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Time to renovate Winnipeg's 'living room'

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The City of Winnipeg is to be congratulated for its new initiative to assist developers in creating new downtown housing with tax incentives of up to \$40,000 per unit.

As a city we are spending and have spent hundreds of millions in sewer treatment plants, new roads and repairs of existing roads, new bridges (Main-Norwood, Provencher, Disraeli, etc.) and public amenities such as Canwest Park, the MTS Centre and the new stadium for the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. There is presently the \$300-million human rights museum under construction, thanks to the dedication and hard work and vision of the late Izzy Asper and his daughter Gail's work. We have spent \$600 million on renovating Duff's Ditch.

The universities of Winnipeg and Manitoba and Red River College have all had major funding announcements.

Yes, we are spending public dollars to maintain and improve our city's infrastructure, and improve public amenities such as schools, hospitals, universities, community centre and transit.

The sum of money spent is staggering and is one of the reasons our unemployment rate sits at approximately five per cent, while other provinces and the country come in at eight per cent or higher.

However, when we talk about our downtown we need to rethink our position. The \$10 million is a great start but we need to spend \$100 million or more to make an impact.

Our city should work with developers to create 10,000 to 15,000 new housing spaces in our downtown over the next five years to increase downtown residency to 30,000 to 40,000, from its present 12,000. Only then will we have the critical mass to be able to create safe, sustainable neighbourhoods and neighbourhood amenities.

Is \$100 million too little? Probably, but if we plan properly and create a model that citizens buy into, then \$100 million can spark the private sector to spend \$500 million to \$1 billion. It has happened in other cities. The increase in assessment and taxation as the downtown improves and the West End, West Broadway and Point Douglas neighbourhoods improve, will more than offset the cost.

The city saves because it takes pressure off extending transit, police and fire services. Once the transformation gets underway the baby boomers will move to downtown in droves.

Think about neighbourhoods where you can walk to work or to green grocers, fruit markets, flower shops, meat markets, bakeries, restaurants and cafés. The theatre, concert hall, The Forks and the new museum -- all within walking distance, along with the baseball park and the arena. We would be a healthier city and healthier people.

Vancouver, Edmonton and Calgary have all had their time in the sun, it is Winnipeg's turn.

A hundred million dollars is a lot of money but consider that \$300 million or more will be spent to take nitrogen out of our waste water, and \$650 million for Bipole III down the west side of Lake Manitoba to make Al Gore happy.

Surely \$100 million to make our downtown a better place to live, work and play is a worthwhile investment. Winnipeg is our home and the downtown is our living room -- it needs a little help.

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