

Public washroom is better way to go

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EDITORIAL

Back in 2018, Winnipeg architect Wins Bridgman of Bridgman Collaborative Architecture saw his idea, a decade in the making, come to life: a pop-up public washroom in Winnipeg's downtown.

It was a canny campaign, executed in partnership with Downtown BIZ and Siloam Mission, that illustrated a dire human-rights need by actually providing a solution.

Now, the idea has gone from pop-up to permanent. As of May 30, a public 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.

Bridgman designed this structure, known as Amoowigamig. Like the bright-orange pop-up before it, it's a highly visible building with highlighter-yellow accents, and has a host of safety features, such as alarms that can be triggered from stalls, security cameras outside, and a pair of urinals outside the building, which is also a safety consideration: "The reason people go through the indignity of going (to the bathroom) outside is sometimes because there's no washroom but also

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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)

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

A washroom at 715 Main St., next

because it might (seem) safer," Bridgman told the *Free Press*.

Staff members from Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre will provide harm reduction supplies and fresh water to folks using the facilities. A public sink area will also allow users to wash up.

In other words, the permanent structure bears little resemblance to the portable washrooms the city had set up in 2020 which, according to a report, were subject to vandalism, theft and structural damage.

A public washroom is a long overdue addition to the streetscape of downtown Winnipeg. Access to clean, safe washroom facilities are a need everyone has, but many North American cities — Winnipeg included — have steadily moved away from public "comfort stations" over the past few decades after they became sites for drug use and violence, rendering them useless and unsafe for their intended purpose. These public washrooms were poorly maintained and unstaffed and, subsequently, torn down.

The vanishing North American public bathroom has been a subject of debate, discussion and study for years. It's not like this elsewhere: London tube stations often have a public bathroom. In Japan, an art project called The Tokyo Toilet saw 17 public washrooms be redesigned — in the vein of Winnipeg's annual warming hut design competition — so that they are not only functional, but beautiful.

In many cities across North America, meanwhile, the alternatives are using the facilities of businesses — who often designate their washrooms as "employee use" or "customer use" only — or going in the street. For our most vulnerable residents experiencing homelessness, the added indignity of having nowhere to take care of basic, everyday, biological functions is not only demoralizing, it's dehumanizing.

The



Amoowigamig opens May 30 at 715 Main St. (Mike Deal / Winnipeg Free Press files)

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.

opening of a new permanent public washroom in Winnipeg is something to celebrate. But it's not a simple case of "build it and they will go" — cleanliness and safety will be paramount, and that will require staffing and money. The next challenge will be seeing if it can be the one thing in downtown Winnipeg that doesn't close at 5:30 p.m. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre hopes fundraising will allow the washroom to expand to 24-7 service, and there is infrastructure for the site itself to host advertising, which would require an exemption to city bylaws.

Anything to move this project forward is a good thing. Its success will not only help restore dignity to our community members, but will hopefully inspire other such permanent facilities to open in the future.

Editorials are the consensus view of the Winnipeg Free Press' editorial board.