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MTS Centre freebies could boost downtown

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Two things are evident about the MTS Centre, which recently celebrated its fifth anniversary.

First, with the surplus of touring pop acts, it has been much busier than most observers predicted it would be.

Second, it has not proved to be the magic bullet for downtown redevelopment which some had been expecting.

The vast majority of the MTS Centre's alleged five million visitors have arrived by personal chariot from the suburbs.

Occasionally they deign to visit a nearby restaurant or bar, but they tend not to shop for hours on end or alter the downtown in any other way of the deserted character it sadly exhibits most days after 6 p.m.

Of course, it is not fair to expect miracles from a single private business venture, even one that had almost a third of its construction costs covered by the public purse.

No individual project will return Winnipeg's downtown to its former glory. The degree to which our central avenues will ever again become magnets for activity depends on a concerted effort by all sorts of players.

And, in truth, things have improved significantly in the last five years.

But there may be something the MTS Centre could do, just to put its money where its mouth is, and to demonstrate its gratitude for that \$40 million in taxpayers' handouts.

Why not design and promote a Downtowners' Pass?

It would be handed out only to those whose full-time residence is downtown and would give them free access to any event at the MTS Centre.

It would only be usable for events to which there were unsold tickets, kind of like flying standby.

And it would not be transferable. No handing off your free Moose tickets to your friends and relatives in the suburbs.

It sounds fairly fanciful, but you never know. The Downtown BIZ, for example, distributed 2,000 welcome bags, each with more than \$100 in coupons from BIZ members, to employees at the new Hydro building.

Most city planners say the key to a vibrant downtown is getting people to live there, and it would be interesting to see if an incentive like free arena tickets would make much of a difference.

The best reason to live downtown is that it allows you to walk to work. Of course, this assumes your work is downtown, and that's an increasingly large assumption.

In that regard, an MTS Downtowners' Pass might be better directed at business owners who opt to stay or locate downtown.

If you get the businesses, you have a much better chance of getting their employees.

Part of the bigger challenge for Winnipeg is to recognize that it has a "bipolar" downtown; the retail downtown shifted to St. James Street and Polo Park several decades ago and it is never coming back.

The new hot spot is along the same north-south axis, Kenaston between Wilkes and Waverley.

The effects of that massive Ikea development can only be guessed at. But it's not going to be a downtown business magnet.

Owners and employees in the retail sector, like everyone else, like to live close to work, and with every passing year this is a suburban neighbourhood.

The only area in Winnipeg that has a residential density to support urban street life is Osborne Village. Even south Broadway, with all its apartments between Kennedy and Main streets, is not sufficiently dense.

The main hope for downtown hinges on a lively mix of entertainment happenings -- concerts, bars, restaurants, bookstores, festivals and so on.

Lots of people, empty nesters in particular, have chosen condos in the East Exchange to be close to the performing arts venues. Imagine the boost to their property values if an MTS Downtowners' Pass were thrown into the mix.

Maybe it's not as fanciful as it sounds.

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