


# RECOVER Urban Wellbeing



## 2021 Highlights Report





RECOVER is honoured to acknowledge that we learn, grow, and gather on Treaty 6 territory and Métis Homeland, which is the traditional and contemporary home of many Indigenous peoples including the nehiyawak, Niitsitapi, Nakota Sioux, Saulteaux, Dene, Métis, and Inuit among many others. It is a privilege to find ourselves in relationship to this ancient gathering place, and we commit to do all we can to recognize and renew those relations.



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# The 2021 Context in Edmonton

## The Pandemic Continued

The COVID pandemic continued to shape our lives through 2021. Vaccines became widely available and new variants emerged. Public health measures created to minimize opportunities for infection were rescinded, yet the health care system continued to be under strain, with waves of infection cresting in April and September. In many ways in 2021, the pandemic situation seemed to normalize. However, demands to recognize and address systemic problems persisted.

There is no denying that humanity has been enduring serious threats to wellbeing. We have had epidemics of depression, anxiety<sup>1</sup>, substance use<sup>2</sup>, political division<sup>3</sup>, isolation, and systemic inequalities. Domestic violence<sup>4</sup> increased and wait lists for subsidized housing grew. Some say that we are dealing with a triple existential threat - pandemic, climate change and systemic racism. Together, these have threatened the quality of life across every demographic and have had disproportionate effects on those living on the margins. Disconnection is a common theme at play in all of the above.

At the same time, there were signs and signals that all of the inequity and injustices that have been laid bare by the pandemic are putting Edmonton on a path to finding justice and healing. In 2021, as a result of the momentum created by the Black Lives Matter movement, the City of Edmonton's Community Safety and Well-being Task Force published [Safer for All](#). This report included recommendations on how to improve Edmonton's safety and wellbeing ecosystem. The City launched its Indigenous Framework in partnership with the community, which directs city staff to be listeners, advocates, connectors and partners to Indigenous Peoples. In November 2021, Edmontonians elected a first ever racialized Mayor and a new Council - one with a stronger emphasis on equity and anti-racism - and this seemed to extend to wellbeing.

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada, "[Survey on COVID-19 and Mental Health, February to May 2021](#)". Sept 27, 2021

<sup>2</sup> Government of Canada Statement, "[COVID-19: Focus on Substance Use and Stigma](#)". May 2021

<sup>3</sup> CBC News, "[COVID-19 pandemic has brought out the worst in people, pulled Canadians further apart, survey suggests](#)". March 10, 2022

<sup>4</sup> CTV News Calgary, "[Get worse before it gets better': Alberta agencies say domestic violence increased during pandemic](#)". Nov 25, 2021



# The Wellbeing Framework

## The Continued Journey

With the continued impacts of the pandemic - perhaps unsurprisingly - throughout the course of 2021, general curiosity and interest grew regarding RECOVER's work and the learnings both locally and globally. The RECOVER team intentionally created space to share learnings more widely, through its [online presence](#), and specifically via regular blogging/story sharing. 2021 was also a year where there were efforts to integrate the RECOVER Urban Wellbeing approach across some of the various business areas of the City of Edmonton.

At the same time, within the corporate City of Edmonton structure, the RECOVER team faced its own technocratic challenges. The challenge that most directly impacted the team was that the core RECOVER team became leaner. RECOVER's Project Lead retired, and the team's Social Lead had less time to devote to RECOVER as a result of being pulled in to additional work elsewhere. Also within the course of the year, the team moved twice in the corporate structure of the City - once from the Integrated Strategic Development Branch to Deputy City Manager's Office, and then from Deputy City Manager's Office to the Social Development Branch.

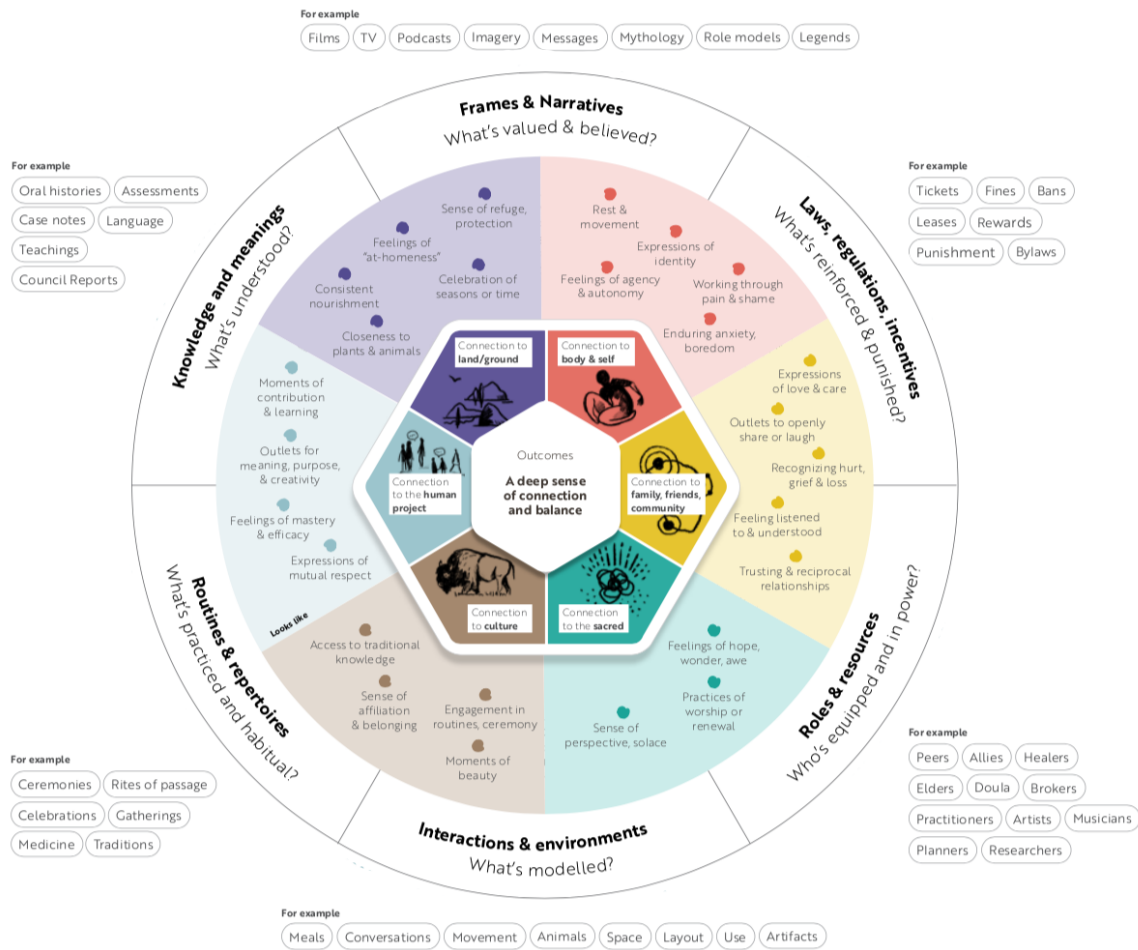
Despite the structural shifts, 2021 was really about continuing to socialize the Wellbeing Framework and making efforts to really use it meaningfully - with discernment - through RECOVER's [prototype portfolio](#).

Through the prototyping work, the team continued to deepen their learning about:

- What do we really mean by wellness and wellbeing?
- What contributes to it?
- What does it take to improve it for people in Edmonton?

The Wellbeing Framework guided the team in all their work.

# The Wellbeing Framework



This [framework for a culture of wellbeing](#) continued to be our north star throughout 2021. RECOVER focused on connection as the target outcome and through prototypes and sharing of the framework, worked to strengthen the connections that lead to wellbeing.



# Key 2021 Activities

In 2021, RECOVER Urban Wellbeing:

- Made efforts to **shift the dominant narratives** related to wellbeing. In the realm of systems level change, narratives and underlying mental models are one of the most significant levers to pull. For RECOVER, this includes the continued socializing of the **framework for urban wellbeing** towards broadening our understanding of what it means to be well and how to help people become more well, and sharing our learning journey more broadly.
- Nourished **post-secondary partnerships** with faculty and staff, to explore applications of the Wellbeing Framework in classrooms and communities.
- Supported the testing of a community care collective that helped people to process **disenfranchised grief and loss**. This was what the *Soloss* prototype was about, and it specifically tested a new role called a Losstender.
- Tested a new approach to **measuring wellbeing**, one that aligns with the Wellbeing Framework. This was what the *Auricle* prototype was about, and it specifically tested a new role called a Local Listener.
- Led and supported a variety of smaller **prototypes**, intentionally incorporating the Wellbeing Framework into this work.
- Supported the **Catalyst Group**, the advisory and learning group. They offered a number of ideas to support the recommendations of the **Community Safety and Well-being Task Force**.
- Supported other City of Edmonton work, including beginning to design the approach and process for a **City Hall Safety** project, and providing support and coaching for the design process for **Approach to Problem Properties**.

More information on these activities follows.

## Worked to Shift Dominant Wellbeing Narratives & Shared the Journey

Narratives shape the way people see and make sense of the world – including how we understand ourselves and other people. They guide the way we think about an issue; influence our perceptions and actions. Often wellbeing is boiled down to meeting basic human needs (material needs) like the needs for food, clothing and shelter. In 2021, RECOVER made an effort to shift some narratives - so that they included more consideration for higher order human needs (immaterial needs), such as the needs for healing, meaning and purpose. This was important as RECOVER's research revealed that it is important to address both needs together, not sequentially as commonly understood and as suggested by Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

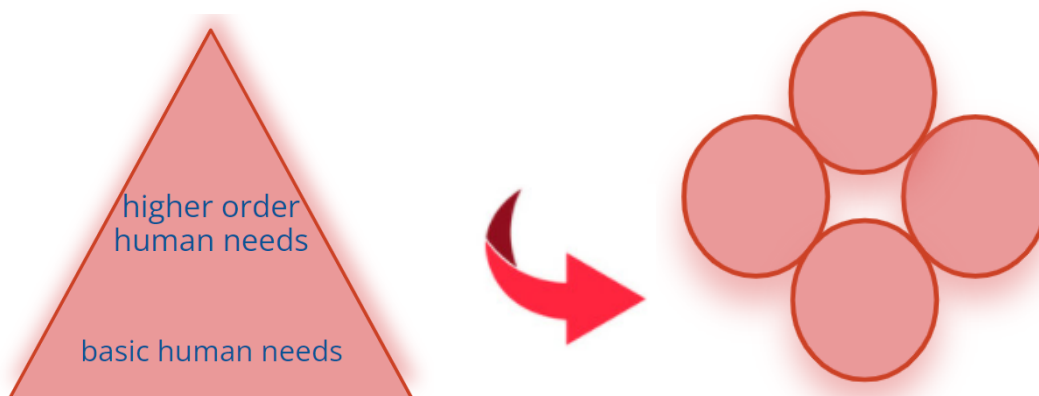



Figure: the elements of **wellness are not hierarchical**; they are **interrelated and interdependent** and need to be addressed together, at the same time

RECOVER [published 25 stories](#) (aka blog posts) over the course of 2021 - [this](#) one specifically addressed the above point about addressing all needs concurrently. The majority of the posts were written by members of the core team. Other posts were republished with permissions from authors who offered wisdom that helped deepen the core team's understanding, including ones on the importance of framing/language (such as [this](#) post about the word "vulnerability"). Overall, the posts offered various perspectives on different aspects of RECOVER's work and approach, while trying to support the shifting of some dominant narratives; the posts were also intended to share the learning journey with a broader audience.

RECOVER core team members continued to present to a wide variety of audiences including information related to the above, and asked questions like: Does the Wellbeing





Framework make sense to people? Does it resonate with their experiences? Are there parts of it that make people uncomfortable? How might they apply it to their own work? In 2021, the core team members:

- presented at the international [Policies for Better Lives](#) Conference and the local Participatory City Symposium and at the launch of MacEwan University's Interdisciplinary Dialogue Project, as well as to participants of the Healthy Built Environments in Canada webinar series
- presented to various groups and communities of practice such as:
  - The Government of Alberta Policy Connects community
  - City of Vancouver, City of Toronto, City of Kelowna and Nanaimo staff
  - The City of Edmonton Youth Council
  - Edmonton Seniors Coordinating Council
  - Edmonton's Coalition for the Advancement of Public Engagement
  - City of Edmonton staff, including staff in housing, employee services, district planning, social development, as well as in service innovation and performance

The presentations shared the research and the Wellbeing Framework, focusing on our theory of change, and the ways in which we attempt to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and approaches.

RECOVER also participated in the Local Leaders Learning Network for [Socially Connected Communities](#), and the Chief Innovators monthly meetings hosted by Bloomberg Philanthropies. In addition, RECOVER supported a grant proposal by the McGill Institute for Health and Social Policy to establish a Canadian Wellbeing Knowledge Network.

## Shared Tools

The RECOVER team has learned that it can be tricky for people to reflect upon the Wellbeing Framework, know how to apply it to themselves or their organizations, or how it could be instructful in helping them identify what they might do differently to nourish the conditions for wellbeing. To help people with applying the framework, the RECOVER team created application tools including a [Wellbeing Framework Application Worksheet](#), a [Self-Location Guide](#), and [Questions for Connection](#) tool. The team also made their [various prototyping process tools](#) publicly available.



## Nourished Post-Secondary Partnerships

As a result of the key learnings from 2020 -- and due to larger contextual challenges in the time of the pandemic, in 2021 RECOVER focused its work on encouraging, legitimizing, and cultivating ideas and innovations that support wellbeing outcomes in three contexts:

- the classroom
- the MacEwan Community, and
- within the RECOVER team

RECOVER worked directly with professors and students in two courses in 2020: an ethnographic methods course, and a fine arts course. Within both courses, RECOVER leaned into the “custom built” approach to working with professors and students in the classroom. By doing so, course participants were better able to reflect on and apply insights from the Wellbeing Framework, and how it could be applied to their coursework.

In understanding that the practical application of the Wellbeing Framework can be tricky for people, our work within the MacEwan community this year was, in part, an attempt to help bring the Framework “to life” for people through working with individual students, and the larger MacEwan community. In 2021, RECOVER hosted two student interns through the Mitacs program, and presented at the Interdisciplinary Dialogue Project.

Our work in the realm of post-secondary relationships reminded us that words to describe the conditions of being unwell can be accessed and understood easily. Social isolation, burnout, languishing, physical and mental illness are all examples of the unwellness that students and staff at MacEwan experienced in 2021. It is trickier in our westernized, capitalist way of understanding the world to be able to find the language to describe what it means to be well. Since the Wellbeing Framework incorporates teachings from peoples around the world, it helped provide a helpful way for the Social Innovation Institute to make sense of wellbeing in real-time with students. The framework provided some staff and students the language they needed to talk about their wellbeing more holistically.

For a more detailed brief of the post-secondary work completed in 2021, please see [this](#) report.



## Supported the Catalyst Group

The Catalyst Group, a group of community and institutional leaders convened to advise and support RECOVER, focused on learning and met four times in 2021. They spent time doing the following:

- Learning about specific prototypes and providing support to various prototype teams. They provided their own expertise and insights, sometimes making introductions and stewarding relationships with relevant people and/or organizations
- Learning about the Community Safety and Well-being Task Force recommendations; how the application of wellbeing thinking could support community safety and wellbeing. The Catalysts developed their own supplementary ideas to support the Task Force recommendations
- Reviewing the Soloss high fidelity prototyping results, as well as the draft business case for it
- Learning about anti-racism, the work of the Anti-Racism Advisory Committee (ARAC), as well as reflecting on synergies between anti-racism/ARAC and RECOVER Urban Wellbeing


The intention in early 2022 is to review the Catalyst group journey thus far and to examine options for its focus in the future.

## Supported Prototyping

The process of researching, designing small practices, testing them and then evaluating is called prototyping. The primary output of a prototype is a documented and shareable learning. Through experimentation, participants better understand the opportunity to intervene and have impact, including specifics, such as what kind of interactions are effective for whom and under what circumstances.

As the RECOVER team has learned that it is important to be intentional and specific in the design of solution ideas, they were mindful to use the right levers for the problems being addressed. There is much more to be learned in how solutions and approaches can be strengthened, and how the Wellbeing Framework can help to design interventions that intentionally link levers and outcomes.

In 2021, RECOVER focused on the following prototypes:




**Soloss** - This is a [prototype](#) that evolved from The Connector prototype in 2020. It focused on helping people deal with **disenfranchised grief and loss**, and was rooted in cultural healing versus clinical problem solving. Essentially, it was an experiment and investment in the capacity of residents to care for each other.

In 2021, in partnership with REACH and InWithForward, RECOVER tested a new model of community care in Belvedere and Balwin neighbourhoods. More specifically, we tested a new role called a Losstender. [Losstenders](#) were Edmontonians who signed up to bear witness to loss and help give grief a concrete form -- as paintings, objects, songs, dances, meditations and stories. Losstenders were matched with Story Sharers (people with disenfranchised grief and loss who signed up to meet with a Losstender), and they met four to five times. Through this relationship building, we tested how to strengthen social capital, reduce stigma, and contribute to community safety and healing. This prototype showed great promise and the intention in 2022 is to test this role further in a new neighbourhood, to test it as part of an employee assistance program, and to begin to build a structure for its growth.

**Auricle** - In partnership with InWithForward, RECOVER prototyped a new listening infrastructure for the City, in, with, and for communities. We were seeking to understand the ways in which people in Edmonton experience wellbeing, or the lack of it. We wanted to learn how to **measure wellbeing**; how to shift data from being a numbers-driven exercise, based on colonial ways of knowing, towards data as a storytelling experience, nourished by multiple ways of knowing and being.

Through the [prototype](#), and in collaboration with people who live in the Alberta Avenue neighbourhood, we tested the following:

- **Values:** To try to live into our [anti-oppressive and de-colonial values](#), we needed to explicitly reject data gathering as an extractive activity, and instead, develop language and practices that honour mutual respect, relationality, experience and context.
- **Roles:** In an effort to create an experience of data collection rooted in reciprocity and relationship, we hired 10 [Local Listeners](#) to meet, connect with, and gather stories from their neighbours.
- **Data Collection Tools:** Deliberately avoiding dominant, colonial methods of surveys and focus groups, we blended the qualitative and the quantitative using a narrative-based data collection platform called *Sensemaker*.

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- **Community Sensemaking:** Our intention was to involve neighbours in the process of sensemaking and analysis at every level, from the moment they shared their own story, to a [festival](#) in which they were asked to engage with and react to raw data and stories contributed by their community, to a [digital dashboard](#) that they can use to seek out patterns and insights on their own.


A detailed overview of the major learnings from this prototype can be found [here](#).

**The Gallery** - While this [prototype](#) focuses on the sidewalk space adjacent to Edmonton City Centre in downtown Edmonton and has elements that relate to streetscaping, it is really about nurturing connections across difference.

In February/March 2021, decorative lighting hanging above the sidewalk and artwork in the windows facing 102A Avenue were installed. The lighting was meant to make the space more inviting. The artwork was created by street-involved artists and was accompanied by stories of how making the art helped them to reconnect to one or more of the elements at the heart of RECOVER's Wellbeing Framework. The intention of the artwork was to spark curiosity and empathy.

Then in October 2021, RECOVER hosted a workshop series consisting of three gatherings. The target audience were members of downtown's business community. The first gathering was tailored to provide some context to help them engage with those with lived experience of being marginalized; the second to create a safe and warm environment to engage in conversation and connection across differences, and, the third was an opportunity to debrief and digest learnings and insights. The main workshop was the second one and this is when we met in-person altogether with an artist who had deep experience living on the margins and experiencing homelessness. She taught us how to do her style of applique art and shared her story. Participants shared that the experience did encourage them to be more curious and motivate them to want to connect with those living in the margins in spite of existing tensions. There are plans to host more workshops.

**Old Strathcona Neighbours Project** - This [prototype](#) wanted to imagine what would happen if everyone had the opportunity to contribute to their community, build relationships with their neighbours, and be valued for their presence. The initial idea was to connect marginalized community members with casual employment opportunities in and around the Old Strathcona neighbourhood.



COVID required the team to pivot a number of times, trying to focus on building and maintaining connections with participants. In 2021, during the winter months, the Neighbours Project offered various experiences at the Cessco shelter, and throughout the spring, summer and fall months, the Project offered outside work opportunities for the community.

COVID made it very challenging to get our winter programming off the ground. Despite this, the team was still able to offer: 3 art nights that helped to decorate the shelter, and 15 work opportunities that employed 32 people, including window washing and yard work in and around Old Strathcona. Individuals had the opportunity to learn more about each other, build relationships, and contribute to their community.

Due to team constraints, and the difficulties of navigating this work during COVID, this prototype has officially winded down. The team wishes to remain connected to the community as they are able.

**Expectant** - This community-led [prototype](#) explored ways to support people in their transition to parenthood by allowing space for healing and nourishment through entering “the heart space.” The team learned in 2021 that very few organizations in the social service sector are set up to enable “heart space” conversations. In 2021, the team tested how it might be possible to open up space for those conversations within an organizational context.

To test out this notion of influencing organizations towards being healing Informed, the prototype team offered two workshops for staff of the Candora Society. The first workshop was designed around introducing unlearning practices, to open up the space for staff to think about their challenges differently. The second workshop was designed around introducing the wellbeing framework.

**Affordable Housing Solutions Lab Prototypes** - Also, in early 2021, RECOVER partnered with the Affordable Housing Solutions Lab so that the Catalyst group could support three of their housing prototypes: one led by the Multicultural Health Brokers and two led by Green Violin, a housing nonprofit focused on inclusion and sustainability. The Multicultural Health Brokers prototype did not proceed. Some Catalysts and RECOVER core team members did meet to support Green Violin in their work, but their involvement was short-lived.



## Supported Other City Work

In 2021, RECOVER was invited to support City of Edmonton work within the corporation.

RECOVER supported the **Approach to Problem Properties** project in their application of a human centred-design approach towards addressing the complex challenges related to problem properties in Edmonton. RECOVER served as a key advisor in designing the process for the work, and as a coach for one of the project's prototypes.

RECOVER also joined the Steering Committee for the [Addictions Don't Discriminate](#) exhibit. It is an in-person interactive exhibit that takes participants on the journeys of real people whose lives have been impacted by addiction. It was designed to inspire understanding, empathy and action.

RECOVER was also asked to support work in creating a safe and welcoming environment within **City Hall**. Work began in 2021 to design the research process for this work. This included ethnographic training for staff at the City of Edmonton, as well as the initial development of an ethnographic research plan and tools for work that will take place in 2022.


## The Direction for 2022

The World Economic Forum released its list of the top ten risks facing the world in 2022. They say that “the 4th most severe risk on a global scale over the next 10 years is social cohesion erosion. This risk is the polarization, disconnection, de-humanization we see in the public arena. It is the massive rise in mental health challenges, the despair, anxiety, fear and grief gripping the collective”<sup>5</sup>. These problems have clear links to concerns about social disorder and community safety. As a society, we cannot rely on professional services alone to address these challenges. People in community have an important role to play, and RECOVER's focus on connection and community-based solutions is significant and key.

RECOVER will build on its work from 2021. The Wellbeing Framework continues to provide focus on desired connection outcomes, as well as clarity on the levers for change. Indigenous teachings for ethical space making will enrich our work. We embark on a new learning journey on how to grow our two most promising prototypes (*Soloss* and *Auricle*), and to use social research and development to improve wellbeing in other spaces. We

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<sup>5</sup> Referenced in Stepani McCallum's blog on Bravely Lead. "[Inviting Light in Challenging Times](#)". 2022



hope to learn about governance - what sort of structures can help promising practices to grow.

Partnerships that continue to evolve will deepen the understanding and application of the Wellbeing Framework, including through post-secondary institutions.

This year, when Edmonton emerges from the restrictions that have kept us disconnected for so long - the centering of connection, a deep understanding of its necessity to the good life, and the tools to better integrate it into our society and systems, will be more important than ever.



*The artwork featured on the cover page of this report was created by Shyla Pellandini for RECOVER Urban Wellbeing.*

*In regards to connection to self and her own spirituality, Shyla was inspired by the work being done by the RECOVER team and gifted her the opportunity to consider alternative ways of reimagining community. The phrase "without mud, there is no lotus" immediately came into mind. Shyla was thinking of the history of Amiskwaciy-wâskahikan, with a tumultuous and muddy past, but with a bright and blossoming present where we all work together to make a better community. Every individual is given space to discover what they contribute to the betterment of our city.*



 #recover #urbanwellnessyeg

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