

# **FINDINGS AND TAKE-AWAYS FOR WASHINGTON DC FROM A QUESTIONNAIRE ADMINISTERED TO CITIES THAT HAVE INSTALLED THE PORTLAND LOO**

## **SUMMARY**



A Report of the Public Restroom Committee  
People for Fairness Coalition (PFFC) Downtown DC Public Restroom Initiative

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In August 2019 the People for Fairness Coalition (PFFC) [Downtown DC Public Restroom Initiative](#) sent questionnaires to 28 cities in the US and Canada that, between 2008 and 2019, installed [Portland Loos](#) (stand-alone public restrooms designed to be open 24/7). Of the 18 cities that responded, 13 installed 21 Portland Loos in downtown commercial areas, and 9 installed 24 Portland Loos in city parks.<sup>1</sup>

The questionnaire (attached) requests information on the number of Portland Loos installed, when they were installed, their locations, experiences with the Portland Loos once installed, and advice for Washington DC should it decide to install one or two Portland Loos a part of a public restroom pilot under [Law 22-280, Public Restroom Installation & Promotion Act of 2018](#)<sup>2</sup>

The full report available on the [Downtown DC Public Restroom Initiative website](#) is divided into six sections: (1) background; (2) study methodology; (3) findings from cities that have installed Portland Loos in/near commercial areas; (4) what has worked and what hasn't worked; (5) takeaways for Washington DC; (6) concluding remarks.

Findings, by city, and tabulations of findings for Portland Loos installed in commercial areas in cities may be found in the left hand column of Attachment 3 and in Attachments 4, 5 and 8. Findings, by city, that have installed Portland Loos in parks may be found in the right hand column of Attachment 3 and in Attachments 6, 7, and 8.

This summary and the full document focus on findings from cities that have installed Portland Loos in downtown commercial areas.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Most (9 of 13) cities keep their Portland Loos open 24/7. Two decided before installing them that they would keep them open only during the day. Two that originally opened their Portland Loo(s) 24/7 decided to close them at night due to problems.<sup>3</sup>
- Responders in 8 of the 9 cities that kept their Portland Loos open 24/7 report that users have found them to be clean and safe.<sup>4</sup>
- All cities that have installed Portland Loos have done so with a commitment to the importance of having clean, safe public restrooms is good for personal and public health,

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<sup>1</sup> The total, 22, reflects that some cities have Portland Loos installed in downtown commercial areas and parks.

<sup>2</sup> [Law 22-280](#) provides for piloting two programs: (1) Stand-alone public restrooms open 24/7; (2) Businesses provided with incentives to open their restroom to the public. The two opened for a standalone open 24/7 are the Portland Loo and Automated Public Toilets (APTs).

<sup>3</sup> One was Salt Lake City UT which was inappropriately located in a dilapidated area, with few businesses and residential housing, limited pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and a high concentration of people experiencing homelessness.

<sup>4</sup> The one exception is Central Square in Cambridge MA where the BID overseeing the Portland Lo, has encountered problems but has determined, on balance, that people in need (especially the population experiencing homelessness) deserve to have access to a public restroom 24/7.

and to serving all members of the community, with the acknowledgment that occasionally problems will arise, most of them easily addressed as part of ongoing maintenance (broken locks, stopped up toilets, graffiti, frozen pipes).<sup>5</sup>

- Location has been key to success: (1) an area that is visible from the sidewalk and street; (2) shops, restaurants, bars civic buildings, metro/bus stations nearby; (3) high level of pedestrian and vehicular traffic during the day and moderate at night; (4) under/near street lights at night.
- Also important is identifying potential users and designing one's approach based on the number and variety of users. This study found that Portland Loos that are open 24/7 in cities with a variety of users (shoppers tourists, seniors, families with children, people getting on and off buses and metros, joggers; people experiencing homelessness) were apt to encounter fewer challenges.<sup>6</sup>
- All eleven (11) cities that responded have business and community buy in (serve as eyes and ears during the day); they have also have arranged for police/other monitoring at night.
- Seven (7) installed needle deposits; four (4) installed baby changers.
- When asked whether they would recommend the Portland Loo for Washington, DC, the seven (7) cities that responded to this question said yes.

In the words of individuals from three cities that recommended that Washington DC install Portland Loos:

Harvard Square, Cambridge, Massachusetts: "*The design is excellent. We love that it resists graffiti, that it can be maintained quite easily with a robust cleaning schedule. We also appreciate that it is comfortable, but not too comfortable so that folks are inclined to stay too long. For the most part, they use it and leave.*"

Cincinnati, Ohio: "*It is a good unit to place anywhere there are people present.*"

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<sup>5</sup> 3 report people occasionally sleeping at night; however this has not been seen as a major deterrent.

<sup>6</sup> The study found that areas with a smaller variety of users, among them a relatively high proportion of transient or unhoused individuals, were more apt to experience problems.

Monterey, California: “They are practical and low maintenance. Because of the open, slatted wall users don’t feel too comfortable inside. So they just do their business and move on.”

## **TAKEAWAYS FOR WASHINGTON DC**

1. Commitment and need should be the guiding principles in deciding where to install a stand-alone public restroom open 24/7
  - There are no public restrooms nearby and businesses are increasingly limiting restroom access to customers only.
  - Members of the community are committed to making sure that the personal and public health needs of residents and visitors are met.
2. It is very important to apply Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) principles in selecting the most appropriate site(s)
  - In an open visible location with a lot of pedestrian and vehicular traffic during the day and at night.
  - In/near a commercial area (businesses, offices, restaurants, bars) where eyes can be kept on the restroom during the daytime and into the evening.
  - Nearby business and community buy-in (as they serve as the eyes and ears during the day)<sup>7</sup>;
  - Good street lighting at night.
  - Arrangements made for police (or other) monitoring at night.
3. Consider who the users will be and adopt the most appropriate strategy(ies)
  - The ideal, depending on the location, is an area with a wide variety of users (shoppers, tourist, people working nearby, people entering and leaving public transit, people experiencing homelessness).
  - In cases where the priority is to benefit one target group (example, transient population and/or people experiencing homelessness) it may be appropriate to provide some form of oversight.
4. Anticipate that there will be issues and be prepared to address them when they arise:
  - Most (broken locks, graffiti, clogged toilets, frozen pipes) can be easily addressed and are part of ongoing maintenance.

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<sup>7</sup> Businesses and residents supported the Portland Loos in the overwhelming majority of cities that responded to the questionnaire. Among others, businesses were happy that they had fewer people asking to use their restrooms.

- Where used for shooting up (very common in both public and private restrooms), install needle drops.
- If used for prostitution (rarely reported) there are three options: (1) shut it down at night; (2) improve surveillance during the day including hiring a full-time monitor; (3) keep it open 24/7 if seen not to cause a significant problem and there is a determination that the highest priority is to serve those in need.

## 5. The Portland Loo is a viable option for DC

- Low cost to purchases and maintain<sup>8</sup>, durable, and easy to clean.
- Designed using parts that are available locally should they need to be replaced.
- Designed to maximize use by having a washing station outside.
- Designed with safety considerations (louvers so that people outside can see and hear what is happening inside, lighting inside and outside at night).
- Follow the manufacturer's guidance that it be located in areas that meet Crime Prevention for Environment Design (CPTED) principles.

## 6. Keep the Portland Loo and the area around it clean

- Number of times cleaned daily depends on frequency of use.
- Ability to respond quickly between scheduled cleanings if the need arises.
- If open 24/7 do first cleaning early in the day .

## IN CLOSING

Ultimately a judgement call will need to be made which takes into consideration at least four factors:

- Benefits to public health: less public urination and defecation; fewer citations for public urination/defecation; less risk of becoming sick from stepping on human feces that carry life threatening diseases such as Hepatitis B <sup>9</sup>.
- Benefits to personal health: Everyone needs access to a clean, safe public restroom when nature calls. When the need comes, people who are restroom challenged have to go urgently. They include, among others: seniors, small children, people with diabetes and crohns & colitis disease, individuals with physical challenges who move more slowly. <sup>10</sup>
- Benefits to local businesses who will have fewer people asking to use their restrooms; more individuals who are restroom challenged coming to shop knowing there is a clean, safe public restroom nearby; less poop to scoop poop, less urine in front of their establishments.
- Willingness to accept that a public restroom will require ongoing cleaning and maintenance; that some occasions may arise where the restroom may be used for other purposes.

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<sup>8</sup> \$95,000 to purchase and transport the Portland Loo to its location; \$35,000 (if near a water and sewer line) to install; \$12,000 to \$20,000 to maintain, depending on location and daily use.

<sup>9</sup> San Diego Hepatitis A outbreak ends after 2 years, <https://www.apnews.com/cc40b8c476ef469ebdc2228772176b03>

<sup>10</sup> A full list of individuals who are restroom challenged is drawn from a document prepared by the [American Restroom Association](#).

Taken from an article that appeared in June 2017 in the San Antonio Tribune:<sup>11</sup>

*"The cost to the city would be much greater if people didn't perceive downtown to be a welcoming and clean place to visit".*

"San Antonio Police Department officers issued 104 citations for public urination in the ten months prior to the loo opening, according to records obtained by the local Fox affiliate. Ten months after its July installation, and that number's been cut in half — officers have only handed out 51 citations. In an interview with Fox, SAPD spokesperson Sgt. Jesse Salame linked this significant drop to the new bathroom and said that businesses have noted a clear difference in the amount of human waste left near their downtown doorsteps.

Centro maintenance staffers — the other uniformed crew with a constant downtown presence — have also noticed a welcome dip in the amount of urine or poop they run across at work.

In the past eight months, Centro employees have reported a 27 percent decrease in what Centro CEO Pat DiGiovanni politely calls "cleaning efforts related to human waste" compared to the same 8-month period last year.

"The statistics show that [the loo's] making a positive impact on the downtown experience," DiGiovanni told the Current.

The cost to the city would be much greater if people didn't perceive downtown to be a welcoming and clean place to visit.'

## **ATTACHMENT**

### **Questionnaire Sent Out to 28 Cities in the US and Canada Asking about their Experience with the Portland Loo**

Name and contact information: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

#### General Information

1. How many Portland Loos does your city/location have?
2. When were they installed?
3. Where are they installed (along a sidewalk, in a park, etc)? Please share the following information:
  - a. Please describe pedestrian traffic that passes by during the day: e.g. shoppers, tourists, individuals experiencing homelessness

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<sup>11</sup> In Defense of San Antonio's \$100,000 Toilet, San Antonio Current, June 17, 2017: <https://www.sacurrent.com/the-daily/archives/2017/06/15/in-defense-of-san-antonios-thousand-dollar-toilet>

- b. Please describe what may be found nearby (e.g. within the same block): stores, restaurants bars, how many?)
  - c. Is there large population experiencing homelessness nearby?
4. What criteria did your city use in deciding on the site(s) where they are installed? For example: visibility to pedestrians and cars, community support serving as the eyes and ears during the day)
  5. Has your city added any extras (ex? baby changer, needle drop)?
  6. Do you have plans to install any more Portland Loos? (if yes, please specify)
  7. Are the Portland Loos that are currently installed open 24/7?
    - a. If not, what hours are they open?
    - b. If not, why was the decision taking to not keep the Loo(s) open 24/7
  8. Who is responsible for cleaning and maintaining them?
  9. How often (times/day) are they cleaned?
  10. Approximately how many people use it/them each day?
  11. Have you installed any monitoring devices (e.g. counters, surveillance cameras of areas outside/nearby)?
  12. Have arrangements been made for the police or other entity to monitor the Loo(s) by passing by periodically during the rounds at night o?

#### Receptivity to/experiences once installed

1. Are nearby businesses supportive? (please expand on your response)
2. Are community members supportive? (please expand on your response)
3. Have you experienced any problems and, if so, how has your city addressed them? (please specify)
4. Do you know of any instances where the Portland Loo(s) in your city has/have been used for prostitution/other illicit sexual activity? If so, how have you addressed this?
5. Do you know of any instances where the Portland Loo (s) have been used for selling drugs? If so, how have you addressed this?
6. Have there been complaints on cleanliness (and if so how have they been addressed)?
7. Have there been any complaints on the part of users not feeling safe (and if so how addressed)?

#### Other

1. Would you recommend that DC install one or more Portland Loos and, if so, why?
2. Do you have any precautions/lessons learned that you think DC should take into consideration should it decide to install/maintain one or more Portland Loos?
3. Would you be interested in receiving the spreadsheet and tabulations that we will be preparing?

Thank you very much!

