

Public Washroom Navigator Program Pilot: Reallocation of Capital Funds

ISSUE

In December 2020, City Council approved \$50,000 to be allocated to a public washroom support pilot capital project to be administered by the City of Saskatoon (City) with community serving partners. As a result of there being no uptake from community partners to administer or co-administer this program, Administration is recommending that the scope of the project be broadened to accommodate complementary use as determined by Social Development staff in the Recreation and Community Development Department.

BACKGROUND

History

The Public Washroom Navigator Program Pilot (Pilot) was originally intended to support the operation of the Kiwanis Park public washrooms for the Winter of 2021, in recognition of the challenges of ensuring safe and open public washrooms, to support vulnerable patrons and all residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. From the outset, the intent was to administer the program with a community partner. Funding for the pilot program, \$50,000 from Reserves for Capital Expenditures (RCE), was included as a component within Capital Project P.02652 Take It Outside Winter Animation Fund.

Current Status

Since 2021, both the Planning & Development (Neighbourhood Safety) and Facilities Management Departments have been exploring ways to secure a community partner to administer or co-administer the Pilot. The Pilot concept was initially supported by a Public Washroom Advisory Committee, which was developed to evaluate public washroom access in Saskatoon during the COVID-19 pandemic. A Request for Proposal (RFP) was issued in June of 2022 seeking submissions to monitor downtown public washrooms, at various times of the day, in North Kiwanis Park and River Landing. Despite discussions with social enterprises and social serving agencies and the issuance of an RFP, no submissions came forward. At the time, the community-based agencies indicated they were at maximum capacity just dealing with the needs of their clients during COVID and were not able to take on the oversight of a new pilot program. As a result, the Pilot program has not been implemented.

Approaches in Other Jurisdictions

The City of Edmonton (Edmonton) was able to secure a community partner to successfully monitor high-use public washrooms, also referred to as Peer Navigator, in the city during COVID-19. Edmonton's approach was based on the principle of "engagement and support", and the Peer Navigators worked in pairs. The community partner received a significant funding support from the City of Edmonton (approximately \$350,000) to deliver the year-round program 7 days per week, and was periodically

supported by Edmonton City staff during periods of inclement weather; for example, by handing out water bottles during periods of extreme heat.

Post COVID-19, and in addition to the Peer Navigator Program, Edmonton offers a “Washroom Accessibility Grant”, which awards grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$50,000 to any organization, private, non-profit, community association or business improvement area, to help improve accessibility to public washrooms.

OPTIONS

Administration has reviewed the Pilot Project and its lack of progress as designed and has developed three options for consideration.

Option 1 – Cancel the Public Washroom Navigator Program Pilot and return the Funds to Source, that being RCE.

In this option the Public Washroom Navigator Program Pilot would be cancelled and the \$50,000 in funding would be returned to RCE for future capital use as directed by City Council.

Advantage:

- Funds are returned to RCE for use in or for another capital project.

Disadvantage:

- There would be no foreseeable focused monitoring of public washrooms in the Downtown and River Landing at various times of the day. The current level of service would remain, which is being provided by contract staff to unlock/lock the facility during operating hours, stock supplies and sporadic cleaning during the day.

Option 2 – Propose an increase to the Capital Funding, through the 2024/2025 Business Plan and Budget, Operating and RCE Options Process

This option provides another opportunity to secure a social enterprise or social serving agency to implement the pilot project. Now in a recovery period from the pandemic, social serving agency capacities may be in a better position to implement a pilot project. Given the documented incidents occurring at City owned public washroom facilities (specific to the riverbank parks) related to social disorder such as vandalism, drug/alcohol use, excessive mess/garbage and transiency in public washrooms, the magnitude of the work for such a pilot program is beyond what \$50,000 can accomplish.

Advantage:

- With additional funds to supplement the initial \$50,000 investment, a community partner might be secured to pilot the program, to demonstrate proof of concept for future operating budget considerations.
- Administration would re-engage directly with community-based agencies to assess overall interest in an expanded pilot program and to help frame the parameter to better meet the needs of community.

Disadvantages:

- There would be no immediate monitoring of public washrooms in the Downtown and River Landing area, at various times of the day, as the project would be contingent on the approval of additional budget.

There is no guarantee that with additional funds a social enterprise or agency would submit a bid, nor is it fully known how much additional funding is needed to generate a bid. Administration has estimated, at minimum, an additional \$50,000 in capital is required to pay Monitors and cover related costs, such as personal protective equipment, first aid equipment and cleaning supplies. By way of comparison, in its initial year the City of Edmonton Peer Navigator Project operated for approximately \$300,000 to \$350,000 (one downtown washroom facility operating year-round, with extensive hours of operation).

Option 3 – Broaden the Defined Scope of the Capital Project to Accommodate Complementary Use as Determined by Social Development

This option involves integrating the spirit of the original project into the work currently being undertaken by Social Development, in the area of community safety and wellbeing. In this option the existing funding would be integrated for one-time use in the Assistance to Community Groups Grant – Social Services Cash Grant Social Program as Washroom Accessibility Grant(s) or for similar community project(s) that aims to improve community wellbeing.

Advantages:

- Social Development staff re-examine the project parameters to seek alternative ways to allocate the funds for washroom access and monitoring.
- Should it be determined that washroom access and monitoring is not viable with the \$50,000, which is currently available; Social Development staff would engage directly with community-based agencies to determine alternative project(s) that could utilize the funds and that align with the spirit of the original project and community wellbeing.
- There are synergies between the Pilot and the work of Social Development, notably in providing supports to vulnerable and in-need populations with the goal of ensuring a safe city, in the event the funds are not used specifically for washroom monitoring.

Disadvantage:

- There would be no immediate monitoring of public washrooms in the Downtown and River Landing.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Standing Policy Committee on Planning Development and Community Services recommend to City Council Option 3, that the Scope of the Public Washroom Navigator Program Pilot be broadened to accommodate complementary uses which includes funding projects that address priority issues related to overall community wellbeing.

RATIONALE

Reallocating the Pilot funds, to the Social Development Program through the Assistance to Community Groups Grant – Social Services component, as a potential Washroom Accessibility Grant(s) or for similar community project(s) that aims to improve community wellbeing, supports the City's Strategic Priority of Community Safety and Wellbeing. Social Development staff would consider restructuring the Pilot as a grant administered through the existing Assistance to Community Groups Grant – Social Services funding program.

The model for this one-time Washroom Accessibility Grant would be similar to the City of Edmonton's program of the same name. With Edmonton's program, any organization, whether it be private business or non-profit, can apply for grant funding to improve accessibility to washrooms. Targeted initiatives under this program include private businesses keeping washrooms open to non-paying patrons and non-profits placing mobile washrooms in areas with high public washroom needs. Eligible grant expenses range from cleaning expenses to maintenance costs, to hiring washroom attendants.

If for any reason the Washroom Accessibility Grant is not deemed viable, the funds would re-allocated to one-time initiatives that address community wellbeing priorities.

ADDITIONAL IMPLICATIONS/CONSIDERATION

Should Option 3 be approved, Administration will consult both internal and community stakeholders to inform the criteria and process for the Washroom Accessibility Grant as integrated into the existing Assistance to Community Groups Grant – Social Services funding program.

REPORT APPROVAL

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