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Downtown Winnipeggers need someplace to go

By: Carl DeGurse

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David Lipnowski / Winnipeg Free Press Files

Portable toilets are temporarily provided for events such as festivals, but there is a lack of permanent outdoor toilets in downtown Winnipeg.

The Canada Summer Games left behind a wonderful legacy of improved athletic facilities. Unfortunately, they didn't leave behind the toilets.

The long-standing scarcity of outdoor toilets in Winnipeg was temporarily solved this summer by the Games, which spread a total of 108 portable toilets throughout the

city and by festivals such as the Fringe Festival and Interstellar Rodeo, which provided rows of Porta Potties.

For organizers of large gatherings, it's just common sense: to get the public to come, provide toilets for them to go.

But this fundamental rule of catering to the public's needs is ignored by municipal officials who launch repeated campaigns to attract people to downtown Winnipeg, but don't provide public toilets to accommodate people who feel the call of nature.

This need can be particularly frequent for children, older people and people whose specific needs can require immediate restroom access. These people can't easily "hold it" until they leave downtown and rush home.

It's true that downtown restaurants and shops have washrooms, but they are often reserved for customers, a restriction that can be humiliating for passersby who come off the street with an urgent need and are told they can't do their business in the washroom unless they do business with the cashier.

People left in dire circumstances

A few far-flung places in downtown Winnipeg allow free access to washrooms, including the Millennium Library, Portage Place mall and the Manitoba legislature. But such facilities are often closed and, even when open, can be impossibly distant for someone with immediate washroom needs.

As a result, some people avoid downtown and instead opt for suburban shopping centres, which unfailingly accommodate this essential human need.

A second result of the dearth of public toilets downtown is that some desperate people are forced to forgo their dignity and relieve themselves outdoors, in alleys or against the outside walls of businesses.

They must feel degraded by having to do so in open areas, but in the absence of alternatives, what must be done will be done.

Staff of the Exchange BIZ regularly see — and smell — evidence of outdoor excretions. About once a week, they power-spray disinfectant on downtown sites

where people urinate, creating an odour that's particularly foul when heated by summer sun.

The people who leave behind their urine and feces are often, but not always, homeless people, Brian Timmerman, executive director of the BIZ, said in an interview.

Attempts in the past have failed

There have been many attempts in past years to provide public washrooms downtown.

The BIZ tried installing two portable toilets near Old Market Square, but they were removed nine years ago because they were often being used for sex, drug abuse and as sleeping quarters, said Timmerman.

Public washrooms in Memorial Park, across from the legislature, lasted about three decades before they were dismantled in the summer of 2006. Again, the problem was the facilities were being misused by transients, prostitutes and drug users.

In a case that could be described as a toilet insurrection, architect Wins Bridgman ignored city hall and set up two portable toilets in 2008 near his office at the corner of Higgins Avenue and Main Street.

City of Winnipeg officials ordered the toilets removed because Bridgman didn't have permits for them and because, officials said, the outdoor toilets didn't look good. As if it looks better to have people urinating in public?

Supplying public toilets is neither simple nor inexpensive. A single facility can cost as much as \$300,000 if it has plumbing that won't freeze in Winnipeg winters and includes options such as timers to prevent people from using toilets as sleeping quarters.

Other cities have found solutions

But many cities in Europe manage adequate outdoor facilities and many cities in Canada are at least trying.

Vancouver has nine self-cleaning public toilets downtown.

Montreal recently promised to install 12 self-cleaning public toilets in its downtown core and in Old Montreal.

At a minimum, Winnipeg should study options to determine which model of outdoor toilet would work best here and then acquire one or two for test-use purposes. Better to start small than not at all.

It's about sanitation. According to WaterAid International, one gram of human feces can contain 10,000,000 viruses, 1,000,000 bacteria, 1,000 parasite cysts and 100 parasite eggs.

It's also about offering a bit of dignity to people who are trapped downtown when they have a critical need to relieve themselves.

It's about revitalization of the heart of the city. It's difficult to be proud of a downtown where people are forced to answer nature's call outdoors.

Carl DeGurse is a member of the Free Press editorial board.

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