

# Flush with excitement

## PERMANENT, SAFE WASHROOM UNVEILED ON MAIN STREET

By: Joyanne Pursaga

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The three-storey public washroom has a blend of metal, glass and shipping container materials with bright yellow accents. It has three large glass garage-style doors that provide an open look for the public sink area, which also includes a drinking water fountain and foot-washing station. (Mike Deal / Winnipeg Free Press)

A long-awaited, permanent public washroom will soon provide vulnerable Winnipeggers "a place to go" downtown.

A washroom at 715 Main St., next to Circle of Life Thunderbird House, will open for daily public use from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., beginning May 30.

After years of discussion and planning, the structure, known as Amoowigamig, was revealed at a news conference Tuesday.



Coun. Sherri Rollins has long advocated for multiple public washrooms and vowed to pursue more. (Mike Deal / Winnipeg Free Press)

"The result of needing a washroom can be humiliating. On site, these blocks, the pain can be sometimes very obvious," said Coun. Sherri Rollins, who has long advocated for multiple public washrooms and vowed to pursue more.

Rollins has said public urination and defecation downtown is a health concern, noting the homeless population lacks access to safe, clean washrooms. She stressed that access should be considered a basic human right.

The three-storey structure has a blend of metal, glass and shipping container materials with bright yellow accents. It has three large glass garage-style doors that provide an open look for the public sink area, which also includes a drinking water fountain and foot-washing station.

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A small office at the site provides phone access and internet, which will be staffed by outreach workers who can connect those in need with housing, addictions and other supports.

"(It's) not just a washroom. We're going to have harm-reduction supply for folks, fresh water. We're also going to provide support to individuals who need connections to resources," said Melissa Stone, a co-ordinator with the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre.

Two Ma Mawi staff will supply those services during opening hours, which will offer bathroom access while shelters surrounding the site are typically closed, said Stone.

The centre hopes fundraising will allow the washroom to expand to 24-hour daily service as soon as possible.

The city has approved \$250,000 per year to operate the facility so far, in each of the next two years, said Rollins.

The inclusion of outreach staff will be critical to its success, said Wins Bridgman,



Each stall is equipped with a button that can trigger an alarm and security cameras will monitor the outside of the facility, says Wins Bridgman, whose firm Bridgman Collaborative Architecture designed the washroom. (Mike Deal / Winnipeg Free Press)

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"We're not going to succeed easily. This isn't just a perfect solution," said Bridgman.

In December 2021, a city report offered a blunt review of problems that plagued temporary portable washrooms the city had begun setting up 16 months earlier. Those toilets, envisioned as a first step to providing public toilets, were repeatedly subjected to vandalism, theft, structural damage and fire, the report noted.

The permanent washroom is designed to mitigate those safety concerns, including a unique focus on visibility, Bridgman said.

"In most washrooms that we are all familiar with, you go into a place where we privilege privacy. The reason why this building is meant to have its (front oversized)

doors open three seasons of the year, why people are able to look into the washroom with modesty panels behind is so that when something happens... we are all there to protect one another," he said.

Each stall is equipped with a button that can trigger an alarm and security cameras will monitor the outside of the facility, Bridgman noted.

Two urinals are outside the building, though side doors can enclose them when not in use, which Bridgman said was also designed with safety in mind.

"Safety occurs when you can hear people, when you can see people. Almost every person on the street has at one time or another been assaulted. The reason people go through the indignity of going (to the bathroom) outside is sometimes because there's no washroom but also because it might (seem) safer," he said.

The structure was built with sufficient height and strength to support large electronic or static ads, which Bridgman hopes will one day help fund its operations. That goal would require an exemption to current city bylaws, he said.

The public washroom cost \$874,289 to build, which will be covered by a \$633,087 Federation of Canadian Municipalities' grant and \$241,202 from Circle of Life Thunderbird House (through a federal government grant).

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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.