

Edmonton River – Executive Summary

Vision: A positive, globally recognizable place brand that resonates with people and organizations across the Edmonton region and beyond.

Problem: Edmonton is home to more than one million residents, a multibillion-dollar economy, and a strong sense of local pride. Yet the city remains under-recognized nationally and internationally. It is often perceived as remote, cold, or defined by stereotypes such as “Deadmonton” or the oil sands, rather than by its cultural vibrancy, welcoming communities, extensive river valley, and increasingly diversified economy. The city’s core continues to face challenges related to safety and business retention, and Edmonton is not yet top-of-mind as a destination for investment, talent, or tourism.

Solution: A cohesive, adaptable, and authentic visual identity system that engages residents, businesses, visitors, and government can meaningfully contribute to the place brand being developed with the City of Edmonton. The system proposed by Edmonton River is designed to be accessible, flexible, and responsive—helping the region stand out, attract positive attention, and compete globally.

Mission: To promote Edmonton as an exceptional place to invest, live, learn, and play.

Tactics

- Develop compelling imagery and merchandise annually to highlight the region’s strengths—its diverse people, river valley, outdoor lifestyle, and festivals.
- Build authentic visual narratives that Edmontonians can identify with and that attract visitors, talent, and companies.
- Offer locally designed and sourced merchandise that celebrates Edmonton as the world’s most vibrant northern city, while supporting local makers and keeping products affordable.

Initiation: Beginning in 2013, Edmonton City Councillors and Mayors encouraged citizens to contribute to grassroots place-branding efforts. Their guidance, along with that of the City of Edmonton, has informed the Edmonton River project since its inception.

Structure: Edmonton River was formed in 2015 and has operated independently as an Alberta Limited company headquartered in Edmonton since 2017.

Intellectual Property: Includes trademarks, copyrights, designs, contacts, and the Edmonton River website and social media channels.

Products: Images and merchandise—including branded garments—sold online and through local retailers such as the Edmonton Arts Council, Muttart Conservatory, John Janzen Nature Centre, and The Makers Keep. Edmonton River partners with local print shops, maintains accessible pricing, and directs proceeds to community causes such as the Orange Shirt Society.

Team: Edmonton River is directed by Michael Overduin, who operates the initiative with his family. He co-founded and leads DiscoveryLab, which supports entrepreneurs and investors, and runs a structural biology research lab at the University of Alberta. Michael also organizes international conferences focussed on nanobiotechnology through the SMALP Network. He and his partner, Marcella Erskine, co-founded Music Shakers and Science Capital in 2010. Collaborators include illustrator Evelyn Eekels and graphic designer and city-rebranding expert Mario Minichiello.

Consultation: More than 900 contributors—including Indigenous leaders, business and government representatives, artists, and designers—have informed the development of the visual identity system and co-creation of imagery over the past decade.

Competition: Calgary is Edmonton’s closest competitor for investment and tourism and invested \$5 million in 2024 to launch its “Blue Sky City” brand. Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver continue to hold strong global reputations.

Need: Edmonton River seeks partnerships with the City of Edmonton, Edmonton Global, Explore Edmonton, Edmonton Unlimited, business networks, and charities to expand its programming—including co-creation of imagery, merchandise production and distribution, and coordinated sponsorship of events, conferences, and festivals.

Costs: A new place brand can be implemented within existing budgets. It can streamline branding, marketing, and public engagement efforts and reduce the internal strain currently experienced by Communications & Engagement teams and other branches of government and business that promote the city locally and globally without a singular, inclusive, and memorable visual identity system.

Risk Management: A broad consultation network across business, creative, and government sectors helps identify concerns early and guide the ongoing evolution of imagery that reflects authentic dimensions of the city and region.

Benefits: A widely adopted, authentic place brand—supported by ongoing infrastructure improvements and enhanced services for people facing housing insecurity—can significantly strengthen Edmonton’s reputation. Expected outcomes include greater social cohesion, increased investment, stronger talent attraction, and long-term growth in tax revenues.

Community feedback includes:

- “The design truly encompasses Edmonton and its history.”
- “Excellent design with so much detail about the culture of Edmonton.”
- “I love the idea of a home which also covers the cultural and Indigenous peoples’ philosophy.”
- “This encompasses love and safety.”
- “Fun design.”
- “Looks amazing.”
- “Beautiful!”

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