

# Winnipeg Vibrancy Trip



## Summary of Events

June 4 & 5, 2015

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## Introduction

The following is a summary of major events from the Vibrancy Trip to Winnipeg over the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2015. It is a compilation of the topics discussed throughout the trip at the various meetings that were attended including The Forks, CentreVenture, the Winnipeg Arts Council, and the University of Winnipeg. There was a very wide variety of topics discussed at each meeting and the information presented here is as comprehensive as possible. The strategies and ideas that were gathered on the trip were invaluable and will undoubtedly serve as great inspiration for Grand Forks community leaders moving forward.

## The Forks

*June 4: Lunch at The Forks Market, a guided walking tour of the Forks, and a presentation and discussion of the development and planning of The Forks with CEO Paul Jordan.*

After arriving at The Forks and enjoying lunch at one of its various food shops, the group met up with CEO of The Forks, Paul Jordan. Mr. Jordan began with giving the group a tour of The Forks and told us about the various programs and strategies they use to make it the year-round success that it is, as well as the various parties that made it happen.

On the tour, Mr. Jordan pointed out the countless projects and programs that The Forks uses to date. From what he highlighted, it seems these projects fall into at least one of three themes: regular events, the embracing of the winter season, and green development. It was abundantly clear throughout the tour that events were a major driver of foot traffic in The Forks. While the more permanent attractions (like The Forks Market and the Human Rights Museum) are an excellent way of attracting first-time visitors, the varied events are a great way to offer new experiences to keep them coming back. Mr. Jordan highlighted a few of the various programs and festivals they put on throughout the year including Kids Fest (which was to begin the following weekend) and a number of other regular concerts and performances. They also host a “pop-up” restaurant on the frozen river, which sells out quickly and has become extremely popular among Winnipeggers. The key takeaway seemed to be that it is extremely important to host a diverse array of regularly scheduled events in order to continue to draw people to the area and to maintain their interest moving forward.

Another yearly event that The Forks puts on involves the second theme: embracing winter. Every winter, The Forks hosts a number of events and programs to make it appealing for people to get out and visit The Forks, no matter the temperature. Mr. Jordan summarized this idea by saying in essence, that “people want to get out of the house in the winter, but they need things to get out and do. If there are interesting and fun things available, people will get out and do them.” He said that point has been proven true in the past several years at The Forks, as winter attendance numbers now reach the same levels as summer months.

In order to achieve this result, The Forks has launched a number of projects and programs over the years. For example, each year the freeze over portions of the walking trails in the area to create skating trails. The trails then go down onto their river walk and even onto the river, and are maintained every morning by Zamboni. The warming huts along the trail are also a project of their own. The Forks opens up a design competition for the huts to architects from around the world, which has created a lot of buzz and driven

popularity of winter at The Forks globally. With winter such an integral part of life in Grand Forks, these ideas peaked the interest of many members in the group.

The final theme that seemed to be present in all aspects of The Forks' operations was green development. Nearly everything in the area was designed to function in an eco-friendly way and, as Mr. Jordan later stated; it has paid off major dividends in the long run. One such green investment has been the geothermal heating/cooling system that is used for all of the buildings on the site. Mr. Jordan said that the system saved them over \$250,000 in just one winter which, when considering the whole system cost \$2.5 million to install, is an incredible return on investment. The Forks also utilizes a bio-composting system which greatly reduces the amount they spend on trash disposal. In addition, the resultant fertilizer is then used on the various gardens in the area, creating even more value. Interestingly, almost none of this green technology or really any infrastructure is visible to the casual visitor. Mr. Jordan said that reducing "visual noise" is a huge part of what makes The Forks such a pleasant experience for visitors.

Of course, the amount of funding that makes The Forks possible is quite significant. Mr. Jordan said that the funding sources come from all different sectors, but especially from federal grants. He acknowledged that those grant opportunities might be more difficult to come by today, but was optimistic about provincial/state and city sources as well as private sector partnership opportunities. It makes sense that an abundance of funding sources work, because The Forks ownership structure is made up of representatives from all 3 levels of government that serve to check and balance each other. This allows The Forks to be run like a private nonprofit business, making it much easier to work with private developers.

A final takeaway and point of emphasis that Mr. Jordan made was the importance of public consultation when developing and planning projects. He emphasized that The Forks would not be what it is today had they not done a rigorous public consultation process. They used a variety of means, from online to physical kiosks at events, to ensure the public could provide input to projects. This has likely helped strengthen public support and interest in The Forks over the long run.

## CentreVenture

*June 4: Presentation and discussion with CentreVenture CEO, Angela Mathieson.*

The group then had the privilege of visiting with Angela Mathieson, the CEO of Winnipeg's downtown development corporation CentreVenture (CV). CentreVenture is essentially an arms-length corporation of the City of Winnipeg focused solely on developing downtown. The mayor is the primary shareholder and heads a board of self-appointed volunteer board members, who guide CV's development projects. Importantly, CV is completely separate from Winnipeg's Economic Development Corporation, allowing it more flexibility in getting people through the downtown development process. CV operates in conjunction with Winnipeg's BIZ zones, which are essentially promotion-based areas funded by businesses located in the zones meant to increase development in specific areas. The businesses provide the funds and CV does the physical development.

At the start, CV bought and "flipped" roughly 40 downtown properties, which ended up netting huge gains for the City of Winnipeg. They have continued and built on that success over the past 15 years and continue to improve the entire downtown area. Because the array of projects CV takes on is extremely varied, the methods used in pursuing those projects must also be varied. Oftentimes the final approach to a project is a combination of many different methods.

Part of CV's goal is to help provide bridge financing to smaller investors who want to be a part of downtown. These investors don't always have a lot of equity, so CV provides financing to fill the void. This financing can take many forms, but some of the most common that CV uses are tax increment financing (TIF) and façade grants among many others. These methods are meant to incentivize current owners to improve their properties or to find a developer or new owner who will.

CV also can serve as a matchmaking resource in this area. Many times developers are willing to swap pieces of land and properties for different purposes but lack the time or skills to make such a swap happen. CV then can step in and put them into contact with each other and the appropriate resources to make the process occur. CV also facilitates "pop-up shops," which seek to match up property owners with potential entrepreneurs. In this program, CV rents out shop space from building owners and will then turn and sublease the shop to a new entrepreneur. The program allows the entrepreneur to test out the downtown market for a period of time and has been largely successful.

In addition to attracting businesses downtown, CV also has played a part in promoting and developing housing downtown as well. They often offer tax credits for housing projects downtown, which then helps to promote nearby business. Assistance from the provincial government in terms of tax credits has also been critical in driving

down costs. A common trend as of late has been the renovation of historic properties downtown and turning them into various kinds of housing. In a tour of the downtown Exchange District, the group was shown a number of historic buildings that had been renovated into condominiums and apartments. This allowed the buildings to retain their historic look and Heritage property status, but also become a more valuable part of the downtown area. To support this development, CV allocates 5% of all annual land sales to Heritage Restoration Projects.

A final step that Ms. Mathieson discussed in her presentation was CV's implementation of specific districts downtown. That is, CV has outlined specific areas that are ideal for certain kinds of businesses. This program does not by any means prevent a business from opening in any location it chooses, but it has proven to be a very effective promotional tool for attracting new businesses to these areas. For example, the Sports, Hospitality and Entertainment District (SHED) is centered around the home of the Winnipeg Jets, the MTS Centre. Since the start of the SHED program, development in that area has been increasing rapidly. This is just one example of how CV's use of promotional tactics has paid dividends over the long-run.

Overall, the meeting with Ms. Mathieson was very informative and useful. Though Grand Forks does not necessarily have an organization exactly like CentreVenture, many of the strategies and methods that were discussed can still be applied.

## Winnipeg Arts Council

*June 5: Meeting with Executive Director of the Winnipeg Arts Council, Carol Phillips.*

Following breakfast on June 5, the group traveled to the Winnipeg Arts Council's downtown office to meet with Carol Phillips and two of her staff members. Their organization is doing an incredible amount of work in developing and promoting both public and private art throughout Winnipeg. The Winnipeg Arts Council (WAC) is another arms-length corporation of the City of Winnipeg. It acts as a makeshift department of cultural affairs for the city and, though it administers the monies that the city allocates to the arts, it is otherwise completely financially independent of the city. Its goals as a nonprofit corporation include promoting art development and community engagement in the city.

Ms. Phillips highlighted that, as an arms-length corporation, the WAC's relationship to the City of Winnipeg is a pretty close one. Essentially, the city issues its plan and budget for the arts, and the WAC delivers on that plan by maximizing the value the city gets from the arts. In addition to monetary return, this value comes in the form of an increased quality of life among the residents and a better reputation for the city. In doing this, the WAC's distribution costs range from 10-11% of the allocated money. Ms. Phillips said the WAC is very proud of that statistic because the average in Winnipeg is around 15-16%, but they'd still like to get it lower. In order to ensure expectations are met, the Ms. Phillips and her staff sign a written agreement with the city outlining all expectations and goals. They also work closely with the city's planning and development office to make sure they stay on track. Additionally, the board of directors is made up of a joint group, half appointed by the city and half elected by the WAC. They have found that by maintaining this relationship and completing more projects, interest from the city has continued to go up.

In pursuing their goals of promoting art development and community engagement, Ms. Phillips and her staff discussed a great number of the various programs the WAC has put in place. The largest program that they fund is called the Municipal Creation Program. Anyone who is some kind of artist can apply to be 1 of 50 chosen to receive anywhere from \$2000 to \$5000 to go directly to the creation of art. On average, the WAC gets between 150 and 200 applicants a year for these awards. The WAC also offers a professional development support program where between 50 and 70 artists are granted anywhere from \$200 to \$1000 to go towards improving their artistic abilities (through clinics, mentorships, etc.). According to Ms. Phillips, approximately 80% of WAC's annual budget goes toward this program.

Another program the WAC supports is known as the Urban Idea program. This program is an opportunity for local builders and artists to get together in a think tank and get together with the general public in a variety of events to examine the relationship of art

and the function of the city. In 2014, for instance, builders went on tours of various parts of the city with high school students and taught them about the various artistic elements of the buildings in those areas. Then, they incorporated art into the tours by providing students cameras and explaining architectural traits so as to see how the art blends with the city as a whole. This led them to launch another event called the Great Placemaking Challenge where a series of locations were made known to the general public, who then came in and examined the areas. They then wrote down their suggestions and ideas for how the space could be reused in a more artistic way. Events from this program have also been very popular among Winnipeggers.

Ms. Phillips then went into detail about what she termed as “the most important element of vibrancy:” public art. She believed that public art is what gives a city its character and it shows the city’s openness and appreciation for art. WAC’s public art program is, as with everything it does, in close conjunction with the city. Funding for public art is approved on an annual basis by the city council. After funding is approved, WAC can move forward with the projects.

Projects are presented to and must then be approved by a WAC jury. This jury helps find appropriate artists and works with them to find a suitable design. Once approved, each project is assigned a committee of five members who are often artists, architects, or city officials. These committees lead the project through the process. A technical review committee, made up mostly of city staff, then looks at the committee’s proposals for feasibility. Ms. Phillips noted that this helps the city stay more involved in the process and makes them like the finished project more. Once this process is complete, the project can move forward.

Site selection is another important part of WAC’s public art process. Roughly 90% of all the sites chosen for projects to date have been publicly owned. The remaining 10% are still privately owned, but the city has entered into a long-term lease agreement with the owner. According to Ms. Phillips, the city decides the site where they want the art to go, then WAC determines the design by sending out notices to artists and then developing it with them. As previously mentioned the jury goes through the proposals and chooses a winner. The artist, the city, and WAC all then enter into a tripartite agreement where the artist retains the copyright for the art, the city maintains the site, and WAC maintains the artwork itself (10% of the overall project budget is withheld for maintenance). Ms. Phillips stated that this format helped to keep as much politics out of the process as possible.

Collaboration is a huge part of WAC’s process as well. Ms. Phillips highlighted the importance of getting public input for what kinds of activities and art they want to see in their community. She also mentioned that collaboration with local businesses was also very important, especially on the bigger projects. This helps to get the community more



engaged and more invested in the arts. WAC's winter art projects were partially a result of public input. WAC has made it a point to "sell the winter season" by livening up Winnipeg through unique winter artwork. This was a result of public sentiment that people wanted to get out in the winter time, they just needed an opportunity and a reason. Winnipeg has since received numerous awards for many of its winter projects.

Ultimately, the major point Ms. Phillips emphasized toward the end of her discussion was the importance of sticking to the local soul and staying authentic. Focusing on the local people and culture gets people invested and excited about the art, and visitors will then follow. This is done, as previously mentioned, through public consultation. These processes ultimately yield a "destination place" for people, which helps forward the goals of WAC and the City of Winnipeg.

## University of Winnipeg

*June 5: Meeting with University of Winnipeg President, Annette Trimbee.*

The final major event of the trip was a meeting with the President of the University of Winnipeg Annette Trimbee and her staff. Though there are many differences between the U of W and UND, Dr. Trimbee discussed some strategies and ideas that could certainly translate and benefit Grand Forks. She listed three key steps that the U of W has taken to increase their presence in the community and the ways in which they were accomplished.

The first major step U of W took was they “blew up the moat” around campus. Previously, the U of W campus was very cut off from the surrounding city, similar to how some perceive UND’s campus. There was a distinct divide between where campus ended and the city began. Dr. Trimbee’s administration took steps to eliminate that divide and make U of W a greater part of the surrounding community.

The second major step included doing just that: expanding into the community. U of W began looking at surrounding neighborhoods for expansion opportunities to help become a greater part of the community. One example Dr. Trimbee described involved their new recreation center. Rather than making the facility exclusive to only U of W students, they opted to make it a community rec center, allocating one-third of the space for local residents not affiliated with the university. Dr. Trimbee said that this has brought more people onto campus and has lessened the divide between campus and the community. Importantly, she also noted that every expansion or development opportunity is designed with a clear idea of how it links campus to the greater community. Making this a priority has helped to incorporate the U of W into its surrounding neighborhoods.

The third major step has been the renovation and redoing of buildings on and around campus. Buildings have been and continue to be improved to ensure they are appealing and sustainable. Sustainability is a common theme throughout the campus and is a fundamental part of development at the U of W. No major building or project is done if it is not sustainable long-term.

A recent project of the university aims to blend all three of these steps. The university has begun renovating and redeveloping many surrounding buildings to address the current housing shortages for their students and those in the surrounding community. However, rather than create exclusive student-only housing, they have opted to create mixed-housing for people with mixed-incomes. The idea is that there will be a healthy combination of people from all different backgrounds occupying the buildings, which will serve to benefit the university, its students, and the community at large. 25% of units have been set aside for the non-student demographic to facilitate that happening.

An especially interesting point in the development process though is that the U of W is the actual developer. The university actually created its own development corporation to handle development on and around campus. Dr. Trimbee said that this allows the university far greater flexibility in developing the properties the way they envision. In securing the funding, both public and private resources are pursued and used. However, the U of W has taken an interesting approach to securing funding in-house. Rather than group similar programs together and ask one area of study to fund their own development, the U of W has grouped together no-so-similar programs to secure funding from different backgrounds. For instance, they partnered their business school with their school of the arts for a new facility that the two share. This forces artistic majors to interact with business majors and vice versa, adding to the diversity and inclusivity of the campus community.

Another strategy that the U of W uses to incorporate itself into the community is through events. The university has put a lot of effort into hosting a variety of events that are designed to draw in people who would otherwise not visit campus. They host anything from children's events to conferences on serious topics. Dr. Trimbee stated that it is part of using small things like events to break down larger barriers.

Though the U of W is a much larger school located in a much more urban setting, the basic principles outlined by Dr. Trimbee and her staff translate well to the Grand Forks and UND dynamic. An emphasis on breaking down barriers and becoming an active part of the community were common themes throughout her discussion and was insightful to the group.