged the success of the urban core and main streets that had traditionally shown greater levels of walkability and vibrancy. Through the 1970s and 80s, development pressures led to the deregulation of retail development in municipal policies, allowing market forces to dictate the forms and locations of the evolving retail market. In result, new retail formats that emphasize profit-making and efficiency have been adopted, leading to symptoms of urban decay in traditional retail areas; these take the form of suburban big-box stores and power centres that locate in auto-dependant suburban locations and lack public space elements and walkable features (e.g., South Edmonton Common).

Since the 1990s, the City of Edmonton has developed policies to bring vibrancy back to traditional and more sustainable commercial areas such as main streets, but these initiatives have seen limited success. More than 40 stakeholders related to the revitalization of mature retail areas were interviewed in this case study. These include city planners, politicians, local organizations, business revitalization zones, business owners, developers, and financiers.

It is found that the transition to revitalize and promote denser and walkable urban retail areas in Edmonton has been slowed by remnants of policies and practices that promote the growth of suburban retail. The municipality has recognized many of these issues but has found them difficult to adapt. Likewise, businesses and developers are challenged by a framework that makes locating in central urban areas challenging. It is concluded that eliminating incentives to develop automobile-dependant retail and successfully promoting sustainable and vibrant retail forms requires path dependant city processes and policies to be identified and challenged.

Corresponding author: [rsoans@ualberta.ca](mailto:rsoans@ualberta.ca)