

City eyes permanent public washroom hours options



By: [Joyanne Pursaga](#)

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Safety concerns could prevent Winnipeg's permanent public washroom from operating 24 hours, delaying a key goal of its supporters.

A new city staff report lists options to give vulnerable people more access to the Amoowigamig facility at 715 Main St.

However, the report's author notes Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre (the organization that currently staffs the site with peer support workers from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily) doesn't want to operate it from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. due to safety risks.

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A new city staff report lists options to give vulnerable people more access to the Amoowigamig facility at 715 Main St.

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“The rate of violent crime in that area is quite concerning, so they believe, via their experience, that operating overnight will draw undue risk to their staff and to visitors of the site,” Greg MacPherson, administrative co-ordinator for safety and well-being in the city’s community services department, said in an interview.

MacPherson said washroom staff have reported some incidents of “poor” treatment by visitors during the current hours, though he did not provide details.

The city report offers four options for the site’s hours going forward:

- Continue 10-hour daily operations (\$270,500 per year);
- Expand the current peer support staffing model to cover 12, 16 or 24 hours per day (\$324,600 to \$649,200 per year);
- Extend current services to 16 hours per day and allow washroom access without support services between 11 p.m. and 7 a.m., with private security or other non-profit staff working overnight (\$612,800 to \$665,800 per year);
- Replace current peer support services with a 24-hour attendant or security service staff (at least \$420,000 per year).

Winnipeg city council previously referred the nearly \$650,000 cost estimate to offer Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata support services at the washroom round the clock for consideration in the next city budget.

While the report doesn’t recommend which option council should choose, MacPherson said switching to a different type of staffing could affect the social supports offered at the washroom, which he deems a “remarkable

success."

"I think having Ma Mawi at the site has provided a level of resource navigation. We know that (they've) provided housing for dozens of people now... It's not just been functioning as a bathroom... If we moved to a different model, we'd expect that would be interrupted and lost or at least it would shift."

The report notes the site has been visited about 30,000 times since it opened in June 2022.

Since then, staff have provided thousands of clean needles, pipes, feminine products and condoms, and given life-saving doses of naloxone eight times to prevent deaths from opioid poisoning, according to the city report.

It states staff also helped connect washroom visitors with permanent housing more than 30 times, and offered employment and income assistance, legal aid, family doctors, shelter, and Child and Family Services supports.

Community advocates have long-warned ensuring staff are always present while the washroom is open is critical to keeping visitors and staff safe. Several have urged council to pay for round-the-clock service, since it serves people experiencing poverty and homelessness who often lack other places to relieve themselves.

Wins Bridgman, whose firm Bridgman Collaborative Architecture designed the washroom, said round-the-clock operations must remain the long-term goal.



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Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, the organization that currently staffs the Amoowigamig facility with peer support workers from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily, doesn't want to operate it from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. due to safety risks.

However, “My recommendation is that the 16-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week (option offers) a really good balance. It allows for the harm reduction supplies to be available (for more hours), it increases the number of hours of the washroom and yet it balances the safety of... the workers in the area,” said Bridgman, suggesting the site operate from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily.

He stressed the facility has succeeded in providing a dignified “place to go.”

“My (workplace) is less than a block away. I can’t tell you how much of a pleasure it is to not smell urine on the front door or back door or the parking lot... and not seeing people in distress (because they have to) urinate or defecate in public... The whole area is so much cleaner.”

Coun. John Orlikow, head of council’s community services committee, said he’d still prefer the washroom operate 24 hours, but more discussion is needed to determine the best next step.

Coun. Sherri Rollins, a long-time champion of the public washroom, said she’ll reach out to its users before determining which option to support.

“I’m really attuned to the high level of stress that front-line workers face when they’re trying to deliver services,” said Rollins, adding there is a clear need to eventually ensure the washroom is available at all hours.

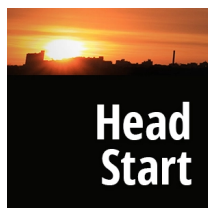
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“You see the safety issues play out with respect to the washroom (when) it is closed... You do see feces (in public places).”

Council’s community services committee will debate the report May 31. Any changes to the washroom’s hours would require full council approval.

A Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata co-ordinator could not be reached for comment by deadline Thursday.

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Born and raised in Winnipeg, Joyanne loves to tell the stories of this city, especially when politics is involved. Joyanne became the city hall reporter for the Winnipeg Free Press in early 2020.

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