

201 Portage Canada Day Living Maple Leaf

Since 2011, the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ has been engaging the public by challenging Winnipeggers to help claim the title of largest living flag in Canada. Volunteers from the community are invited to wear red and white, and become part of a larger mosaic in various iconic downtown locations. A banner year was in 2012, when Winnipeg's Canada Living Flag defended its record, while the photo of that year's living flag was selected to be produced as an official Canada Post stamp, inking over 10 million copies distributed worldwide.

In 2017, the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ, partners, and the local community set its sights on a new goal, ready to upstage its previous efforts. To commemorate Canada's 150th birthday, accommodate a growing number of participants, and, in order to work within the confines of an important landmark determined for the location, the Canada Living Flag was transformed into a Living Maple Leaf, with the numbers '150' nestled just below, in the July 1st event, the 201 Portage Canada Day Living Maple Leaf.

The event saw over 3,600 participants, nabbing the largest Living Maple leaf title, and encouraging pedestrian use of the iconic downtown intersection of Portage and Main. The Downtown Winnipeg BIZ is currently working with the community, government and stakeholders to advocate for the "opening up" of this intersection to pedestrians, as it remains closed to foot traffic since the 1970s.

Utilizing the city's most famous intersection for the Living Flag event helped participants and the wider community, through resulting media coverage, imagine the vibrancy of a new Portage and Main that connects the city for special events, as well as for regular active commuting, which adds vibrancy and life to any downtown. Each year, the Living Flag event engages participants citywide in an event hosted downtown, helping to defeat common misconceptions about the downtown core, including perceptions of its relative safety.

As safety remains the top priority for BIZ membership, the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ supports a 25-member Downtown Winnipeg BIZ Watch Team, along with hundreds of volunteers, who serve as ambassadors for safety and patrol downtown streets from the early morning to late evening every day. The Downtown Winnipeg BIZ has also spearheaded a Community Homeless Assistance Team, which has eight outreach workers that serve those at-risk and connect them to helpful social agencies and social providers, providing a safe place to go or a warm night's sleep for individuals in need downtown.

With these visible programs, and the difference between the real and perceived safety issues downtown, any time the wider population is engaged in a fun, collaborative and inclusive event downtown, perception shifts about the downtown core and its appeal, helping to strengthen support of our downtown businesses and encouraging attendees to return to the area. Due to community partnerships, each year, the Living Flag event is supported by a sustainable model of voluntary civic engagement helped by media partners; placemaking initiatives are generally supported by a business partner; and even the 3,500 free T-shirts given to most

attendees, the most expensive cost, are gained through sponsorship. The event received a total of \$17,850 in sponsorship, including the title sponsorship opportunity (new in 2017), plus over \$23,000 donated in-kind value. In 2017, the City of Winnipeg also waived the road closure fees, a large sponsorship on their behalf to close Winnipeg's most iconic intersection for the special event.

As a result, the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ has been able to capture the hearts and imaginations of over 18,000 attendees since the event's inception, getting a wide-ranging demographic to the city's core. Nearby businesses benefit from the event being held in the area, due to increased foot traffic and even having new eyes on their businesses. The ability to keep reimagining the concept, to change locations and strive for new records helps the event continue to grow its following and attendance each year.

While this year's Canada Living Flag was particularly symbolic in terms of the civic and national pride displayed by the city, the resulting image always tells an even better story: one of multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion in our city. Especially due to limitations in accessibility of the downtown's underground walkway, which was built to divert pedestrians from a closed-off Portage and Main, this year's "taking back the streets" event helped promote a more inclusive and accessible alternative for the future of the iconic intersection.

The success in attendance and interest for the live event was matched or even exceeded by media coverage both leading up to and following the event. Between local, national, and even international coverage through media outlets like *The Huffington Post*, BBC News, Euro News in France, and MSN and Yahoo News in the U.K., media coverage of this year's Living Maple Leaf reached over 80 million viewers. The social media-friendly time lapse video and media shares also went viral – reaching nearly 90 million sets of eyes on Twitter and Facebook. In addition, the event also produced the most reach/impressions on the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ social media accounts than ever before, putting the heart of Winnipeg and the heart of Canada in front of international eyes.

As a smaller metropolitan city in Canada, gaining this kind of national and international attention surrounding Canada's sesquicentennial, the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, lifts the image of Winnipeg as a whole; boosting the perception of Winnipeg as a great place to live, work, play, or visit in Canada. Having the event linked to downtown and an iconic backdrop also helped communicate the strength of Winnipeg's downtown, business community and vibrancy – a win-win for Downtown Winnipeg BIZ members and the local tourism industry, and for the civic pride in the area.

As the seventh Living Flag BIZ-initiated event, our internal events team, Living Flag committee, volunteers and community outreach efforts are well-established. We rely on our media sponsors the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the *Winnipeg Sun* and QX104 to help spread the word about the event, and entice public participation leading up to the event. Because the event is rain or shine, we team up with local entertainers to make sure there's a little something extra in it for the event attendees. This year, local favourites Dirty Catfish Brass Band

provided roving entertainment, the local baseball team, the Winnipeg Goldeyes, were out showing their support along with guests of honour and special addresses from Mayor Brian Bowman, Member of Parliament Robert Falcon-Ouellette, and Paralympian Tim McIsaac. A Canadian Military Hercules plane was flown over the iconic downtown intersection to kick off the event, following the singing of 'O'Canada' and reciting of the Canadian Oath of Citizenship.

Volunteer support is critical to the success of the event, not just in regard to participation, but in orchestrating the best visual representation when putting thousands of bodies together. It's no small feat to maintain order in this exercise – though, it's something that can be replicated anywhere through the support of many partners and volunteers, and a vibrant downtown community ensuring the event's success. And the Living Flag title is always up for contention!