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Delegation information
Committee: Executive Policy Committee
Committee - council: N/A
Committee - other: N/A
Agenda item (number and title): Amoowigamig

Service inquiry: Submit Comments in writing
Participation preference: N/A
Comments in writing: The following is an excerpt from an article written by the Dear Winnipeg blog, edited to address council. These are not my words, so I won't take credit for them, but they are more succinct and complete than I could write.

"It's to watch when you do something so absolutely right, only to have Council come and flush all their hard work down the toilet.

I am talking, of course, about Amoowigamig, the public toilet constructed last year at 715 Main St. The three-storey building provides a drinking water fountain, public sinks, a foot washing station, toilets, a small office with phone and internet access with outreach workers who can connect those in need with housing, addictions and other supports.

It opened on June 3rd of last year as a way to provide a modicum of human dignity to those experiencing homelessness in our Downtown by providing them with access to clean and safe washrooms.

Not to mention that the alternative of public urination and defecation on sidewalks, beside buildings and in bus shelters Downtown is not only a health concern, it's pretty bad for business too.

In all, it cost $874,289 to build, all of which was paid for by a donation from the Canadian Medical Association Foundation, and from Circle of Life Thunderbird House through a federal grant. That's right, it cost the City nothing. But even if the City had covered the entire bill, it would have amounted to less than 0.04% of its approximately $2.3-Billion combined operating and capital budget last year. That barely qualifies as a rounding error.

The City's only financial contribution was $50,000 for operations (lighting, water, cleaning, supplies), and $200,000 to have a community organization staff it with outreach workers for 10 hours per day.

Again, some may call that amount a rounding error. I'd call it a small bet.

And it was a small bet built on another, even smaller, bet: the City's temporary Downtown washroom project started in 2020, where they spent $50,000 (also from a grant by the Canadian Medical Association Foundation) on 7 temporary pop-up washrooms set up at various locations Downtown.

A really small bet.

Over the course of two years, the temporary washroom project evolved, responding to changing conditions and the realities of each site, often trying out different locations. During those two years, some of the temporary washrooms went unused. Many others were vandalized, subjected to structural damage and the theft of internal components such as toilet paper holders, urinals and exhaust piping. On three separate occasions, the washrooms were set on fire, with one requiring major repairs, and the other two being complete losses.

The public service is now recommending discontinuing the temporary washroom project.

Believe it or not, this is what success looks like.

Because City staff took everything they learned during these pilots and applied it to the permanent washroom.

As a result, the public service reports that over the 7 months of operation last year, the permanent washroom welcomed over 20,000 users, in addition to the thousands of harm-reduction supplies, such as clean needles, pipes, feminine products and condoms, that were distributed by peer support workers. Support workers also report that a sharps receptacle installed at the site has become a regular drop zone for a steady volume of used needles. And they even saved 6 lives by administering Narcan to reverse the effects of opioid poisoning.

"Staff reported several interactions with community members who have provided critical information about the existence and whereabouts of firearms. These interactions have led to illicit weapons being apprehended by the Winnipeg Police Service."
- Public service report to the Community Services Committee, February 28, 2023

On a weekly basis, dozens of individuals are visiting Amoowigamig to access identification, health care services, employment information and cultural connection.

In the months of November and December alone, support staff there even helped secure housing for 8 previously unsheltered individuals.

But beyond all the social benefits this project has brought, beyond the basic human dignity it provides to people experiencing homelessness in our Downtown, this is a great example of spending money that does more than one thing simultaneously. It's why I love street trees so much, because they provide so many benefits at once.

This toilet gives trees a run for their money. It's not only a place "to go", it's keeping Downtown cleaner, it's saving lives, it's improving public safety by taking used needles and guns off the streets, and it's helping to address homelessness. Talk about value for money!

So given the apparent success of this small bet, you'd think we'd want to increase funding to it. But if you thought that, you'd be wrong: the proposed 2023 budget is short about $50,000 of maintaining the current service levels, so operating hours are planned to be cut from 10 hours/day to 8 hours/day.

It would cost an additional $50,000 to maintain current hours, or an additional $450,000 to increase them to 24 hours/7 days. That's 0.002% and 0.018% of the proposed 2023 budget. And we won't find it?

Even though we've managed to find $2.8 million for a project that we haven't even confirmed the economic value of.

I know there's a lot of talk about human rights and dignity and social benefits around this project. But even the cold, dispassionate eye of a financial examination of this toilet says it's a winner.

Research from 2017 showed that each person experiencing homelessness cost the public $45,585 per year in Winnipeg. Just the City's portion of those expenses, ambulance and police, amounts to $8,109.

By finding housing for 8 people, this toilet has helped the City save nearly $65,000 per year in emergency services costs going forward. You know, the staff that are currently skipping breaks and costing us overtime just to keep up with the overwhelming demand.

Just counting this one demonstrated benefit means we've received a 26% return on our investment.

"It is difficult to overstate the value of Amoowigamig."
- Public service report to the Community Services Committee, February 28, 2023

From a purely financial point of view, this is a no-brainer.

But Council is about to mess it all up. It's unfortunately too late to register to speak at today's Community Services meeting, but luckily, there are a few other ways you can help influence Council to change this:

One last thing. I want to give a hat tip to the City staff who have been working on this public toilet project. You've demonstrated perfectly how to innovate and improve our city, and importantly, how to get real, low-risk financial returns to help get ourselves out of the financial quagmire we find ourselves in.

Not with one or two mega projects costing millions or billions of dollars, but with thousands of small bets, the cost of each amounting to nothing more than a rounding error in our annual budget.

Not all of them will be as successful as this toilet, but that's the point. The goal is to fail fast, and fail cheap, learn from our experiences, discontinue the losing bets, and double-down on the winners. Reducing risk, while increasing community wealth and capacity, and improving lives for all Winnipeggers."