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Foundation fights to save community

By: Staff Writer

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AN impoverished downtown community squeezed between railway tracks and busy thoroughfares has been called Winnipeg's forgotten neighbourhood.

But the Winnipeg Foundation hopes a unique \$2.5-million initiative will revive Centennial, where 2,200 people share about 80 square blocks just west of the Exchange District.

Statistics show that Centennial is one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Winnipeg. Almost a third of its adult residents are unemployed and an equal amount have less than a Grade 9 education.

Residents say homes are in short supply in Centennial, and what exists is often dilapidated, making it a transient neighbourhood.

But that could soon change.

This year, for the first time in its 80-year history, the Winnipeg Foundation has decided to dedicate a large chunk of its cash to a single neighbourhood -- Centennial.

At least \$500,000 a year for the next five years will be devoted to the neighbourhood.

The head of the foundation hopes to at least double that investment to \$1 million a year through partnerships with business, government and other agencies.

Richard Frost said the foundation's board wanted to invest in an in-depth, comprehensive project. They chose Centennial, a neighbourhood that seems to have been forgotten as communities like West Broadway come to life.

"This is going to be a longer term. Our board is committed to five years. If it takes longer than that, we will take a look at it again," said Frost.

"We don't think any other foundation in Canada has done anything like this. It's new for us and new to community foundations in this country."

At the heart of the project will be Dufferin Elementary, a school with 250 students, of whom about 90 per cent are aboriginal.

After nine months of planning, empty offices in the school will be turned into a community resource centre in the coming weeks.

Community activist

For the first time, a staff member of the Winnipeg Foundation, Tom Simms, will be based outside the foundation's Lombard Avenue offices. Simms is a longtime community activist who has worked in the inner city for two decades.

Also working out of the school will be Diane Roussin, on loan from Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre, a native-run organization with experience improving aboriginal communities.

The Centennial Project will be closely watched by other community foundations and has attracted the attention of the federal government, which will likely kick in funding.

In today's *Sunday Magazine*, the *Free Press* profiles the project and the neighbourhood it's intended to change.

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