

Downtown pop-up parks planned

BIZ AIMS TO DRAW MORE PEOPLE TO 'FORGOTTEN' SPACES

By: Murray McNeill

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Downtown Winnipeg BIZ CEO Stefano Grande: 'It's all about trying to get more activity in our downtown. It adds vibe, it adds safety, it adds excitement.'

Coming soon to some downtown Winnipeg streets: pop-up parks and maybe some pop-up public toilets.

The Downtown Winnipeg Business Improvement Zone (BIZ) wants to bring new life and more people to three "forgotten" downtown spaces by taking over a portion of the street and turning it into a temporary "pop-up park/event venue."

It's also looking into ways to add public toilets to four or five areas of the downtown where public urination is a problem.

It's all part of a three-year, \$300,000 Placemaking Initiative that was first unveiled last year as part of the BIZ's new three-year strategic plan for 2017- 19.

The streetscaping initiative includes a three-year pilot project in which three temporary pop-up parks/event venues will be created by extending the sidewalk out into the parking lane to create a public-patio-like space for people and amenities.

In some cases, the entire street could be closed temporarily for larger on-street activities such as special events, food-and-drink vendors, beer gardens or open-air markets.

These new spaces will be created for the summer months, and could feature elements such as food vendors, live entertainment, benches, outdoor tables and chairs, potted trees, flowers and string lighting.

"Imagine people lounging, eating, sipping, listening, watching, sunning, shading, relaxing," a glossy BIZ brochure states. "It is a temporary streetscape that allow us to test drive new public spaces without spending a bundle."

The locations for the pop-up parks/event venues will be Kennedy Street between Portage and Graham avenues, the north side of Portage between Hargrave and Donald streets, and Smith Street between Ellice and Notre Dame avenues.

Downtown Winnipeg BIZ CEO Stefano Grande noted in an interview following the BIZ's annual general meeting on Tuesday that the south side of Portage, between Donald and Hargrave, was reduced from four lanes to two when the Bell MTS Place was built. But the north side of the street remained four lanes wide.

"So you've got all this space (on the north side)," he said, adding it would be much better to take one or two of those lanes and create a WiFi-equipped public park or patio area where people can relax, soak up the sun, maybe check their emails, have something to eat or drink, or listen to some live entertainment.

"It's all about trying to get more activity in our downtown. It adds vibe, it adds safety, it adds excitement," he said. "And maybe it leads to some permanent infrastructure changes in our downtown that are more about pedestrians, which are the bread and butter for our businesses."

The first phase of the pop-up-parks project involved collecting ideas from the public, architects, designers and downtown business owners on what should be included in these temporary spaces. The next phase involves creating one or two of the spaces this spring and another one or two the following spring. A second part of the Placemaking Initiative involves developing a public-toilet strategy for the downtown that hopefully will reduce incidents of people urinating on the street, in doorways or in back lanes.

Grande said the BIZ has identified four or five areas where that's occurring because there are no public washrooms available. They include the Main Street area, the Sports, Hospitality and Entertainment District, the Portage Place area and the Exchange District.

"We want to develop a long-term strategy for how to develop some public washrooms and also see if there is anything we can do in the short term," he said. "Right now, the technology for public toilets is quite impressive. Can we do a pop-up toilet... that fits in with our urban environment and is very positive?"

He said local architect Wins Bridgman has been commissioned to help develop a master plan and bring some concepts forward.

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