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Pop-Up Toilet finds home where it is needed most

By: Ben Waldman

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After a few months searching for a place to go, Winnipeg's Pop-Up Toilet has found its spot at the corner of Main Street and Henry Avenue, and will officially open to the public today.

The Pop-Up Toilet, which debuted in 2018 at various locations in downtown Winnipeg, was designed by Bridgman Collaborative Architecture to address the absence of free, accessible bathroom facilities in the city's core. It was used nearly 2,000 times from June to September.



This year, instead of moving around, the bright orange potties are staying put at Main and Henry, where some of the city's most vulnerable people access shelter and resources from the Salvation Army, Thunderbird House and the Main Street Project.

"We wanted to have it in one location," said Melanie Andrushko of the Downtown BIZ, which funds the pop-up. Andrushko said the toilet was in storage at Ken's Crane Service, but the BIZ needed a partner organization to get it back to the street.

"Main Street Project seemed like an obvious choice," said Andrushko. "They know the community well, and know exactly what they need to be doing."

The pop-up's services must be adapted to suit the distinct needs of the potential users, said Main Street Project executive director Rick Lees.

"This is much greater than just a toilet," he told the *Free Press*. To Lees, it's a harm-reduction tool.

Main Street Project, Lees said, will reach out to clients, providing harm-reduction resources such as sharps disposal, clean needles, condoms and sterile crack kits, all of which help to prevent intravenous, sexually transmitted or respiratory infections.

"Last year, we were just monitoring hygiene," said Lees, who oversaw the porta-potties when they stopped at Main and Henry in August 2018. "We weren't really doing the harm-reduction piece."

"People often get quite upset seeing people go in public spaces. They forget that people living in homelessness don't have access to things we have and regularly take for granted."

— Main Street Project executive director Rick Lees

In 2018, the pop-up had a kiosk that sold T-shirts, reusable bottles and newspapers; the profits went to Siloam Mission, which was last year's partner agency. While those services made sense in certain stops on the pop-up's journey, such as across from the Millenium Library, Andrushko said they wouldn't fit in at Main and Henry.

Lees said the harm-reduction services to be provided at the pop-up, which is a reconfigured shipping container, are an extension of those offered at his



organization's shelter and outreach van. Each month, the facility gives out about 9,500 clean needles, which prevent the sharing of used ones that might cause infection.

He said workers will provide information about safe drug use, safe sex and services. Lees points to high rates of STIs and syphilis, which has been on a provincewide increase since 2014, as areas of focus.

Above all, the pop-up toilet addresses the indignity of having nowhere to go; in those situations, public urination and defecation often occur. The Downtown BIZ said the sites where the pop-up was set up became cleaner and had less vandalism.

"People often get quite upset seeing people go in public spaces," said Lees. "They forget that people living in homelessness don't have access to things we have and regularly take for granted."

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The Downtown BIZ said long-term, permanent solutions are being discussed.

The pop-up will be staffed by Main Street Project employees and clients from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., seven days a week, but Lees said the hours could be adjusted.

Funding for the pop-up this year is roughly \$40,000.

Andrushko hopes the facility will be open to the public for as long as the weather allows.

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