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## City looking at relief options downtown, rather than making visitors ‘go’ elsewhere

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Downtown Winnipeg BIZ launched Pop-up Toilet, a new fully accessible two stall public washroom with a small retail kiosk, in Downtown Winnipeg on June 4, 2018. Danton Unger/Winnipeg Sun

The city is being offered a new strategy to help ensure Winnipeggers don't need to leave downtown to find a toilet.

The Downtown Winnipeg BIZ hopes to create a one-year pilot project with businesses and other organizations willing to open their washroom doors to the public, with no purchase required. The proposal is one of three changes the BIZ hopes will be implemented to offer clean, appropriate places for downtown visitors to relieve themselves.

A Downtown BIZ report notes 46 businesses and organizations in the area already allow such public use of their toilets. The BIZ wants a pilot project that promotes that access with 17 companies, a test it hopes the city will help fund.

The project would offer an inexpensive way to increase downtown access to public restrooms since Winnipeg lacks permanent ones, a BIZ manager told council's protection and community services committee on Friday.

"Organizations and private businesses would voluntarily open the doors of their existing washrooms to the public during their current operating hours. Washroom visitors have no obligation to buy anything and the businesses benefit from increased foot traffic (and) free publicity," said Melanie Andrushko, Downtown Winnipeg BIZ manager for transportation and placemaking.

The BIZ said the strategy has proven effective in Germany and parts of the UK.

"There's relatively low costs for this particular type of partnership because we're not constructing anything. It's merely using what already exists out there," said Andrushko.

The BIZ suggests the city cover the program's costs for additional cleaning, signs and a map to highlight participating businesses. It estimates the one-year pilot project would cost \$22,500, including cleaning and maintenance, plus some new sharps boxes (for needles and other items) and baby change tables.

The BIZ said the partnership is one step to remove barriers to restroom access, which it argues limits the time some visitors will spend downtown and leads others to actually urinate or defecate in public. A Downtown BIZ report said the organization's enviro team responds to as many as 300 biohazard calls per month.

There's also a clear need to continue offering temporary public toilets, said Wins Bridgman, of Bridgman Collaborative Architecture.

Bridgman's company designed the bright orange, pop-up toilets that the BIZ tested at some downtown locations in parts of 2018 and 2019. He said the two-toilet structure was used at least 40 times per day in each location it's been placed so far.

And the 2019 pop-up potty location at the corner of Main Street and Henry Avenue sparked improvements in its surrounding area, Bridgman added.

"The level of cleanliness ... has significantly changed," he said. "To assume that there are areas of the city where you will smell urine all year round is not something we want in our city and these public toilets are a key to changing that."

Andrushko said the city should also pursue the construction of permanent public toilets.

"We just don't see that there's one perfect solution ... We can't just provide one toilet in one location of the downtown and expect that to solve all of our problems," she said.

The Downtown BIZ also asked the city to explore whether bylaw changes or exemptions could be made to allow advertising at the pop-up toilets, which could then help fund them.

On Friday, council's protection and community services committee ordered a verbal staff report on a downtown public restroom strategy, which could arrive as soon as the committee's Nov. 14 meeting.

That update should include cost estimates related to the downtown BIZ ideas and comment on possible bylaw amendments to support it, said Coun. Sherri Rollins, the committee's chair.

Rollins (Fort Rouge-East Fort Garry) said she sees value in the BIZ proposal.

"We don't want a lack of ... public washrooms to inhibit people from coming downtown, enjoying their downtown," she said.

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## **Places to go**

A closer look at three programs Downtown Winnipeg BIZ suggests to increase access to public restrooms in the downtown:

### **Option 1: Pop-up toilets**

**How it works:** This would build upon two previous temporary toilet installations, which took place during parts of 2018 and 2019. Downtown Winnipeg BIZ has worked with Bridgman Collaborative Architecture on the project, which designed a portable, two-toilet structure. Attendants from non-profit groups were hired to maintain the facility.

**Cost:** In 2018, the pop-up toilets cost \$125,000 (including construction, permits and labour). In 2019, they cost \$40,000 to operate.

**Challenges:** The unheated toilets can't be used in winter and rely on non-profit staff, who may have limited resources.

### **Option 2: Permanent toilets**

**How it works:** A stand-alone public toilet would be constructed following a model known as the Portland Loo. It would be open 24/7, contain anti-graffiti wall panels, be gender neutral, offer automated night-time lights and handle about 300 flushes per day.

**Cost:** About \$185,000 in year one, including construction and permits, followed by about \$12,500 worth of cleaning costs each year after.

**Challenges:** The BIZ suspects the structure may not work in Winnipeg's coldest months, so operations may only be possible nine months per year. It's also the most expensive of the three ideas.

### **Option 3: The Public-Private Washroom Program**

**How it works:** Organizations and private businesses voluntarily open their existing washrooms to the public during operating hours, with no required purchase. This requires no new construction. The BIZ suggests the city cover costs for signage, a map of participating locations and extra cleaning costs.

**Cost:** A one-year pilot project is expected to cost at least \$22,500.

**Challenges:** Some costs aren't yet known, including the advertising of washroom locations.

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