

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

## Community washrooms a potential solution to Canada's two-tiered system of toilet access

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*Amoowigamig, which means public washroom in Ojibwe, is the only permanent public toilet in central Winnipeg. Shannon VanRaes/The Globe and Mail*

In a stylish building made of stacked shipping containers and corrugated metal, the public toilets sit between a homeless shelter and the scruffy yard of a boarded-up community centre in the toughest part of downtown Winnipeg. The facility came with a jarring price tag, but its approach of meeting basic needs while offering social support to visitors could be a model for other cities.

Approaching its second anniversary, the facility known as Amoowigamig is serving thousands of people a month. While the \$875,000 site is the only permanent public toilet in central Winnipeg – opening after 43 years of the city not having any – its appeal runs deeper than the obvious.

Jacob Kaufman of the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, an Indigenous organization contracted by the city to run the facility, said that most patrons simply use the toilet. But many take the opportunity to wash their feet, obtain information about shelters or get safer drug paraphernalia. Staff have reversed a small number of overdoses.

“The only goal here is to give them dignity,” Mr. Kaufman, himself formerly homeless, said in an interview at the site. “You could replicate this elsewhere, as long as you had the staff.”

The pandemic shone a light in Canada on what had effectively become a two-tier system of toilet access. Homeless people relied on substandard public toilets, while anyone who appeared middle class could duck into a mall or coffee shop, whether or not they were customers.



*Jacob Kaufman of the Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, an Indigenous organization contracted by the city to run the facility, said the goal of the site is to give people dignity. Shannon VanRaes/The Globe and Mail*

However, the shuttering of those businesses made the shortcomings in public toilets broadly visible. And those flaws have persisted as normal life resumed.

For example, Toronto now has about 300 public toilets, aside from those in community centres, but most are open only in warmer months. They are often in parks and not necessarily convenient for people walking city

streets. Many are also closed overnight. The Toronto Public Space Committee, an advocacy group, is pushing for the city to create a proper network of public toilets.

In Calgary, bureaucrats say that stand-alone public toilets can make patrons feel uneasy – unsure whether the place will be empty and worried about what they might find inside. And they tend to get damaged. A new project in that city packages public toilets with a pickleball court in a bid to prevent vandalism.

Vancouver added temporary toilet facilities in the Downtown Eastside with attendants to monitor and help patrons. However, the province did not renew funding, and the city had to find money internally to keep the program going past this month.

In Winnipeg, the full-service offering comes with a higher continuing price than most toilets. Amoowigamig, which means public washroom in Ojibwe, costs about \$36,000 a month to keep open 16 hours a day. But it meets people where they're at.

The toilets are in the heart of what's known as the local skid row. Next door is a community centre that has been stripped of valuable materials, closed and fenced off. Homeless people cluster nearby and many Winnipeggers speak fearfully of the area.



*The washroom costs about \$36,000 a month to keep open 16 hours a day.*  
Shannon VanRaes/The Globe and Mail

On a recent spring day, though, the facility was bright and welcoming. It was scrupulously clean, in spite of a steady stream of visitors, and didn't smell like a public toilet. Nor was there an odour of harsh chemicals.

Mr. Kaufman is particularly pleased when he sees people come in who aren't obviously vulnerable or struggling. Visits by some of the patrons he describes – the Tesla driver wearing pricey shoes, the mothers with young children – suggest the place has a broadening appeal.

At those moments, it's not the homeless-person toilet, it's the community washroom.

That same sense of local ownership is what Calgary is trying to achieve with its planned toilet and pickleball court project.

The Calgary Municipal Land Corp., the urban renewal agency that commissioned the project in the East Village part of downtown, says combining the two is a way to attract the critical mass of people needed to provide feelings of safety and community.

“We've always tried to look at how we animate and activate East Village,” Clare LePan, a vice-president at the CMLC, said in a phone interview. “And so we thought the relationship between the two was really interesting and it contributed to the community in more [ways] than just the actual washroom facility.”

The project began construction last month and is scheduled to open in October. It is pegged to cost a bit more than \$1-million, for four universal washroom stalls, the pickleball court and spectator seating. It replaces a pair of self-cleaning automated toilets that ran into maintenance problems and allegations of improper use.

Like many other North American cities, Calgary is generally short of public toilets. And Ms. LePan acknowledged that the money being spent on this facility could go a lot further if spent strictly on toilets. But she argued that could leave them open to the same deterioration as before.

A similar tension over whether it's preferable to have fewer and pricier – but arguably better – facilities underlined a council debate this year about public toilets in Winnipeg.

Citing the success but high cost of the Amoowigamig facility, Councillor Russ Wyatt argued that toilet access could be provided by opening up government buildings and those housing institutions funded by government.

City staff also proposed incentives to encourage local businesses to open their bathrooms to non-patrons, an idea that has worked well in Germany. But Councillor Vivian Santos argued that publicly available toilets without social assistance were worse than none at all. She introduced a motion at a council committee in early March that led to the idea being nixed.

“Yes, we need washrooms,” Ms. Santos said in a subsequent interview. “But without the appropriate wraparound supports to mitigate some of these mental-health issues and overdose issues, unfortunately, it would fail.”

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