

Portage la Prairie Social Planning Initiative



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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About the Institute of Urban Studies

Founded in 1969 by the University of Winnipeg, the Institute of Urban Studies (IUS) was created at a time when the city's "urban university" recognized a need to address the problems and concerns of the inner city. From the outset, IUS has been both an educational and an applied research centre. The Institute has remained committed to examining urban development issues in a broad, non-partisan context and has never lost sight of the demands of applied research aimed at practical, often novel, solutions to urban problems and issues.

This report was prepared on behalf of the Institute of Urban Studies by:

Dr. Jino Distasio, Barb Besner, Michael Dudley, Karin Kliewer, Art Ladd, Susan Mulligan, Dan Powell Kaeley Wiseman and Joshua Warkentin.

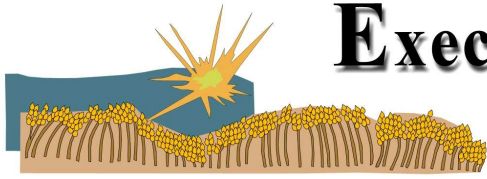
Institute of Urban Studies



<http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca>



The Institute of Urban Studies
103-520 Portage Avenue
Winnipeg MB R3C 0G2
t: 204-982-1140
f: 204-943-4695
<http://ius.uwinnipeg.ca>



Executive Summary

The Institute of Urban Studies (IUS), in partnership with the Portage Community Network (PCN), undertook a public engagement process to produce a *social planning framework* for the city of Portage la Prairie. This document represents the Phase One report on this process. The PCN had previously identified the following areas of concern: Poverty; food security; crime prevention; public transportation; community and neighbourhood development; availability and accessibility of services and resources; recreation/youth programming; and affordable housing and homelessness.

Social planning involves the collection and analysis of social information about a community, including not only general population characteristics but also the issues facing specific population groups. A social plan addresses a community's conditions, concerns, and resources in order to strengthen its ability to meet social programming needs. Broadly speaking the social plan is not social policy per se, but rather should be considered to be a *framework* for the creation and implementation of social policy, one that can articulate a vision for the community, as well as underlying principles for achieving that vision. This framework, in being participatory and community-driven, should derive its issues and values from members of the community.

A Social Plan will help the community set out long-term objectives, establish priorities and define broad strategies for social programs and services. It will assist in the development of long-term social policy and help to define the relationship among and between organizations in the voluntary and public sectors.

This report highlights the findings of this process and includes a demographic profile and mapping study of the city, a summary of findings from the stakeholder and public engagement processes, and a review of social planning theory and practices. The overall

intent is to gain an initial understanding of the issues at hand, and to set out the theoretical and practical issues involved in social planning. The Phase One report should then be able to aid the city in preparing for, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating the social planning process in Portage la Prairie.

To develop the report, the staff of the Institute of Urban Studies engaged in reviews of best practices in social planning, emphasizing small cities; analyzed demographic data relating to social conditions in Portage la Prairie; engaged in a broad consultation with key informants and residents about social needs and assets; identified social policy and program areas of strength and weakness, and proposed improvements and additions to the programming environment; and proposed elements, dimensions and values into an evaluative framework to guide the production of a social plan, and suggested indicators to gauge its effectiveness.

Most of the data analyzed in this report was taken from the 2006 Canadian Census from Statistics Canada.

According to the 2006 Census, Portage la Prairie has a population of 12,728 people. With more than half of this population (57.5%) under 45 years old, Portage can be considered to be a fairly young community. Nearly 20% of the city's population is comprised of children (those under 14) while nearly 38% fell between 15 and 44. Similar to other small prairie cities, Portage la Prairie's ethnic composition is highly homogenous. Despite a 56% increase in the number of persons identified as being a visible minority, no neighbourhood within the city has more than 3.2% of their population identified as a visible minority (this figure excludes Aboriginal persons).

The city's population of Aboriginal Canadians continues to increase. Comprising just over one-fifth of the population, the number of Aboriginal persons within Portage increased 11% from 2001 to 2006. The distribution of the Aboriginal population is far from uniform. Nearly 40% of the North North East's population identifies themselves as Aboriginal while the Koko Platz/Mellenville neighbourhood has a city wide low of only 7%.

When compared to Manitoba's five largest cities, Portage's rates of educational attainment rank in the middle. With approximately one third of the city's adults aged 15 and older without a high school diploma or equivalent, this statistic is significantly higher than Winnipeg's rate of 23.1% and lower than Thompson's rate of nearly 40%. Similarly, Portage ranked third out of the province's five largest cities in terms of high school, university degree and apprenticeship or trades attainment. Within the City, certain neighbourhoods have lower rates of educational attainment: in the South East over 45% of the residents do not hold a high school diploma or other certificate. The highest rate of attainment is in Koko Platz/Mellenville, where almost 8 in 10 adults have some form of recognized educational attainment.

According to the 2006 Census in 2005, the median household income in Portage la Prairie was \$43,015, an increase of 18% from 2000. The same data also indicated that, of Manitoba's five largest urban areas, only Selkirk had a lower median income with \$42,502. Winnipeg, Brandon and Thompson each had higher median incomes than Portage la Prairie. Within the City there is a large geographical variation within income. According to the statistics provided by Neighbourhoods Alive!, the average median income ranges from a high of \$83,171 in Koko Platz/Mellenville to a low of \$42,082 in North North East. On average, Portage families make 74.6% of their income from employment. The remaining 25% of income is generally drawn from government transfers or other sources.

With an unemployment rate of 6.3%, Portage's rate is slightly higher than the Manitoba average of 5.5%. The city's participation rate of 65.5% is also slightly lower than the provincial average of 68.2%. With a rate of 31.8%, the South East neighbourhood has the lowest participation rate in the city (note that this is largely owed to the concentration of Seniors' housing in the South East). The Koko Platz/Mellenville neighbourhood has the highest labour participation rate with almost 74% of residents over 15 employed and just 3.9% actively searching for employment.

While the majority of residents (71.5%) in Portage la Prairie live in owner-occupied accommodations, a significant proportion (29.5%) reside in rented dwellings. The Koko Platz/Mellenville, Central North West and North North West neighbourhoods have the highest proportion of owners in the city (87.4%, 81.4% and 79.6% respectively). In contrast the lowest levels of home ownership is found in the South East with less than half (45.8%) of the neighbourhood's 295 dwellings owned by their occupants.

In terms of affordability, on average, nearly 11% of the city's home owners are paying more than 30% of their monthly income on mortgage payment with the highest proportion occurring in South East (18.5%). The number of renters facing a similar situation jumps dramatically with nearly 37.5% with the South East, Central North East and South West neighbourhoods each experiencing above average rates (56.3%, 40.9% and 39% respectively).

It was found that the Koko Platz/Mellenville neighbourhood had the highest rate of homes in good condition at 76.0% and the lowest needing major repairs, 3.4%. Meanwhile, the North North East and Central North West neighbourhoods contain some of the city's poorest housing stock with 15.6% and 12.3% of their structures requiring major repairs. There are several Census Dissemination Areas (DAs) where over 50% of their homes need minor or major repairs. Over one quarter of its homes within the North North East require major repair.

On average 60% of families (defined as more than one person living in the same residence related by blood, marriage or common-law partnership), have children. Of these, 36% are lone parent families. Lone parent families outnumber two parent households in two neighbourhoods: Central North East (56.4%) and North North East (51.7%). The South West has 72.4% of families reporting children. This is partly the result of just one DAs contribution, which has 88.5% of families reporting children.

This analysis demonstrates that the city of Portage la Prairie features some dramatic spatial disparities; for almost every indicator, positive and negative trends are each concentrated in certain areas. This points to a level of socio-spatial division within the

community, that advantage and disadvantage can depend greatly on where one lives. It is not an ethnically diverse community, but does contain a significant proportion of Aboriginal residents, who again are concentrated in certain neighbourhoods.

So that Portage la Prairie can address some of these disparities, examples of existing social plans are reviewed in order to inform social planning in the city. These plans are discussed briefly in terms of their *rationales*; the *content* of the plans; the *purpose* of the plans; how the plans are to be *implemented, maintained* and *monitored* (is it a one-time publication vs. flexible document); and the *connections* the plans have with other plans. This review showed that the most effective social plans: Take a social development approach; focus on wider community social processes and structures; drive overall policy and enable effective resource allocation; base recommendations on solid community-based research; develop existing community assets; focus on processes, transactions and institutions; emerge from the community; strike a balance between pragmatism and transformation; and measure their progress.

In order to establish the nature and extent of the key areas of concern, IUS researchers engaged in a strategy of public consultation. First the researchers met with stakeholders representing the various member agencies constituting the Portage Community Network. Concurrently, six smaller focus group sessions were held with limited-income parents; health care providers; new immigrants; seniors; Aboriginal persons; and residents with housing challenges. Then a broader community was consulted in two public forums. These results then informed the development of recommendations.

Respondents noted that many social issues connect to poverty; so much so that they can't be addressed without understanding the root causes. Poverty was seen as affecting all aspects of life, from social relationships to education outcomes to transportation. An increasing number of households struggle with low wages, are unable to get ahead and don't qualify for many programs that might otherwise help them improve the quality of their lives. Some people in need are, for a variety of reasons, unable to access services adequately and so are "falling between the cracks." The use of food banks is not seen as a

sustainable solution to poverty and the community must seek ways to reduce the reliance on such institutions.

Recommendations:

- *Develop a holistic approach to understanding and dealing with the issues and root causes of poverty, including working poverty. Include identifying gaps and barriers in service provision and a food security policy.*

One of the most frequently recurring themes raised by the community was that of a lack of affordable and quality housing. Addressing this need should include meeting the needs of a diverse population, including larger families. Much of the affordable housing stock was thought to be in poor condition, requiring investment and supports. The Community's social challenges were seen as being exacerbated by housing, including "concentrations of poverty." Affordable rental units are felt to be in too few hands. It was suggested that more landlords be encouraged to build and manage units within Portage. Relations between residents and the owners and managers of some residential properties were cited as a source of conflict. People often fall through the cracks because their life circumstances make them ill-prepared for independent living, and this includes young adults leaving the child welfare system.

Recommendations:

- *Seek ways to fund the construction of new and affordable housing that meets the diverse needs of all members of the community.*
- *New housing types must recognize the changing needs of residents and must include more examination of both extended family models as well as meeting the need for compact affordable units for single persons.*
- *Support existing owners with accessing repair and renovation programs to ensure that quality and sustainability of the stock is maintained and enhanced.*
- *Deconcentrate poverty by distributing affordable housing throughout the community.*

- *Explore ways to improve the perceptions and relationships among owners/managers, tenants and the general community through creative programs. This should include looking to the Manitoba Residential Tenancies Branch for support.*
- *Seek ways to create a more positive environment such as West Broadway's Tenant Landlord Cooperation Model¹.*
- *Provide incentives to expand the choices and location of rental housing along with exploring new funding models to encourage additional development.*
- *Focus on the development of supportive and transitional housing to meet the needs of individuals who are currently difficult to house.*

Many residents reported having inadequate access to key activities in the community as a result of poor mobility options, such as not owning a car or being too far from needed destinations to walk. As a result, access to employment, services, shopping and recreation opportunities imposes an unnecessary burden on already struggling families and individuals. The closure of some of the retail operations in the downtown and the flourishing of suburban big-box retail were raised as a major reason why shopping and services have become impractical destinations for many limited-income households. Big box stores were felt to be too far to walk to, especially in winter.

Recommendations:

- *Explore in more detail the possibility of a public transportation system as both a social equity issue as well as part of a more sustainable future.*
- *Frame transportation as an urban and economic development opportunity that can enhance the quality of life and economic well-being of Portage.*
- *Seek creative partnerships for households that would like to take advantage of big-box retailers by exploring the cost-benefit/effectiveness of shuttle services from downtown.*

There was a strong sense from participants that a division exists between the Aboriginal population and the other residents. Some viewed this as an indication that more visible or

¹ See <http://www.winnipegrentnet.ca/tenant-landlord-coop.cfm>

formal collaboration is needed between the Aboriginal leadership and Portage decision makers. The divide between Aboriginal and non- Aboriginal peoples was repeatedly cited as one of the most significant barriers to addressing a host of social issues.

- ***Embed race and “racialization” as a principal factor in all social planning initiatives.***
- ***Investigate and implement planning models aimed explicitly at overcoming barriers through building cross cultural awareness, bridging divides and building trust.***

The inability of people to access employment was felt to be hindering the potential of the local economy. It was suggested that the employment potential of some residents could be enhanced through appropriate skills-building that focused on basic literacy, numeracy and job readiness. However, many parents are reportedly unable to participate in the work force because they are unable to find affordable and safe child care. This was seen as a barrier not only for families but for the businesses that are unable to benefit from hiring skilled people. Another barrier to economic development that was commonly cited was the lack of public transportation.

Recommendations:

- ***Make locally available training opportunities part of economic development initiatives so that potential workers are provided with the skills needed.***
- ***Community economic development initiatives should strive for balance by supporting a strong retail presence in the downtown.***
- ***Provide more day care spaces. Work with employers and training centres to ensure that day care space becomes part of the long range planning process.***
- ***Promote public transportation as an economic development tool.***

Many people report being afraid to walk the streets at night. This is not just about public safety, it is also a public transportation, racial equality and public perception issue. For example, it was suggested that if buses were available people wouldn't need to be

walking at night. However, the basic safety of the community needs to be improved so people can feel free to walk at night. Aboriginal informants reported feeling harassed by police if they were out at night, and this made them feel unsafe while contributing to racial tension in the city.

- ***Identify areas perceived as unsafe. Consider conducting a Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) audit as one way to assess the local issues.***
- ***Explore how new or existing structures such as the Community Consultative Group and Community Justice Group can aid in improving Aboriginal-police relations.***

Many families reported being unable to afford, or too remote from, recreational activities. Many recreational facilities require fees, and numerous participants reported missing free community skating rinks. Life circumstances can also prevent attendance in recreational programs. The most frequently cited barrier to greater participation in recreational activities was the lack of mass public transportation. There was also a suggestion that young peoples' interests in activities and sports are diverse and may not be the same as the ones we grew up with, nor might these be deemed "acceptable" to adults.

- ***Invest in family-friendly places. Children and families need more no- or low-cost public spaces for kids to hang out, such as skating rinks, parks and plazas, and they need to be placed where needed across the city.***
- ***Consult young people when creating recreational opportunities.***
- ***Engage and empower youth. Consider a youth committee that has a budget and authority to make real decisions.***

Many social services are located in Portage – so many in fact that some worry that Portage is a “social services city.” Yet people stated that many are still falling through the cracks because of the narrow range of mandates in existing programs. As well, some

providers acknowledge that they don't know what is available locally, limiting their ability to refer clients.

- ***Coordinate and Communicate: More knowledge, awareness and an institutionalized means of communication and information-sharing is needed so that social service providers are able to refer their clients to needed resources.***
- ***Develop a Social Planning Council [Portage la Prairie Social Planning Council (PLP-SPC)] which could engage in ongoing needs assessments, program evaluation, lobbying and coordination.***
- ***Engage in ongoing consultation with the community. It could also help to identify structural barriers.***

It should adopt an integrated planning approach that links it to other planning processes in the municipality and region, so that it is consistent with existing institutional structures and engages relevant local actors. The necessary processes to achieving this holistic approach would include preliminary and ongoing research, including data gathering and analysis; a robust and multi-platform community consultation process; the identification of key target groups; ongoing communication with multiple governmental departments and agencies; and the development of indicators.

The report concludes with recommendations for moving forward on a social planning process.