

Use Mendel for family venue

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As recent residents of Saskatoon, we have enjoyed this city's high quality family amenities with our respective young families, including swimming pools, soccer centres, libraries, the Western Development Museum, Kinsmen Park, the Forestry Farm, and the dinosaur display at the University of Saskatchewan.

As enjoyable as these amenities are, it is hard not to notice that Saskatoon falls behind many other cities when it comes to family-oriented options. Take, for example, Regina.

In addition to swimming pools, soccer centres, parks and libraries, Regina is home to the Saskatchewan Science Centre, with its endless hands-on activities for children, and its IMAX Cinema. Regina also is home to the Royal Saskatchewan Museum that features nature exhibits with life-sized animals, and a large earth sciences gallery that demonstrates how the Saskatchewan lands have evolved over three billion years.

Regina families can also enjoy the Regina Plains Museum, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Heritage Centre and Government House.

Saskatoon needs to expand its "family infrastructure" - places where parents and children can enjoy themselves and spend time together. Family infrastructure benefits cities in at least two ways. First, it helps children develop intellectually and socially, as recent scientific research consistently points out. Thus family infrastructure can be seen as an investment in Saskatoon's children.

Second, family infrastructure helps cities attract and retain young, skilled workers. North American cities compete for these workers to drive their economies, and a recent poll of 14,000 Americans in large and mid-sized urban centers found that skilled workers rate social offerings such as entertainment and other venues that promote interconnectivity among residents as the top factor that influences decisions on where to anchor their lives and careers. In this way, family infrastructure can be seen as an investment in Saskatoon's economy.

The re-purposing of the Mendel Art Gallery building offers a tremendous opportunity to enhance Saskatoon's family infrastructure. With its riverbank location, ample parking and accessibility by bike path, the Mendel site is perfect for a family-oriented attraction. Moreover, such an attraction would fit well with the re-development of Kinsmen Park, creating a family "town square" in the centre of Saskatoon.

This amenity would serve as a tourist attraction, bringing people into the city centre. After visiting the family-oriented amenities at the re-purposed Mendel building and the revitalized Kinsmen Park, families may stay downtown to shop or eat at a restaurant - thus creating spinoff benefits for downtown businesses.

What type of family attraction should be considered for the Mendel space? One option proposed is a children's museum. Children's museums have recently become popular fixtures in many North American cities such as Winnipeg, Ottawa, and Ann Arbor, Mich. These facilities focus on hands-on exhibits, and children learn through interaction and discovery.

Since 2009, the non-profit Children's Discovery Museum on the Saskatchewan has been operational at Market Mall. Funded almost exclusively through admissions and fundraising, the museum is popular with families and is heavily used. However, its current space is much too small to meet the demand of the growing number of families in Saskatoon. It's not centrally located, making access difficult for some families.

The children's museum has proposed to move its operations to the Mendel building.

If it can get space at the Mendel site, the children's museum intends to house numerous permanent, interactive exhibits for children up to age 12, and anticipates attracting 60,000 visitors per year.

While there undoubtedly will be many exciting ideas for the Mendel Art Gallery space, we believe that Saskatoon residents and their elected officials should give strong consideration to family-oriented options such as that proposed by the Children's Discovery Museum on the Saskatchewan. In a world of hectic schedules and much too little family time, we should not pass up this opportunity to create a family-oriented town square in the heart of our city.

Our children will thank us for the foresight and the great memories when they are older.