

Staffing 'critical' at new permanent Main Street public washroom, city report advises

Vandalism, theft at portable sites seen as cautionary tale for desperately needed facility for vulnerable population

By: Joyanne Pursaga | Posted: 7:00 PM CST Wednesday, Dec. 1, 2021

A permanent public washroom at Main Street and Higgins Avenue is slated to open early in the new year, providing a desperately needed facility for vulnerable Winnipeggers, but there are concerns about the amount of cash needed to keep it safe and secure.

A new city report offers a blunt review of problems that plagued temporary portable facilities that the city began to set up 16 months ago. They were designed as the first step to provide public toilets to Winnipeggers in need.

The portable units were repeatedly subjected to vandalism, structural damage and fire, the report notes. Theft was also common; toilet-paper holders, urinals and exhaust piping were taken.



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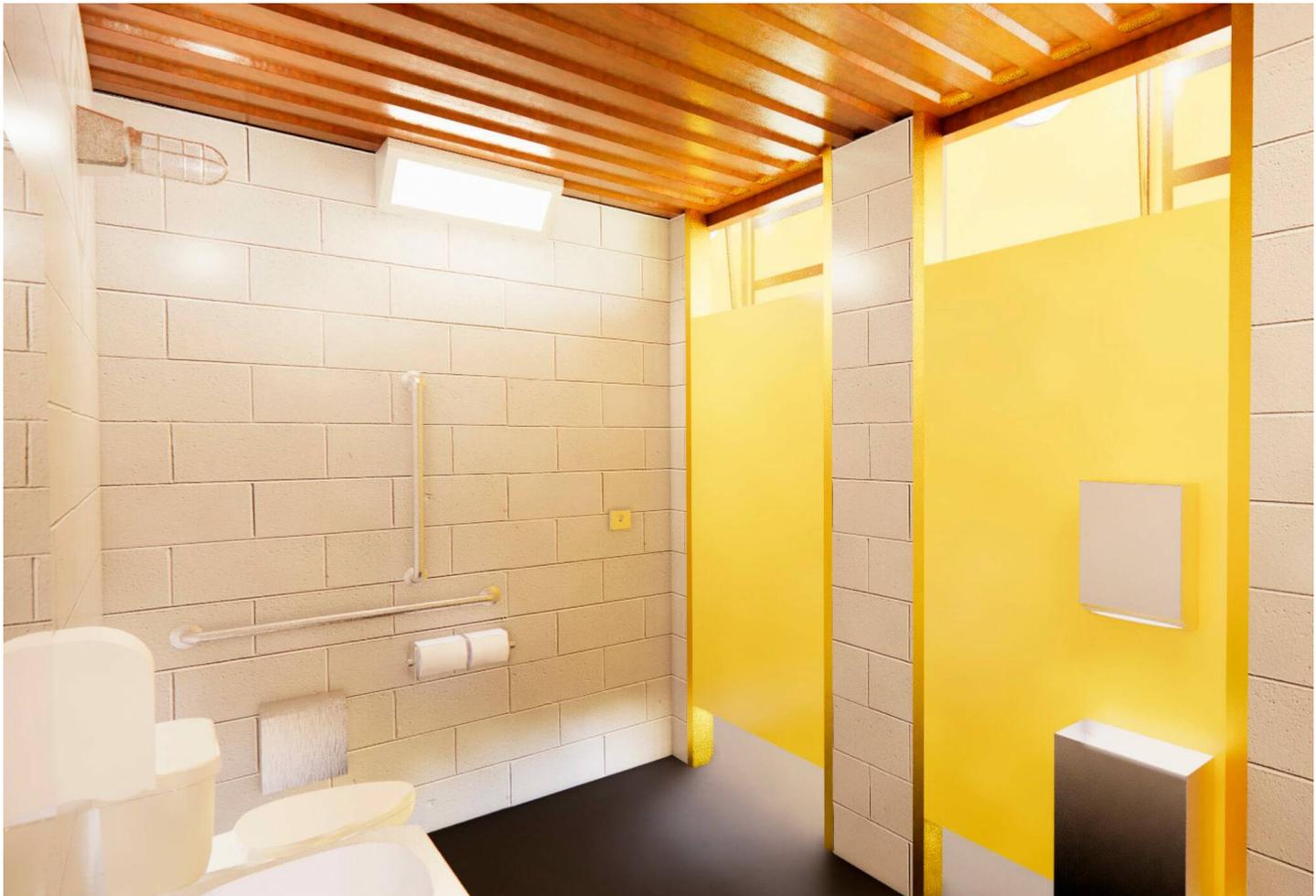
Renderings from a new city report that details the problems that plagued a temporary public washroom at Main Street and Higgins Avenue that the city began to set up 16 months ago.

"In two separate instances, units were set on fire with one requiring major repairs, and the other burning in its entirety," the report notes.

An overdose victim who died was discovered in one of the facilities.

Sponsors of the project and a contractor servicing the sites also reported vandalism to nearby buildings, discarded needles, extreme odour and verbal threats from people who were using the facilities or those in the immediate area.

The city says some units were moved to new locations, while one was taken out of service entirely to allow more-frequent cleaning of the others.



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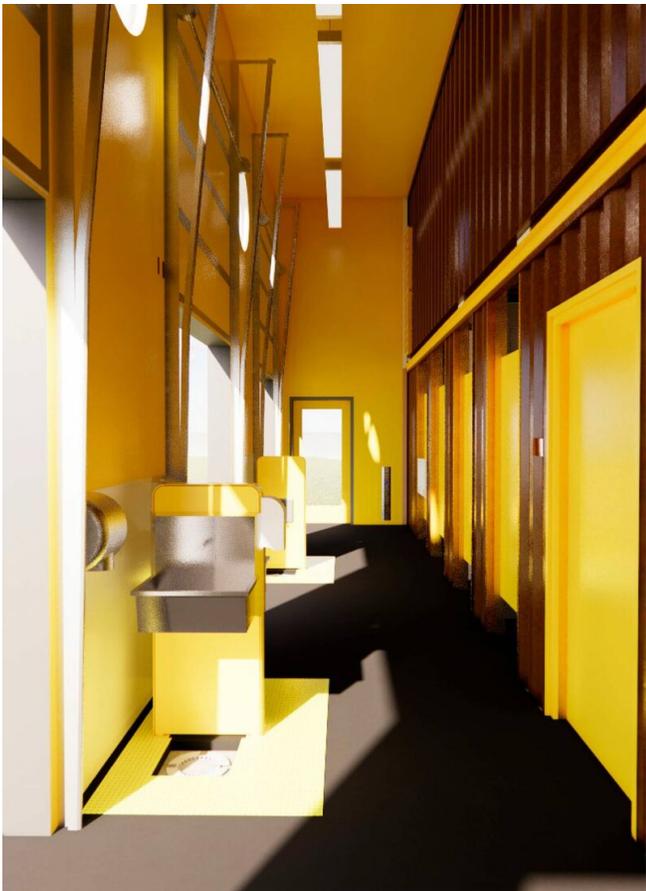
The Public Restroom Strategy Annual Report notes the portable units were repeatedly subjected to vandalism, structural damage and fire.

Six of the temporary units remain, at 222 Furby St., 75 Martha St. (three units), 185 Young St., and 473 Selkirk Ave.

Despite the concerns, a key advocate and designer for the permanent washroom is confident a sufficient operating investment would mitigate the same potential problems from being repeated at 715 Main St., next to Circle of Life Thunderbird House.

"A key element to its success is the ability to have an operating system that includes... ambassadors who are on site to ensure people are safe.... Without both the infrastructure and operating system, the project will run into difficulties," said Wins Bridgman, whose firm Bridgman Collaborative Architecture was hired to design the project across Main Street from its offices.

Ideally, staff would monitor the site 24 hours, seven days a week when it opens in January or February, said Bridgman.



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"The value of the washrooms is so great. The ability to offer people a place to go to the toilet, to wash, to be clean, to have all of those human rights... (these benefits) are so important," he said.

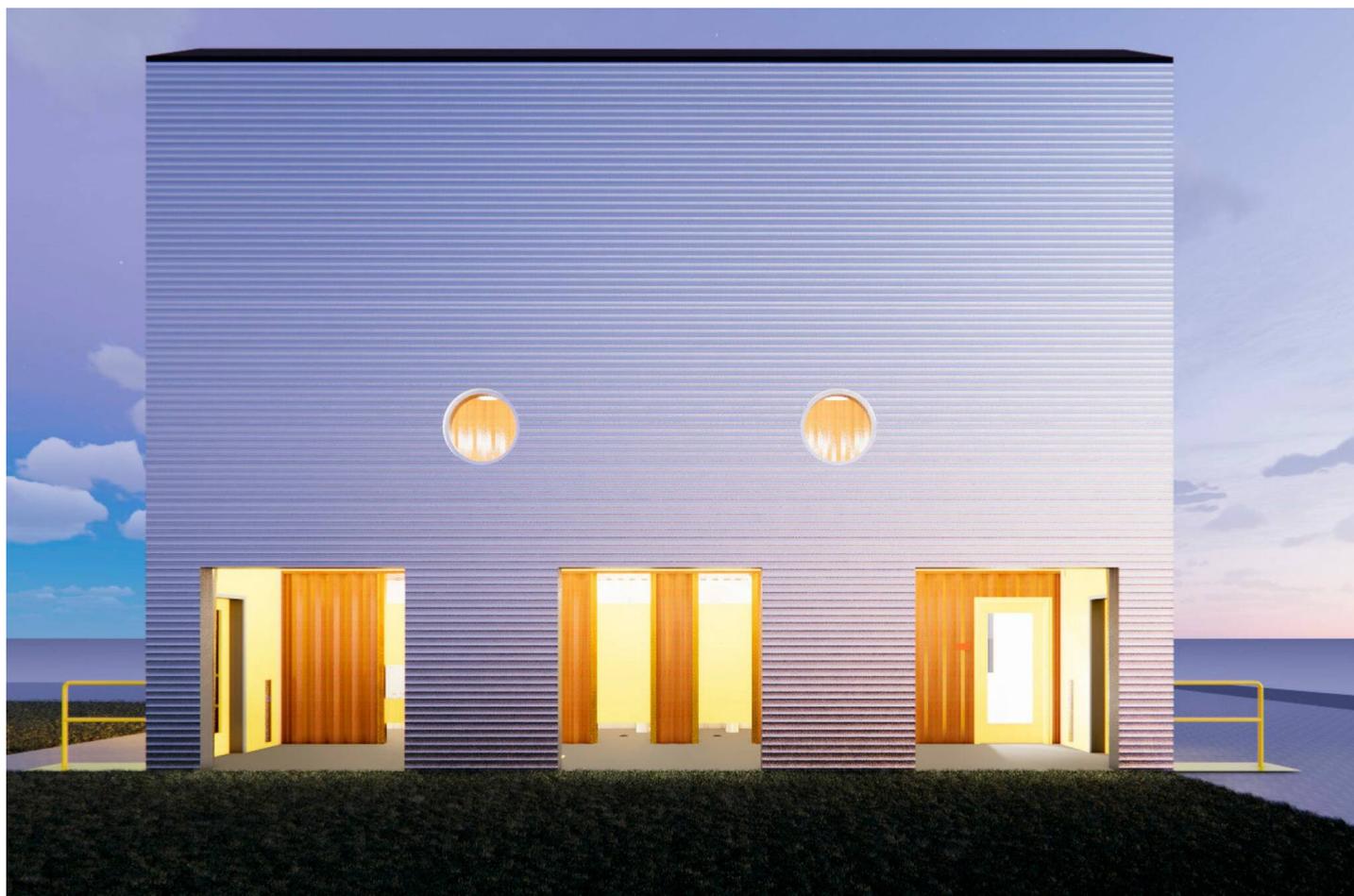
The city report also deems it "critical" to ensure staff support at the permanent washroom. The report estimates it would cost \$402,960 a year to have the city pay two community service agency staff to be onsite around the clock, while using a "12-hour model" would cost \$201,480.

The city will pay another \$54,820 in basic facility costs, including cleaning, water and energy, while council

previously approved a construction budget of about \$874,000 for both the

temporary and permanent washrooms.

Coun. Sherri Rollins said the problems connected to the temporary washrooms are directly linked to a shortage of addictions, mental health and general health supports.



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The city report deems it "critical" to ensure there is staff support at the permanent washroom.

"If you have something that is essentially your hospital, your house, your washroom and your supervised consumption site, that's some hard living going on in them and there is a cost to that," said Rollins, chairperson of council's protection and community services committee.

Rollins stressed there's still a critical public-health need to ensure unsheltered Winnipeggers have access to toilets and hand-washing stations.

"Every person deserves the right to safe and clean accessible washrooms and not everyone has them. And we see that on city streets, with respect to feces and urine on businesses.... This is a constant complaint," she said.

The proposed 2022 operating budget includes \$250,000 to support permanent washroom operations, which would staff 715 Main 12 hours per day, she said. It also includes \$40,000 to keep the temporary toilets operating.

That funding is a good start, Rollins said, adding she will continue lobbying for more.

The permanent washroom will be built with safety in mind, with ample lighting and thick glass that is especially difficult to break, she said.

Joyanne.pursaga@freepress.mb.ca

Twitter: @joyanne_pursaga

Joyanne Pursaga

Reporter

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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