

Our Downtown:

Creating possibilities with Complete Communities

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Abstract

In 2009, the City of Winnipeg began an extensive community engagement process in order to create the new plan, OurWinnipeg. Community engagement happened over two years and several phases to create a vision for the city that could be supported by all. An outcome of the engagement process was the value Winnipeg's citizens place in its Downtown. Complete Communities, a direction of OurWinnipeg, outlines five key directions that the City of Winnipeg will take over the next 25 years to improve the Downtown. It has been several years since the plan was enacted and already the Downtown has seen some significant changes although whether they were because of OurWinnipeg is debated. This case-in-point examines the OurDowntown section of Complete Communities as a best practice in public participation and creating a vision for the Downtown. The research also evaluates whether the result of Downtown Winnipeg's current success can be attributed to OurWinnipeg.

Background

Our Winnipeg:

OurWinnipeg is a 25 year vision for the city that replaced Winnipeg 2020. On August 17, 2011 the plan took effect (City of Winnipeg, 2010). In addition to the overall plan, four direction documents were created, Complete Communities, Sustainable Transportation, Sustainable Water and Waste and A Sustainable Winnipeg. Complete Communities “represents more than two years of research and analysis about what should be part of a state of the art land use and development plan” (City of

The document sees growth as an opportunity for change to create “complete mixed use, higher density communities in a way that promotes sustainable practices” (15, 2011).

Our Downtown:

The first key direction for Downtown is “Organizing Downtown.” Strategies for organization include:
 -enhancing the character of the unique districts by establishing guidelines for development criteria.
 -promote density and mixed use development while maintaining and complementing character



Above: Manitoba Hydro Building by KPMB

- strategically promote infill and high density development
- develop a parking strategy to eliminate surface lots
- support existing neighborhoods with amenities, streetscaping etc.

The third direction is “Places to Work and Learn Downtown.”

- The strategy will reinforce the Downtown as a premier employment centre by
- promoting Downtown as an office space location
 - facilitate the growth of Downtown campuses
 - promote economic development

Fourth, is “Places to Relax and Enjoy Downtown.” The City will support arts, culture, sports and entertainment by

- working with partners and stakeholders to produce high quality programming
- reinforce Downtown as a hub through marketing, design guidelines and support of retail



Above: Our Winnipeg and Complete Communities from City of Winnipeg

Winnipeg, 2011).

Complete Communities:

Complete Communities considers Downtown Winnipeg as a transformative area and provides several directions for change. Complete Communities calls Downtown a priority, it “is the entertainment, cultural and economic heart of our city and the window to the world” (City of Winnipeg, 15, 2011).

-establishing nodes and corridors that complement the Downtown character and serve as meeting places, gateways etc.

The second direction for Downtown is “Places to Live Downtown.” Population projections show a need to increase housing in the Downtown. Plans to increase housing include:

establishments

Fifth, is “High Quality Places Downtown.” The City aims to improve places Downtown through urban design by:

- recognizing exemplary examples of urban design
- support wayfinding, signs and landmarks
- support heritage conservation
- invest in public and pedestrian spaces

Facts & Outcomes

Public Participation:

Our Winnipeg used multiple processes and opportunities to engage the citizens of Winnipeg. The consultation process was branded as SpeakUp Winnipeg with a unique logo that was used to advertize engagement opportunities. The first phase began with the Mayor’s Forum on Sustainability in order to promote the message that OurWinnipeg would be a sustainable plan. After the forum, other opportunities for engagement included:

- City Building Charrette
- Roundtables with stakeholders around specific themes
- Focused neighborhood conversations
- Staff attending events and speaking to groups
- The SpeakUp Squad that attended public events and festivals and spoke one on one to people in attendance.
- A website that featured questions of the day, blogs and videos

- A Facebook page
- A Twitter page

Phase 2 involved synthesizing the collected input into a vision for OurWinnipeg. The vision was used to check back with the public to confirm that these were the desired outcome of the plan and it would have public support. This stage involved open houses, web based strategies and stakeholder sessions.

Phase 3 came after a draft of OurWinnipeg was finished. Feedback was gathered on the plan as well as the Directions Strategies on Complete Communities, Sustainability, Transportation and Water and Waste. Opportunities included public information sessions, roundtables and stakeholder meetings in addition to online communication.

An interview with Stefano Grande of the Downtown Biz revealed that the engagement process at the stakeholders,



Above: Civic participation by City of Winnipeg

public and social media levels were successful. Grande felt that the concerns of the Downtown Biz were heard. He also says that OurWinnipeg is a good way to articulate the vision for Winnipeg and signifies to the business community that the City of Winnipeg cares about future business endeavors. Additionally, he has observed some changes to the Downtown since the plan was published. There have been more bike lanes, more police, increased use of the Downtown Spirit, the creation of the SHED and residential infill.



Above: Vision of OurWinnipeg by City of Winnipeg

There are also some criticisms on OurWinnipeg. Fleming argues that the plan is toothless (2010). She feels the document is not specific enough and is a gift to the development and building industry. Himbeault observes that there have been significant improvements to the Downtown but they may not be attributed to the OurWinnipeg plan. Instead housing policies and incentives have brought more people Downtown and well as private projects such as the RBC Convention Centre and Manitoba Hydro Building. Our Winnipeg did however cement the idea that its citizens support a strong Downtown and are willing to see public investment.

Lessons Learned

Variety in engagement: This was the most extensive engagement process the City had ever undertaken and the time they used social media and web based input. The engagement strategies were successful in connecting many to the planning process because there was such a variety of ways to engage. Traditional engagement processes tend to attract the same people and can skew input. There was no way to tell if those who spoke represented interests groups or the public and it was hard to convince council that the results represented the views of the public. SpeakUp Winnipeg engaged a wide number of participants and allowed them

to discuss what they wanted to speak about and opinion on specific topics.

Thoroughness:

Although there was an extensive engagement process, there were still some areas that lacked feedback. There was little discussion on studies produced by consultants and in the last phase of SpeakUp Winnipeg there was little discussion on policy.



Above: MTS Centre in the SHED from MTS Centre

Regulation:

The final plan was strong on vision and direction but weak on regulation. The City had done a review of the zoning bylaws prior to the beginning of the OurWinnipeg process so the timing ended up being off. The plan was also strong on what should happen but weak on what should not happen.

Conclusion

OurWinnipeg is a visionary document that unfortunately lacks regulation. The OurDowntown section of Complete Communities considers the area to be transformative and has five directions that they hope the Downtown will go in. These directions include; organizing downtown, places to live downtown, places to work and learn downtown, places to relax and enjoy downtown,

high quality places downtown and getting from place to place downtown. The lack of regulation has not stopped good things from happening Downtown with the guidance and support of OurWinnipeg. Several residential infill projects are underway and the Manitoba Hydro Building and the RBC Convention Centre have brought in significant investment to the area. The civic engagement process was unlike anything the City of Winnipeg had ever done before and is a great example for what civic engagement should look like. Due

“In the end, the final Our Winnipeg plan is high on vision and direction and enabling in what “should” happen but very weak in what “shouldn’t” happen. I think a good plan should provide direction on both.”

- Dianne Himbeault. CMHC

to such a large number of people participating there is confidence that OurWinnipeg does accurately represent the views of Winnipeg’s citizens and politicians feel confident that they are accurately representing their constituents when they make decisions.



Above: Glass House, residential infill from Winnipeg Free Press



Resources

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Above: From Joe Lynn