

# Winnipeg Free Press

Opinion

## A unique approach on communities

By: Edward Jackson

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Heading into this fall's wave of municipal elections across the country, Canadians continue to search for candidates who can do more than just talk about fiscal responsibility.

Keenly aware of governments' scarce resources, voters want to elect representatives who know how to efficiently blend private and public resources to create jobs, build social infrastructure, including more affordable housing, and make our cities more liveable.

One impressive source of expertise and inspiration for the country is the University of Winnipeg Community Renewal Corporation, a nonprofit charitable corporation that has catalyzed sustainable development in Winnipeg's core for more than a dozen years.

By combining contributions from all three levels of government with private financing and charitable donations, UWCRC has contributed to urban revitalization through new and rehabilitated structures on the U of W's downtown campus.

With a combined value of \$200 million, these projects have added to or improved upon existing classrooms, labs, offices, residential units and athletic facilities.

Using a standard multiplier of 1.6 to calculate the broader effects of the real estate and construction sector on local economies, it's estimated that UWCRC has generated \$320 million in economic impacts for the city and the province.

These projects have been both green and social, saving money through green design and efficient energy use.

Built primarily for university purposes, the buildings offer publicly accessible spaces for community meetings and other activities, including culturally-specific ones such as smudging ceremonies.

They also house local small businesses and non-profits, including education and arts groups, benefiting from modest rental income while bringing the community, literally, into the campus.

A 14-storey, 102-unit mixed-income residential development known as the Downtown Commons (opened in 2016) illustrates the corporation's strategy. Its 51 affordable units (including those reserved for U of W students with families, as well as immigrant, refugee and Indigenous families) benefit from provincial support. Other units are offered to students and the community at large at market rates, including 18 units with premium rents.

This \$31-million project was financed by a \$25.6 million conventional mortgage from RBC Insurance, \$2.5 million from the city and province in tax-increment financing, \$1.2 million in a provincial rental-housing construction tax credit, \$750,000 in equity put up by UWCRC itself, and \$250,000 in provincial Power Smart grants.

Together with the building's substantial rental-income stream, the corporation's blending of public and private financing has resulted in a significant contribution to new urban rental units, including affordable housing in the city and improved livability and safety in the downtown core.

With an electric car charger, an on-site car-sharing partnership with Peg-City Co-Op and leading-edge clean-energy use and monitoring, the Downtown Commons is also an environmentally sustainable building.

Through its off-campus development arm, UWCRC 2.0, the corporation is currently pursuing modified replications of the mixed-income Downtown Commons model at 290 Colony St., in West Broadway at All Saints Anglican Church, and at The Forks' Railside site. Together, the three new projects could create nearly 300 downtown rental units, including up to 150 new units of affordable housing.

There's even more to the UWCRC story.

For more than a decade, jointly with local non-profit SEED Winnipeg, the corporation has operated Diversity Food Services, a social enterprise providing healthy, affordable food on campus to U of W students, staff and faculty as well as to the broader Winnipeg community through off-campus cafés, catering and online delivery services.

Today, with \$3 million in annual revenues, Diversity Food Services provides jobs with modest wages but good benefits and training opportunities for 100 employees, many of whom are new Canadians or face other labour-market barriers, such as disabilities or addictions.

Ranked in the top university food services across North America for its sustainability practices and its affordability, Diversity Food Services has won numerous awards and attracted wide attention from other institutions.

The corporation also advises on Indigenous economic development, providing consulting services to First Nations business corporations and governments.

As it has carried out its mission, UWCRC has received important support from U of W's board of regents. The university's president chairs the corporation's board, working closely with committed U of W colleagues and community volunteers from the private and non-profit sectors.

Aside from basic administrative services and some loan guarantees, the financial contribution of the U of W to the corporation has been limited; the organization is tasked with generating its own operating funding. In fact, over the long term, the corporation is charged to serve as a net income earner for the university.

There are challenges, of course. A constantly changing policy environment requires the corporation to be agile and entrepreneurial. Real-estate deals involving multiple private and public financing sources, such as incentives like municipal tax-increment financing, take time to create and to close.

Engineers and architects must be selected and managed. And community groups, rightly, demand authentic consultation and partnership.

There are no perfect development models or organizations. However, UWCRC has succeeded in responding effectively to these various often-competing demands and producing valuable new social infrastructure at significant scale.

Recognizing the unique and innovative role played by UWCRC, the McConnell Foundation has published a **case study** documenting the corporation's methods and results.

Other universities, colleges and institutes across the country can play an important role in renewing the social infrastructure of our cities, and can learn much from UWCRC's approach.

So can candidates running for elected office, as they seek to stretch scarce public resources to improve their communities.

*Edward Jackson is a senior research fellow at Carleton University, and author of the report **Catalyst for Sustainability: The Achievements, Challenges, Lessons and Prospects of the University of Winnipeg Community Renewal Corporation**, published by the McConnell Foundation.*

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## Analysis

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