

OUR VIEW | YOUR SAY

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Winnipeg architect Wins Bridgman

EDITORIAL

Public washrooms downtown long overdue

THE folks at the Downtown Winnipeg Business Improvement Zone (BIZ) are customarily polite, so when they broach a topic that is less than genteel, we should listen.

They have pinpointed four or five areas where people are relieving themselves outdoors because there are no public washrooms available. The areas of concern are on Main Street and in the Portage Place area, the Exchange District and the Sports, Hospitality and Entertainment District.

Unfortunately, there is overwhelming — and unsanitary — evidence that the problem is common. About once a week, staff at the Exchange District BIZ power-spray disinfectant on downtown sites such as alleys and the outside walls of businesses that have been contaminated with human waste.

It should be noted that people responsible are only enduring the humiliation of doing their private business in public because they don't have a choice. They're often homeless, but not always: some are visitors to downtown who can't suppress nature's urgent call. The long-standing scarcity of outdoor toilets in Winnipeg leaves them without a dignified way to relieve themselves — and it leaves Winnipeg embarrassingly short of its am-

bitution to be an urban centre of refinement.

Throughout the years, there have been attempts to provide permanent outdoor facilities in Winnipeg. Public toilets in Memorial Park, across from the legislature, were dismantled in 2006. Two portable toilets near Old Market Square were removed nine years ago. In both cases, they were removed because they were being misused, often for sex, drug abuse or as sleeping quarters.

Many cities in Europe provide adequate outdoor facilities and some cities in Canada — including Vancouver and Montreal — are experimenting with self-cleaning public toilets.

In Winnipeg, the dearth of public toilets in the downtown area has led to many complaints. Happily, it has also led to Downtown Winnipeg BIZ initiating modest, but positive, action that was announced last week at the group's annual general meeting.

Downtown Winnipeg BIZ plans three temporary "pop-up parks," in which sidewalks will be extended into parking lanes to create a patio-like space for amenities such as food vendors, benches and entertainment. While the concept of pop-up parks sounds compelling, what was even more important was an inclination by BIZ to also at-

tempt "pop-up toilets."

Downtown BIZ has commissioned a local architect to help develop a master plan and bring forward concepts for a long-term toilet strategy and something to meet short-term toilet needs.

Interestingly, the architect commissioned by Downtown Winnipeg BIZ is Wins Bridgman, who is known in these parts for having led a toilet insurrection of sorts.

In 2008, he ignored city hall and set up two portable toilets near his office at the corner of Higgins Avenue and Main Street, for the use of the many street people in the neighbourhood who frequently soil the surrounding property. City officials ended the short-term sedition when they ordered the toilets removed because Mr. Bridgman didn't have permits for them and because, officials said, the outdoor toilets didn't look good.

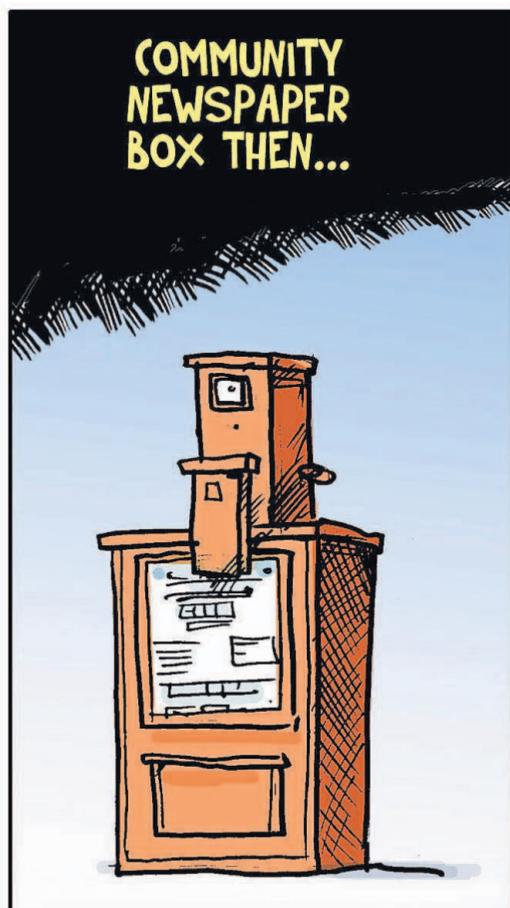
As someone who favoured a practical solution over government red tape, Mr. Bridgman is an inspired choice as the point man in the quest for some form of public toilets downtown. His undertaking warrants financial and bureaucratic backing from all levels of government and industry.

It's about human dignity. Everyone deserves a private place to go.

WHAT'S YOUR TAKE?

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LETTERS AND FP COMMENTS

Spending misguided

I'VE read with some interest about the mayor's plans to re-open the Portage and Main intersection to pedestrians — ludicrous! A more intelligent idea would be to build a covered overhead crosswalk similar to the Indianapolis Artsgarden.

The Indianapolis downtown has gone through an impressive revival and our city planners should have a good look at what has been accomplished there. The cost to build that stunning architectural masterpiece of an overhead crosswalk was US\$12 million, which may sound like a lot, but in comparison to the \$60 million pledged by the city, provincial and federal governments to build the "Diversity Gardens" in Assiniboine Park, maybe it's not so much.

All this money tossed around for grand projects in the city and no money for a road to Churchill — or to repair the railroad tracks. You have to wonder about the mindset of the people who determine spending priorities. We keep getting told northern development is important — that fixing roads and bettering peoples' lives should be how our tax dollars get spent — and the mayor is still pushing for re-opening Portage and Main to pedestrians?

So now money is tight and the city is looking to trim some public transit bus routes, increase bus fare and increase parking costs downtown! Someone has seriously misplaced priorities. Let's be a little smarter about how our tax dollars are spent — that is where savings come from.

DARYL MARTEL
Winnipeg

▼ Three and a half million dollars wasted! That's about 3,500 property tax bills of \$1,000 down the drain. And you wonder why taxes are going up.

The issue has already been "studied" to death a while back, with all the pros and cons. What has changed? Nothing.

It seems whenever money is made available, a group forms around it. By the time the so-called consultants feed off the trough, little is left for ac-

tual practical activity. Hence the huge cost overruns so common to administrations in Winnipeg.

The Public Safety Building is a perfect example! Rapid transit and bike lanes are others.

Steve Juba, a mayor with amazing foresight, had ideas that were totally ignored due to the automobile lobby. Look him up.

The insanity of Winnipeg traffic could be cleaned up substantially by a licence, exempting tourists, required to drive downtown.

Transit should be free. Muster points with heated parking could be established, as in Disney World, where citizens take an enviro-friendly electric shuttle to a monorail run automatically.

Streets would be safe for cycling without the current dense traffic. As it stands, the bike paths are a death trap for cyclists.

Many cities in Europe are implementing similar features. In fact, gasoline-powered vehicles are being phased out there.

Why is Winnipeg so far behind the curve with almost medieval thinking?

JIM STUPARYK
Winnipeg

Hydro hikes outrageous

MANITOBA Hydro wants a 7.9 per cent increase for five years running and 4.54 per cent increase in 2024. On top of that, they talk about the pursuit of "additional sales of 'surplus' electricity outside of Manitoba." If we have a surplus, why are they asking for these outrageous increases? Why are they "short of cash" needed to fund core operations over the next five years?

I say dump the Keeyask generating station and Bipole III. The market for electricity is down, the availability of cheap natural gas-fired generation, resulting in lower electricity on the short-term opportunity market, as they say, has made this building of the Keeyask and Bipole III "unreasonable" burdens on the people of this province.

Are we on the road to the crisis they have in Ontario, where people's hydro bills are almost as much as their mortgages? This is our resource, Manitoba's, which many of us believe should

grant us an affordable rate of hydro and perhaps even a bonus cheque once and a while for the sale of hydro power outside the province.

Premier Pallister and the Public Utilities Board: do something! Put people in Hydro management willing to get that company balanced without driving our rates through the roof.

ROZALIA KENNEDY
Winnipeg

Art helps neighbourhoods thrive

ONCE again we are faced with the closing of a cultural space in our Exchange District. I refer to the Finch Gallery Workshop, which we may suppose will be replaced by another bit of nothingness.

The Toronto-based urbanist Richard Florida has, for some years now, pointed out the profound contribution that an arts and cultural neighbourhood makes to the larger urban environment — physically, esthetically and financially.

Indeed, many articles have been written about the positive impact on cities: think New York, Paris, Baltimore, Hamilton, Portland.

Worth mentioning in this regard are the actual financial contributions of artists themselves, as renters, restaurant customers, shoppers, etc. Moreover, when artists and art organizations congregate in particular areas — however derelict the areas may have been — we are instrumental in the development of a positive trajectory: we make the streets safe, which encourages shops and restaurants to move in, which transforms the old buildings into livable domestic spaces. In short, the neighbourhood becomes "cool." New business is encouraged and profitability is increased.

And it is equally true at this stage in the development of a vibrant arts neighbourhood, the artists and the organizations themselves face the great risk of being forced out by rising rents, and of having to move to another (more rundown) area to begin the process all over again. So here we are; we have seen this all before. But is there not some way to arrest this dismal cycle?

Visitors, customers and tourists are drawn to the Exchange because of its coolness factor — its bars, restaurants, shops and art galleries, along with the grit and historical romance of its beautiful streets. Turn it into a bland and homogeneous neighbourhood and the smart customer or visitor will quickly look elsewhere.

SUZANNE GILLIES
Winnipeg

No ways to treat seniors

IT looks as though personal care homes are the newest victims of provincial government cuts. It's unbelievable for the provincial government to slash \$1 million from 40 facilities in Winnipeg.

Our members who work in these facilities will tell you that resources are already stretched thin. In some cases, we're hearing that workers don't have proper gloves available to them.

I know at one of the facilities, the employer has not filled a rehab therapy position due to the budget cuts.

This means residents who have suffered a stroke or have broken a bone no longer have access to range-of-motion exercises to help them in their recovery.

As well, due to staffing shortages, there is less time to give baths or plan activities for residents to keep their minds engaged.

Everything is being rushed and our grandparents, parents and other loved ones are paying the price because of it. This is no way to treat our seniors.

Earlier this year, the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority was ordered by the government to cut its budget by \$83 million.

The MGEU has spoken out about cuts driven by the bottom line instead of patient care.

We will continue to urge the premier and minister of health to reverse health-care cuts that are putting patient care in jeopardy.

MICHELLE GAWRONSKY
MGEU President