

Seattle adopts Portland model for another go at public toilets

BY AARON BURKHALTER
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Seattle's Larry Clum spends hours each week walking the streets of downtown Seattle.

A mental health counselor for Seattle's Union Gospel Mission, he meanders through Pioneer Square, down Alaskan Way, underneath the viaduct and into Westlake Park.

Clum tries to plan his routes so he can stop at the public restroom at the Washington State Ferry Terminal midway through his day. He keeps a list of accessible restrooms on his iPhone, along with a few door codes for the ones that are locked, just in case.

Finding a bathroom downtown without buying something is hard, he said. For the people he serves who live on the street or in an emergency shelter, it can be nearly impossible.

"Not everyone can buy a cup of coffee and use the Starbucks loo," Clum said.

Everyone poops, but Seattle has few facilities to meet the need and no major plans to change that. Private businesses, public libraries and chambers of commerce are left to pick up the slack — sometimes literally. Metropolitan Improvement District crews cleaned human and animal waste from Seattle streets more than 9,000 times in 2012.

Leslie Smith, executive director of Alliance for Seattle's Pioneer Square, said the business group has explored ways to open public restrooms in the area, but all of them required full-time staff and ongoing maintenance.

"It was prohibitively expensive for my budget," she said.

Seattle has been struggling with the issue for more than a hundred years. At the turn of the last century, the city built extravagant public toilets but later closed them. In 2004, Seattle tried again, purchasing five self-cleaning public bathrooms that brought infamy to the city for how they were misused.

After the toilets became havens for drug use and crime, the city sold the toilets at a significant loss.

"Seattle has a devastating failure in its history," said Carol McCreary, co-founder of the Portland-based non-profit Public Hygiene Lets Us Stay Human (PHLUSH). "Everybody knows about Seattle in the toilet world."

Now, Seattle is bracing for a do-over. In September, Urban Visions will install a new toilet called a Portland Loo, a small, metal outdoor toilet that will sit next to the Sinking Ship parking lot on Yesler Way.

The real estate company is buying and installing the toilet in September as a public amenity in exchange for additional height at a new building. The city will own the toilet, and the Alliance for Pioneer Square will maintain it.

Designers of the Portland Loo based it on everything that went wrong with Seattle's automated toilets. The metal is graffiti resistant, and there are slats pointed down so people outside can see feet but nothing else. It is otherwise enclosed for privacy.



PHOTO COURTESY OF PHLUSH

An oval-shaped metal structure with a simple toilet on the inside and a sink on the outside, the Portland Loo is a glorified Port-O-Potty.

In Portland, the toilets are installed near playgrounds in high-end neighborhoods and in an area of businesses, shelters and social services similar to Seattle's Pioneer Square.

"They're a pleasure to use," McCreary said.

Business owners in Pioneer Square can hardly wait for the Portland Loo to be installed. Sports fans, bar patrons and homeless people use alleyways to relieve themselves, and that hurts the historic neighborhood's public image, they say.

"We've spent a good amount of time shooing people away or getting them to take it elsewhere," said Benjamin Rainbow, owner of Back Alley Bike Repair in the alley between First and Second avenues south of Occidental Park. "On a warm day, I can't afford to let people defecate in the alley."

Joanna Urrego, owner of Klondike Penny's Old Time Portrait Studio on South Washington Street, is also fed up with the lack of toilets. She's building two outhouses, complete with crescent-moon shaped cut-outs in the doors, to put in Occidental Park.

She'll put buckets inside and plans to hire someone to clean and maintain the outhouses starting July 3.

Urrego is protesting the city's lack of public restrooms and demanding lawmakers install more toilets and hire people to clean and maintain them so they work.

"I pay a lot of taxes," Urrego said. "I want

my tax dollars to be spent on public facilities and services."

Elsewhere in the city, businesses feel the strain of too few restrooms for too many people. The Pike Place Market measures its toilet paper by the mile, said spokesperson Kelly Lindsay. Restrooms users go through 95 to 175 miles of toilet paper a month.

These bathrooms are meant for customers, but they're used by everyone. It's not supposed to be that way, Lindsay said.

"We are a public market," Lindsay said. "But our mission is to support our visitors and our commercial tenants."

In Ballard, Elizabeth Maupin of the Ballard Community Taskforce on Homelessness and Hunger is also seeking a public loo. Last year, Seattle's Human Services Department removed a portable toilet from Ballard Commons Park after neighbors deemed it unsightly.

The task force persuaded the city to bring the toilet back for the summer, and to appease neighbors, task force members pledged to build an enclosure for it.

That's the thing about toilets, McCreary said. No one wants to look at them, much less discuss them in public.

"It makes people giggle," she said. "We're not at ease with it."

Such discomfort is bad for all of us, she added, because it's more than a joke: Toilets are a human right.

Reprinted from Real Change Newspaper, Seattle, Wash.

Recalling the comfort of Seattle's Bygone comfort stations

BY RIANNA HIDALGO
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You relax in an oak chair, taking in the Corinthian columns and Alaskan marble. An attendant asks if you would like to purchase a cigar then proceeds to shine your shoes. You relax, refresh and head out to face the rest of your day.

This doesn't sound much like your typical public restroom.

Today, the term public restroom evokes images of cramped stalls, cold steel, sullied surfaces, unpleasant smells and concrete floors littered with toilet paper — a place to flee as soon as possible or avoid altogether.

But in 1909, when Seattle's lavish underground bathroom opened beneath Pioneer Square, public perception of public restrooms, then called "comfort stations," was much more favorable than it is today.

"The man of travels will find nowhere in the Eastern hemisphere a sub-surface public comfort station equal in character to that which has recently been completed in the downtown district of Seattle; and in the United States there are very few that will be found equal to it," read a 1910 magazine article in The Pacific Builder and Engineer.

The pergola still standing on First Avenue and Yesler Way, which was renovated in 1972 and again in 2002 after a truck crashed into it, is a remnant of the underground restrooms. It was part of an integrated design by Julian Everett to shelter two descending stairways and ventilate the restrooms via hollow columns.

Separate anterooms for men and women, where users were greeted by attendants, featured armchairs, terrazzo floors, brass foot rests, toiletries and cigars. A shoe shine cost 10 cents; an individual towel and soap, 2 cents. The facility offered both paid and free toilets, 47 in all, and typically served 5,000 people per day.

For a moment in history, it was believed to be the world's most luxurious underground toilet.

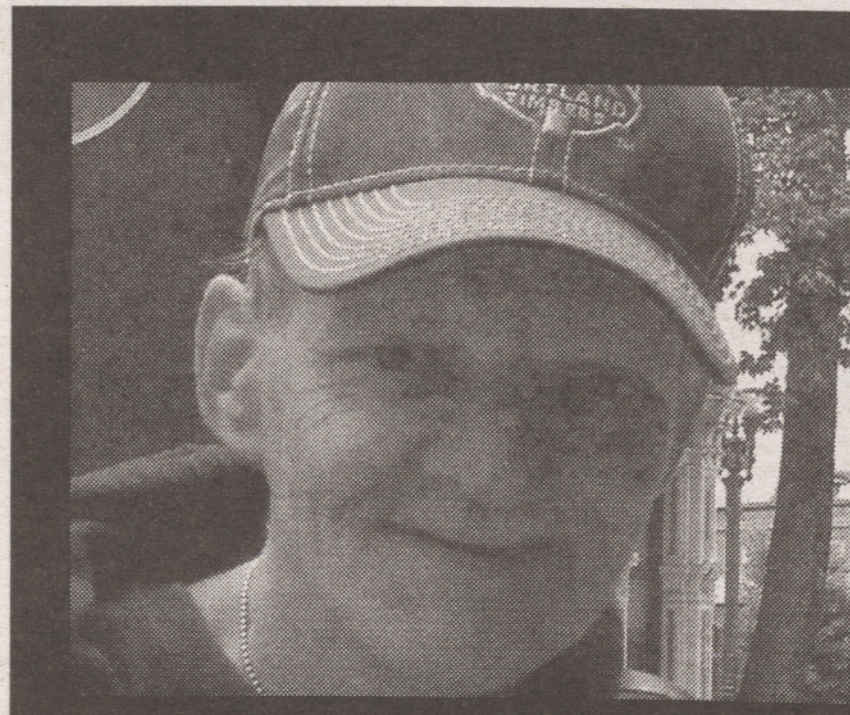
Seattle's Pioneer Square underground restroom closed in the '50s, and by the '70s and '80s, public restrooms were shutting down in droves and becoming targets for vandalism and illegal activity.

Now, Seattle is preparing for a \$90,000 Portland Loo for Pioneer Square. If the city goes through with it, users can bet they won't be getting cigars or shoe-shines while they wait.

Too Honest

By Paula Ramirez

Am I politically correct?
Is my sarcasm easy to detect?
Does my situation give you the blues?
Am I a topic you hear on the news?
You only judge without walking a
Mile in my shoes.
Which side do you choose?



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