

A place to go, when you need to go

By: Editorial | Posted: 05/16/2018 2:19 PM |

Come summertime, a safety-orange beacon will be erected in downtown Winnipeg. And not unlike Lady Liberty, or the Peggy's Point Lighthouse, or maybe just the golden arches coming into view on the side of a highway, it will be a signal of respite.

It is Wins Bridgman's baby: a pop-up public washroom, a decade in the making. Bridgman, the founder of BridgmanCollaborative Architecture, has partnered with the Downtown BIZ and Siloam Mission for the pilot project, which will raise awareness of the need for public toilets in the city by actually providing some.

The wheelchair-accessible facilities — two portable toilets installed inside a retrofitted shipping container — will be relocated to a new spot every few weeks, beginning in June and July in front of Holy Trinity Anglican Church at Smith Street and Graham Avenue. Other locations on the proposed pop-up's summer/fall

schedule include the south side of Portage Avenue downtown and on Main Street near the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority's headquarters.

There's also a novel social-enterprise piece to this pop-up: a kiosk, staffed by Siloam Mission clients, will sell water, coffee and other items to passersby, with proceeds going to the shelter.



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Winnipeg architect Wins Bridgman

The idea of having public washrooms rings strikingly progressive, though it's not a new idea. Winnipeg used to have five "comfort stations," which is a Victorian euphemism for "the can," in the early 1900s. Even back then, Thomas Deacon, who was mayor at the time, bemoaned this town for not having them sooner.

By the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, those comfort stations became unkempt grounds for all manner of illicit activities and, subsequently, were torn down.

Still, the dearth of public toilets downtown has also led to discomfort, with many people having to resort to relieving themselves in alleyways and behind dumpsters — and BIZ crews having to clean up after them. Access to public toilets isn't just a matter of convenience, it's a matter of human rights.

Restoring people's dignity is a big driving force behind Mr. Bridgman's vision. He recognizes that when we talk about downtown revitalization and making our city more accessible and more appealing, the conversation has to include toilets. After all, it's as that book we all read as children says: *Everyone Poops*. This is not a fringe issue. This is about dealing with a basic biological function. And it's also about affording everyone, even the most vulnerable among us, a modicum of privacy and self-respect while they address a fundamental requirement of life.

"It's a need, whether you're coming downtown to shop or going home after a concert or Jets game, or you're a homeless person," said Stefano Grande, CEO of the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ. "It's a need for everyone."

Access to a clean, safe, well-appointed public washroom shouldn't be reserved for those who can pay to use the private facilities at a coffee shop or restaurant. And making clean, safe, well-appointed public washrooms available to everyone — regardless of age, gender, race or socioeconomic circumstance — should be a matter of, well, urgency. It's a terrible feeling to have nowhere to go when you have to go.

Other cities, including Portland, San Francisco, Edmonton and Montreal, are starting to invest in public toilets. If this summer's pilot project goes well, perhaps

it will convince this city to take a forward-thinking idea from pop-up to permanent.



PHIL HOSSACK / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS FILES It's not widely known, but Union Station on Main Street has the best downtown public washrooms.

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