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Potty talk a hot topic for Winnipeg BIZ CEO

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Title of print edition : "Pop-up potties received well by Winnipeggers: Dramatic cleanliness improvements, decreased vandalism in area of first toilet location"



Daniel Crump / Winnipeg Free Press

Passersby check out the pop-up public toilets located at 400 Portage Avenue.

Most people want to avoid potty talk around the dinner table — but not Stefano Grande.

The chief executive officer of the Downtown Winnipeg Business Improvement Zone says he encourages people to talk about the need for free and accessible public toilets, no matter where they are in the city. And ever since the BIZ set up the pop-up public toilet one month ago, the collaborative project with Siloam Mission and BridgmanCollaborative Architecture has been the subject of much conversation.

"Wherever I go, I'll wear my public toilet T-shirt and people start talking about it, which is what we wanted to do, start that conversation: 'Do we need toilets in public spaces?'" he said Friday.

Between 35 to 40 people have used the facilities each day since it opened (and around 70 per cent of the users have been either shoppers or downtown workers), Grande said. "It's like anything related to great design and great art; it creates instant perceptual changes."

The neon orange structure, which houses two stalls, first popped up in front of the Holy Trinity Anglican Church on Graham Avenue in early June. On Monday, the 5,600-kilogram facility was moved to an empty lot on the south side of Portage Avenue between Edmonton and Kennedy streets.

In about 30 days time, the temporary facilities will be moved to a space on the southeast corner of the Graham Avenue and Hargrave Street intersection near Cityplace.

Dozens of people waiting at the bus stop in front of the lot and passersby walking down the sidewalk Friday afternoon stopped to stare at the structure.

"If I had to go to the bathroom, I'd definitely try it out," said Amy Bruneau, a 20-year-old Winnipegger.

Bruneau said she thinks the facility should be permanent, since people often urinate in alleys or doorways downtown.

"It's great because it also gives people the ability to feel like a normal human being and not like an animal going outside."

There were dramatic cleanliness improvements around the immediate area, near the church and library, where the toilet was located for the last month, Grande said.

There was also a decrease in acts of vandalism around the church, Rev. Enid Pow wrote in a letter to the BIZ.

While most Winnipeggers have made positive comments, others have expressed concerns about the safety and misuse of the facilities, said Charles Enns, the Building Futures employment program supervisor at Siloam Mission who staffs a kiosk attached to the toilet. (Attendants clean the facilities and also sell water bottles and T-shirts.)

Enns said he's been encouraged by the fact the toilets have been respected by users; there have been no major graffiti problems and no needles have been found inside either porta-potty, other than inside the designated needle disposal boxes, he said.

"(The Siloam Mission patron staff) are contributing to the safety and dignity of all Winnipeg citizens," he said.

On Friday, Sarina Yanicki and her husband, Ken, bought water bottles from the kiosk. Yanicki, a 46-year-old Winnipegger who is visually impaired, also tested out the toilet.

It's normally tough to find washrooms big enough to enter with her walker, she said. The pop-up stall was big enough though, she said, adding Winnipeg needs more washrooms like it.

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