



Downtown Activations Program Evaluation Summary

In 2022 the Downtown Parks Safety Committee was formed. Several strategies were identified with the goal to promote safe, welcoming, and inclusive parks in Calgary's downtown core. There was broad representation from The City illustrating a joint effort to improve the downtown experience for residents and visitors alike. Key external partners like Alpha House, Calgary Downtown Association, and Calgary Homeless Foundation also contributed to the committee's plans and strategies.

The Committee selected four priority areas to undertake coordinated action. Subcommittees were formed to guide implementation and initiatives were selected in each priority area. The agreed upon priorities were:

1. **Park Improvements and Beautification** – Initiatives included: the washroom attendant pilot; mural in Olympic Plaza washroom;
2. **Communication Campaign** – Initiatives included: the Rediscover Downtown webpage and social media campaign; promotion of 'Who to Call When' information; signage encouraging appropriate behaviour in parks;
3. **Patrols and Outreach** – Initiatives included: utilizing pay duty support for increased law enforcement presence; and
4. **Activations** – Initiatives included: activation subsidies for local musicians, artists, entertainers interested in animating park space; Tipi Project activations; free greenspace permits to encourage community events; onsite playbins.

Three focus parks were selected for activation: (1) Olympic Plaza, (2) Century Gardens, and (3) Harmony Park. Activations included community events and programs to encourage positive behaviours in the parks of focus, with the intent of cultivating a sense of park ownership with residents and businesses in the area. Activations included the following:

1. The Calgary Downtown Association (CDA) administered \$130,000 in **activation subsidies** to community businesses, organizations, and artists interested in activating the focus parks between May 31 and September 31, 2023 resulting in:
 - o 10 activations at Harmony Park, attracting a combined 4,905 attendees.
 - o 19 activations at Century Gardens, the majority being small-scale, weekly activations. The events attracted a combined 3,490 attendees.
 - o Nine activations were supported at Olympic Plaza. These activations tended to be larger scale festivals with multiple funding sources. These events drew a combined attendance of 74,100 attendees.



2. **Playbins** with games and recreation equipment were placed in four downtown locations, two being parks of focus for the Downtown Parks Safety Committee. The Playbins were 'unlocked' 153 times between June and October 2023, representing the number of times citizens borrowed items for use. The Century Gardens PlayBin was unlocked 41 times and the Harmony Park PlayBin five times. The location with highest usage was Barb Scott Park at 77 times. An additional 21 drop-in PlayBin engagement sessions were facilitated by Park Ambassadors.
3. Activations of the **Blackfoot and Tsuut'ina tipis** (as part of the Indigenous Placemaking in Parks/Tipi Project) were planned for the focus parks, however challenges with lack of sufficient green space plus extensive utility and irrigation lines made this impossible. Instead, 26 tipi program activations occurred at either Prince's Island Park or the greenspace north of Lot Six between June 8 and September 23, 2023.
4. **Free greenspace permits** were made available for groups wanting to provide community events in the focus parks, however there was no uptake from the community on this initiative. It is believed that any groups who would have applied were included in the CDA activation subsidies.

Recommendations

Based on the implementation and evaluation of The Committee's initiatives, several recommendations were identified for the future. These include:

1. Align future washroom attendant initiatives with best practices identified through the pilot evaluation and in line with successful programs offered in other municipalities.
2. Expand the provision of intentional activations (amenities and secondary focus programs) that draw people to parks 'for a purpose' and actively promote inclusion over exclusion.
3. Increase local promotion efforts.
4. Continue to support staff in personal safety initiatives.
5. Investigate the implementation of a dedicated Parks' Community Outreach Team (including Peace Officers and relevant social service personnel) assigned to downtown parks.
6. Support the Chinatown Cultural Plan to further activate Harmony Park by creating a guidebook for groups interested in hosting events and programs in the space.
7. Explore the outdoor gathering needs of equity-deserving groups.

Downtown Washroom Program Evaluation Summary

A washroom attendant program was also identified as a potential strategy that could address safety and cleanliness in public washrooms in parks, while at the same time supporting an inclusive and welcoming environment for a broad range of park visitors. The Downtown Revitalization Fund from the Province of



Alberta provided \$600,000 to undertake a washroom attendant pilot in Olympic Plaza and Century Gardens.

A call for proposals was issued for an external partner to operate the program and in April 2023, an agreement for one-time funding was signed between The City of Calgary (The City) and Alberta Alliance Who Educates and Advocates Responsibly (AAWEAR) to pilot a washroom attendant program.

Alignment with City of Calgary policies

The goals of the washroom attendant pilot aligned closely with the [Social Wellbeing Policy](#) adopted by The City of Calgary's Council in 2019. This policy states that The City will follow social wellbeing principles when "making decisions; developing plans, policies and strategies; and delivering City Services" (City of Calgary, 2019, p. 1). The Social Wellbeing Policy principles relevant to washroom access include:

- **The City will strive to provide equitable services which includes removing barriers to access and inclusion.** Equitable means that "conditions are adjusted to meet people's diverse needs, strengths and social realities. It requires recognition that different barriers (often systemic) exist for diverse individuals or groups" (The City of Calgary, 2019, p. 3); and
- **The City will aim to stop problems before they start, using a prevention approach.** Problems include those that weaken the "healthy development, wellbeing, and safety of individuals across the lifespan" (The City of Calgary, 2019, p. 3).

Key findings

The Washroom Attendant Pilot Program operated at Olympic Plaza and Century Gardens between May 1 and September 14, 2023. In summary, the project:

- Attended to 10,489 washroom visits;
- Provided 2,139 referrals to social service organizations (i.e., detox/treatment, CUPS, Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary, etc.);
- Responded to 176 instances of drug poisoning where naloxone was not required;
- Administered naloxone 122 times in response to a drug poisoning where an individual was in medical distress; and
- Created 18 supported employment positions for people experiencing significant barriers to employment.

The pilot operated in the two identified parks from May 1, 2023, to September 14, 2023. At the conclusion of the pilot a comprehensive evaluation was conducted to ensure the pilot's learnings were

captured and recommendations could be made based on the Calgary context. The evaluation included a review of:

- Internal data (provided by 311, Calgary Police Service, Corporate Security, Emergency Management & Community Safety, and Facilities);
- Feedback from City of Calgary business units working closely with the pilot program (i.e., Calgary Police Service, Emergency Management & Community Safety, Parks & Open Spaces Operational Staff, Facilities);
- External partners (AAWEAR staff who had worked as attendants, local businesses, key partners, and organizers of on-site festivals and events); and
- Citizens (both a city-wide Citizens' Views Panel Survey and focus groups with residents living near the implementation sites).

Key feedback - Citizens' View Panel Survey

An online survey was conducted with Citizens' View panelists for the purpose of gathering feedback from Calgarians about downtown Calgary parks. Citizens' View is an online panel that encourages Calgarians to participate in shaping City of Calgary programs and services through surveys, discussions, and engagement activities. The survey was fielded from October 26 to November 5, 2023, and 1,976 citizens completed the survey.

The findings are not considered statistically representative of all Calgarians and are the result of the make-up of panelists currently on the Citizens' View panel. Of note, only two per cent of respondents lived downtown and 16 per cent reported they worked or went to school downtown.

I. Issues with underhoused populations and poor washroom access were key themes among both satisfied and dissatisfied downtown parks visitors.

34 per cent of respondents who disagreed that downtown park amenities met their needs, indicated that the lack of or not being able to access washrooms was the top reason why; this issue was also a top comment among those agreeing that amenities met their needs (14 per cent).

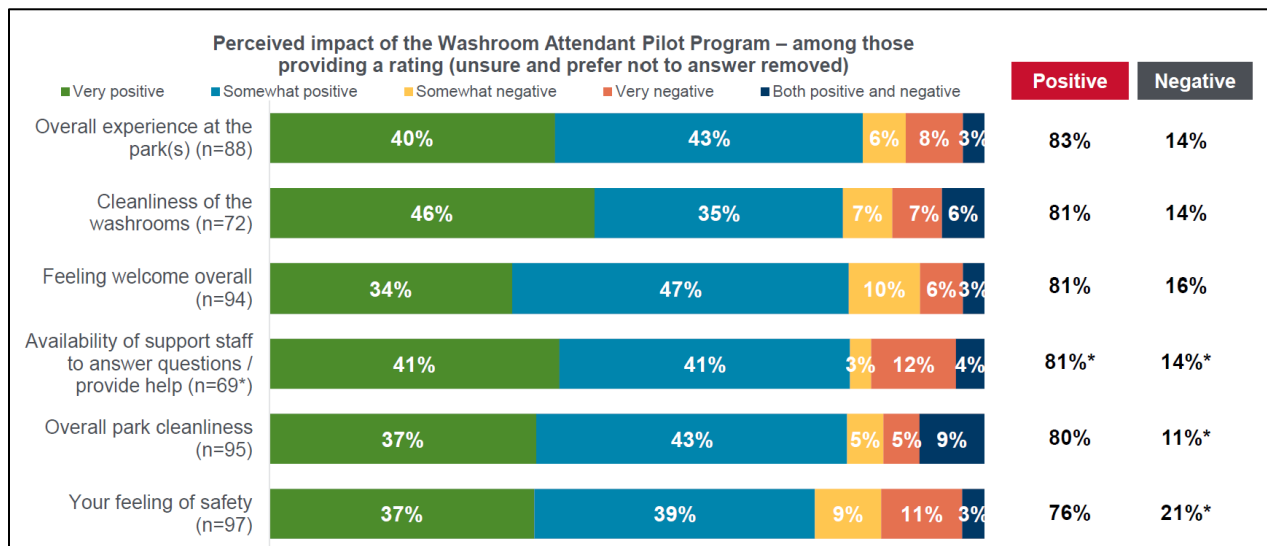
Issues with underhoused populations and open drug use was also a top concern, both among those who disagreed (33 per cent) and agreed (15 per cent) that downtown park amenities met their needs.

About one-third (34 per cent) of panelists who had visited Olympic Plaza in summer 2023 felt that the 'sense of welcomeness' in the park had decreased compared to summer 2022. Issues with underhoused populations, open drug use, and social disorder were the top reasons for providing this rating, mentioned by 68 per cent of respondents who had visited Olympic Plaza in summer of 2023.

II. Although a sizeable proportion of those aware of the Washroom Attendant Pilot were unsure of its impact, the majority of those who did provide ratings found the program’s impact to be positive.

Those who had visited Olympic Plaza and Century Gardens noted a positive overall park experience (83 per cent), washroom cleanliness (81 per cent), feeling welcome (81 per cent), overall park cleanliness (80 per cent) and their feeling of safety (76 per cent).

While the majority did not have suggestions for how to improve the Washroom Attendant Pilot, 13 per cent commented that the program should continue, be expanded to other parks, or be provided year-round.



Key feedback - Focus Groups with residents who live near Century Gardens and Olympic Plaza

Working in close collaboration with The City’s Corporate Research Team (CRT), a total of four focus groups were conducted on November 7 and 8, 2023. Several intentional strategies were used to recruit participants from locations of residence near Century Gardens and Olympic Plaza. The groups were advertised on posters hung in building lobbies and included a QR code linking to a sign-up/screening survey. Community Connectors (contracted through Community Strategies) were also present in buildings during the recruitment campaign to promote the opportunity and assist those with barriers to fill out the screening tool (i.e., lack of Wi-Fi connectivity or mobility device, language barriers).

The engagement strategies and screening questionnaire ensured a mix of gender, age, race, years living in downtown Calgary, new Canadian status, lived experience of houselessness, income, and usage and perceptions of downtown Calgary parks, however findings are still qualitative in nature and results should be regarded as directional.



I. While overall awareness of the Washroom Attendant Pilot was low, the idea was well perceived by participants.

A handful of participants were aware of the Washroom Attendant pilot, either seeing attendants on site or hearing about it in other ways. When provided with a description of the program the majority reacted positively, noting it would make parks feel safer, more accessible, keep washrooms better maintained, and that it could be a good way to connect people with resources they need.

Many participants had mentioned they would not use Century Gardens or Olympic Park washrooms due to cleanliness and safety concerns, and the Washroom Attendant Pilot was viewed as a potential solution by participants.

"I went into the bathroom [in Olympic Plaza] and it was almost a little bit traumatic to be honest. I'll never go back in there again...it looked like a camp."

-Group 2 participant

"I was walking by on eighth street right there. I'm like, what is that? I didn't know what it was right away. And then I walked up and I talked to them for a bit. It was really cool, I really enjoyed it. Considering they had closed those bathrooms for two months...they were trying to make it safer because that's where all the kids are and [they couldn't] go to the bathroom because it was dangerous and now parents [don't have] to go home every five minutes."

-Group 2 participant

II. Participants generally supported future implementation of washroom attendants and made several suggestions for shaping or improving the program.

When asked, the vast majority supported washroom attendants being implemented, and Century Gardens and Olympic Plaza were most often named as the top priority locations. Some felt the program would be beneficial outside of downtown parks, and others expressed a desire to have it run year-round.



“Washrooms are a good place to connect with people when they need help. Because a lot of times when something bad happens in public, you go to the washroom. And I know that overdoses and stuff tend to happen there as well. So having trained people be there and kind of not only upkeeping the washrooms you know they tend to get kind of disgusting if you don't have people upkeeping them all the time, not only having people to upkeep them but monitor them and connect people with the resources they need. I think it's a really good thing for the overall community.”

-Group 3 participant

Speaking to a perceived broader scope for Washroom Attendants' roles, participants presented several ideas for how the program should be designed, including:

- Training: safety (both for attendants and interested park visitors) and de-escalation skills, knowledge of available resources, first aid, and naloxone administration;
- Safety considerations: a direct line to emergency responders and social services; attendants working in pairs or groups; and
- Uniforms: to create a sense of recognizability and legitimacy, and to contribute to a sense of community.

Key feedback - External Parties

Working in close collaboration with The City's Corporate Research Team (CRT), an opportunity was provided to local businesses and services located near Olympic Plaza and Century Gardens, and to organizers who hosted events in the focus parks (i.e.: festival organizers and Calgary Downtown Activation Subsidy recipients).

The online survey for businesses was open from October 30 to November 20, 2023, and received 10 responses (six located near Century Gardens and four located near Olympic Plaza). The festival organizer/activation subsidy recipient survey was open from November 1 to November 20, 2023, and received five completes from festivals and zero completes from activation subsidy recipients. Due to the small sample size the findings are exploratory and are presented by number of respondents versus frequency (percentage).



Businesses

Feedback from local businesses on the washroom attendant pilot was mixed, however tended to be negative. Most local businesses who completed the survey expressed concern that the pilot attracted members of equity-deserving groups to the vicinity, as well as adverse behaviours (crime, consumption of illegal substances, and requests to use business washrooms by non-customers).

*"It needs to be monitored as such otherwise the drug people I would more than imagine will be using it in bad ways. Needs to be monitored and cleaned regularly."
~ local business*

*"It allowed the washrooms to be open for the public to use, which was progress."
~ local business*

*"Seems like a miss to me. The washrooms attracted more vulnerable population who were not comfortable to be around."
~ local business*

Further to The City of Calgary's engagement efforts, the Calgary Downtown Association (CDA) interviewed 11 businesses near Century Gardens. The feedback they received indicates that public substance use and the littering of substance-related paraphernalia/debris continues to be an ongoing and escalating concern for the business community. They also noted:

"Calgary Downtown Association is strongly supportive of access to public washrooms in all public parks to support community activities of the park and greater downtown, compliment the adjacent transit stations, and for general washroom purposes. It is imperative that the washrooms are clean, safe, and accessible for all people including area residents, post-secondary students, downtown workers, and tourists. We do not believe the model used in 2023 is conducive to business vibrancy or the family centred community The City of Calgary has promised for downtown."

Festivals

Respondents who completed the survey tended to provide positive feedback about the washroom attendant pilot.

"The pilot program went well and there were less incidents in the washrooms versus other previous years' events."

~ Festival Organizer

Recommendations

Based on the data collected during the evaluation process, the following recommendations were identified:

1. Utilize an experienced agency committed to working collaboratively with law enforcement and build relationships with law enforcement in the early stages of the project.
2. Explore opportunities to streamline the washroom attendant service with internal partners to leverage increased efficiencies, reduce service duplication and explore cost savings where possible.
3. Ensure the washroom attendant role is distinct from 'outreach' support. While there is benefit in washroom attendants having knowledge of local resources and comfort interacting with diverse members of the public, other common outreach activities (i.e.: dispensing of basic need and harm reduction supplies) create confusion for the public regarding the purpose of the washroom attendant program.
4. Continue to provide washroom attendants with naloxone/Narcan and ensure attendants are trained to administer it.
5. Ensure clear expectations are provided to attendants on maintaining cleanliness of the washrooms.
6. Provide a variety of training opportunities to washroom attendants to better equip them for the role, including basic first aid, de-escalation skills, and janitorial certification.
7. Align washroom safety, cleanliness, and inclusion efforts with Calgary's Winter Strategy.
8. Address City staff experiences with social discomfort and perceptions of safety by partnering with corporate initiatives aligned in this work (i.e., Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging; Anti-Racism Program, and Indigenous Relations Office).
9. Recognize that washroom attendant efforts are in response to symptoms caused by larger, systemic issues (i.e.: the housing crisis, mental health and addiction, and long-term impact of colonization). Continue to support efforts to address root causes and advocate for a citywide public washroom strategy.