



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Beer Bottles to Books: remaking Merchants Corner

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Young North End activists hailed it as the latest example of “North End Rising.” That was the response when Premier Selinger announced on June 24 that the Provincial Government is investing more than \$9 million in the redevelopment of the old Merchants Hotel and six adjoining lots on Selkirk and Pritchard Avenues. At the heart of what will be called Merchants Corner is an innovative educational strategy, prompting Minister of Children and Youth Opportunities, Kevin Chief, to use the phrase “beer bottles to books.” Whatever slogan is used, this is an exciting initiative.

The Merchants Hotel, for years a magnet for criminal activity and a symbol of what was negative in the North End, was shut down in April, 2012. People in the neighbourhood are still talking about how peaceful the area now is. With the Premier’s announcement, there is much more to come.

Merchants Corner will include 30 units of rent-geared-to-income housing for students with children. This alone is enormously important given the severe shortage of decent affordable housing in the inner city.

On the main floor of Merchants Corner, the University of Winnipeg’s Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies will share space with the North End high school support program, Community Education for Development Association-Pathways to Education. Urban and Inner-City Studies will schedule classes daily until 3:30-4:00

PM; the high school students will do their after-school programming from then until 8:00-8:30 PM, using the same classrooms.

The fact that they will be studying in a university space, in their neighbourhood, and that 40-50 percent of the university students they see in that space will be Aboriginal or newcomers or inner-city residents, means that for North End high school students, attending university will increasingly become “normalized.” This is not the case today. In some North End neighbourhoods only 25 percent of young people are graduating high school, and university is seen by many as not being for “people like us.”

Merchants Corner will also include a community space where, among other activities, literacy programming for neighbourhood pre-school children will be offered by Frontier College. The result will be education from 8:30 AM to 8:30 PM and from pre-school to high school to post-secondary. Books will replace beer bottles all day and for all ages.

Urban and Inner-City Studies will continue with our successful community outreach campaign, directed at the wide variety of community-based organizations and high schools, and in future junior high

there is an alternative.

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schools, in the inner city. CEDA-Pathways is already present in North End junior high and high schools. When Merchants Corner is up and running we will bring inner-city residents and high school and junior high school students into the beautiful new space—located right in their neighbourhood—to further normalize the idea of higher education.

Merchants Corner, while significant in its own right, will also be part of an emerging “North End Community Campus,” which includes the University of Manitoba’s Inner City Social Work Program, the outstanding Aboriginal adult education program, Urban Circle Training Centre, which works in collaboration with Red River College, and the recently constructed Makoonsag Intergenerational Childcare Centre, which offers first preference to children whose parents are attending one of these educational institutions. All of these institutions are situated in a one block area on Selkirk Avenue. The student housing and childcare respond to two of the major barriers to higher education. The educational methods used differ in important respects from those in mainstream educational institutions, and have proved to work well. Graduation rates are high. Lives are being changed.

The redevelopment of the old Merchants Hotel into Merchants Corner is a good example of what works well in the inner city. The North End community has come together for the past two and a half years as the Merchants Corner Steering Committee—which includes some 30 North End organizations—to develop the vision and the plan for Merchants Corner, while the Provincial Government has closely followed this work, participating in the Steering Committee but following the lead of the community, and once satisfied with the business plan, has invested public dollars in the project. The beauty of this initiative is that the Provincial investment will be paid back in full and then some, in the form of the higher taxes paid by those who benefit from improved

education and the reduced expenditures on social assistance and criminal justice costs, as ever more people graduate from high school, pursue the path of higher education and move into the paid labour force.

Merchants Corner is a genuine partnership between a community determined to work hard to improve the opportunities available to community members, and a Provincial Government far-sighted enough to see that an investment now will produce returns far into the future. The redevelopment of the old Merchants Hotel makes good sense and is good news—for all of us.

Jim Silver is Chair of the UW’s Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies, a member of the Merchants Corner Steering Committee and Executive Committee, and a CCPA-MB board member.

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