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Main Street washroom designer, advocate calls on city to expand, not reduce, hours

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As financial challenges threaten to reduce the operating hours of Winnipeg's downtown public washroom, calls are growing to expand its services to a round-the-clock basis.

Wins Bridgman, the washroom's designer and long-time advocate, said the Amoowigamig washroom at 715 Main St. should be expanded as soon as possible to offer supports and "places to go" for vulnerable folks at all hours.

"I think it's a difference between thinking of washrooms as charity, as opposed to thinking of it as infrastructure. We certainly wouldn't say, 'You can use roads between nine and five, and the rest of the time, sorry, they are locked.' I understand public washrooms to be an amenity that is part of our city infrastructure," said Bridgman.

A petition on change.org that also calls for the city to fund 24/7 operations of the washroom had gathered nearly 2,800 signatures by Tuesday afternoon.

Bridgman, whose office is across the street from the washroom, said the site has provided several social services to folks in need during its current 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily operations.

"We see people washing their feet, washing their clothes, washing their hands.... But most important, we're seeing kindness there, we're seeing the essence of the city providing each of its citizens with dignity," he said.

An original goal to improve downtown cleanliness and public health is also being met, said Bridgman.

"My building is right opposite. Do I have the same level of the smells of urine or sight of urine or people defecating that used to be here? The answer is no," he said.

The comments come after a recent city report revealed the facility's operations could be cut to eight hours a day (from 10) on May 16, due to higher-than-expected demand.

The city previously budgeted $200,000 in each of 2022 and 2023 to cover Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre's cost to run the facility. This week, a second city report suggests council reduce the temporary washroom element of Winnipeg's "places to go" washroom strategy, to three units from six, to free up another $20,000 to help boost hours at the permanent bathroom.

Since it would cost $38,000 to ensure 10-hour service to the end of 2023, the city would still require additional funding to keep those hours in place.

During next year's 2024-2027 multi-year budget process, the staff report recommends council find $650,000 per year to fund the support services 24/7, starting next year.

"(This) funding... is critical to ensure the success, sustainability and safety of the permanent washroom facility," the public service report notes.

The city recently deemed the washroom a great success in providing addictions and homelessness supports to vulnerable people who visited it thousands of times per month since it opened in June. For example, city officials say the support workers secured housing for 30 unsheltered people.

Mayor Scott Gillingham said he would like to explore ways to maintain the permanent washroom's current hours, possibly through partnerships, though more discussion is needed on how best to do so.

"I think that's been an important service provided to residents in the area... so I'm certainly looking to try to work together to find a way to continue on with the 10 hours-a-day service," said Gillingham.

However, the mayor said it's not realistic for the city to expand to 24/7 operations this year.

"This late in the 2023 budget process, I don't see how we could accommodate that. That's really expensive. If we move (that option) to... the 2024 multi-year budget, I support having that discussion there," he said.

Coun. Sherri Rollins, a champion of the "places to go" program, said she will push for the 24-hour funding.

"My focus is on more sustainable funding and my eye is on the four-year, multi-year budget that is coming up," said Rollins (Fort Rouge-East Fort Garry).

Rollins said she'd also like to maintain the current hours but fears transferring money from portable toilets to do so would create a lack of services elsewhere.

"I'm really cautious (about) that because I don't want to displace money that I know will impact other agencies (and)... the shelter system," she said.

The city staff report also warns the washroom could face a funding gap early next year, since the city isn't required to complete its 2024 budget until March 31 of that year.

"If funding for peer support services is not provided in early January 2024, this permanent public washroom would need to close, as operating unsupervised is not advised," the report notes.

City staff also recommend that council seek ways to reduce the washroom's support service costs and explore whether the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority could help fund the services.

All of the changes would require council approval.

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