Neechi Commons is a worker’s cooperative founded in 1980 that operated a commercial venture first at 325 Dufferin Avenue, and then from March 2013 also in a newly renovated building at 865 Main Street in Winnipeg.

Initially, it was a small grocery and craft store. Promoters wanted to promote local products and employment. They were clearly trying to develop opportunities for the neighborhood, their members, customers and suppliers. They wanted to have a real social and economic impact in the North End / Point Douglas area. Indigenous people were prominent promoters behind this necessary initiative since its inception.

Renovations aimed at upgrading a landmark building with geothermal climate system, state of the art commercial kitchen and so many other features. The expansion brought a full grocery experience for their customers, as well as a wider palette of local products available and more local jobs and training for its members.

Costs overrun and delays have caused the social enterprise to experience a cash flow shortage that sadly caused the closure of the centre in June 2018. Many changes have occurred in the market since this project was launched in 2013 and we decided to look at it from the angle of social innovation and lean start up techniques, considering the new realities of 2020. Just as an example, many food stores have already adopted online food shopping, which combined with new delivery systems, provide some openings for new and seasoned social entrepreneurs.

if they can do it in Newfoundland...

In September 2019, Red River College started a new program in Social Innovation. A new course in social entrepreneurship has allowed a group of students from the School of Indigenous Education (SIE) to work on an update of the Neechi Commons business model.

For practical purposes, apart from a short questionnaire distributed during a popular community event, our research mostly consisted of secondary sources of information and a few interviews with stakeholders and people with previous experiences of similar endeavours. Since the Neechi Commons expansion has been widely covered by the media over the last 5 years, it is not surprising to notice that the sad episode of the closure has been covered as well. The result is that there plenty of information available online.

We developed a questionnaire to complete our information quest and try to identify potential false impressions and discover the unknown. For example, many people might not know that the coop decided that the business would not sell cigarette at all.

To avoid falling in the trap of trying to develop a project for a building, we decided to start from Neechi Commons’ purposes and values. We assessed most of the purposes dear to the coop members over its 38 years of existence.

Through reading about current issues, interviewing people involved, and based on our own experiences, we concluded that food accessibility, proper nutrition in the community and accessibility to mental health’s basic prevention and support services are current issues needing more attention now in Winnipeg. We concluded that Neechi Commons has the capacity and the understanding to address them with a noticeable impact. Maybe there is the possibility of defining a problem from that statement. Our readings and interviews also convinced us that the 3 issues are priorities in the community, are linked together and have better chances of being positively impacted if address holistically.

Community based research will be an essential component of the project. It will allow us to iterate our offer to adjust to the new realities as they present themselves. Among other things, it will help discover what kind of nutrition will help which condition.

We have identified an institution called Food and Mood Centre that could be a model. This is a research centre at Deakin University that aims to understand the complex ways in which what we eat influences our brain, mood, and mental health. More and more researches are confirming that our microbiome must be as healthy as every other parts of our body to maintain balance.
The assets of Neechi Commons

The liabilities

E-Commerce; the new reality

What is accessibility?

How can we improve affordability?

What is an holistic approach to health?

Restaurant, Catering

Grocery store

Bakery

Fish

Butcher

Prepared meals

Delivery

Arts & Crafts

Office rental

NEECHI COMMONS OUvre SES PORTES

Commercial Property Brochure