



Downtown Idea Exchange

Improving physical, social and economic conditions downtown

PATHWAYS AND PUBLIC SPACES

To make downtown more attractive, embrace “the power of public restrooms”

Public potties might be the most mundane and the most fundamental challenge facing downtown leaders.

On the one hand, downtowns increasingly are home to coffee shops, microbreweries, wineries, food carts, and food trucks that increase visitors' need for toilets. On the other hand, many downtowns prefer to avoid the cost and hassle of operating public restrooms.

If your downtown has a dearth of public restrooms — and especially if your toilets close at 5 p.m. — downtown consultant Roger Brooks suggests you rethink your approach. He sings the praises of what he calls “the power of public restrooms.”

Restrooms can be trouble spots, he acknowledges. Vagrants and drug addicts can use them as shelter.

Even so, Brooks says open restrooms pay for themselves by projecting a welcoming vibe and luring people to linger longer.

“Relieved visitors spend more,” Brooks says.

Not offering public restrooms is akin to inviting guests to your home for a dinner party and telling them they can't use your home's bathroom.

“Public restrooms are core to placemaking,” Brooks says. “Your downtown should be your public living room. It's a ridiculous idea to invite people downtown, try to get them to spend time there, and tell them they have to leave when it's time for a potty break.”

Calling restrooms “absolutely critical,” Brooks offered these tips for a washroom strategy in a recent webinar:

- **Never send customers away.** Chances are that storefronts in your downtown have signs reading “Restrooms are for customers only” or “No public restrooms.” “That's just like saying, ‘Go away,’” Brooks says. “Every single business in your community is in the hospitality industry.”

“Relieved visitors spend more.”

He says you and your merchants should take a hint from McDonald's, which never posts a “No public restrooms” sign. The chain has found that many people who come in just to use the bathroom buy something after they leave the loo. “Starbucks became a great third place because their restrooms are always open to the public,” Brooks says.

- **Put restrooms in the heart of your downtown.** If washrooms are located in a prime location, they will attract fewer vagrants and drug dealers. And the high-traffic spot will drive more traffic to downtown businesses.

- **Pay merchants to open their restrooms.** What if your downtown doesn't have thousands of dollars to pay for construction of new restrooms? Compensate business owners who open their existing restrooms to the public.

In Santa Cruz, CA, the city offers \$400 a month to downtown tenants who make their restrooms

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available to anyone, and post a sign in the front window. Bookshop Santa Cruz is among the tenants to embrace the offer.

And in Traverse City, MI, the downtown development authority pays \$250 a month for businesses with single stalls, and more for multiple stalls. One caveat: The bathrooms must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

- **Post visitor information at your public restrooms.** Brooks calls it a way to “monetize” the bathrooms. Restrooms draw traffic, so take advantage by making available a map of downtown, or by including flyers and brochures about downtown businesses.

- **Make them easy to find.** Eliminate frustration by clearly marking public restrooms. Include restrooms on your wayfinding signs, both for motorists and for pedestrians. If you have an app for downtown visitors, be sure to include public restroom information there, too.

- **Make sure they’re open late.** Fully 70 percent of spending at brick-and-mortar retailers and restaurants comes after 6 p.m., Brooks says. If you’ve got public restrooms in city hall or a public library but those facilities close after normal business hours, you don’t have washrooms when you need them most. Brooks says public bathrooms should be open until 10 p.m. — and should open at 7 a.m., for earlybirds visiting coffeeshops.

- **Make people feel safe.** Bathrooms can be magnets for bad behavior. One downtown fixed its crime issues by piping in classical music. That was an unusual move, but a more common tactic is to add lighting and security cameras outside the bathroom. The simple change of making a restroom a clean, well-lit place will scare off trouble-makers and attract everyday visitors.

- **Keep them clean.** “If you don’t maintain them, it is a direct reflection on you,” Brooks says. Be sure to clean public restrooms



Wayfinding signage clearly directs visitors to public restrooms.

New bathroom designs deter crime

Public restrooms might be a necessary amenity, but they also can be trouble spots for drug use and other illicit behavior.

“A homeless person will go in there and lock the door and they’ll just camp out overnight,” downtown consultant Roger Brooks says.

Manufacturers of public restrooms have incorporated new designs that address some of those issues. Brooks points to the well-known “Portland loo,” a single-stall structure that costs about \$90,000. The stainless-steel exterior is graffiti-proof, and there are see-through slats at the bottom. The openings provide ventilation, and they also allow police to see how many pairs of feet are in the restroom.

Napa, CA, has an Exeloo restroom that cost \$220,000 for multiple stalls and automated doors. The sliding doors remain open until someone enters the bathroom. Then the door remains closed for only 10 minutes. The bathroom warns the user when time is running out.

In another example, manufacturer Romtec sells single stalls for as little as \$11,000.

Cost can be an obstacle, but grants are available for public restrooms. And Brooks says city officials should view restrooms as a necessary cost, much like playgrounds and athletic fields.

at least every three to four hours. If your downtown is a bustling, high-traffic place, you might need to clean restrooms more frequently.

- **Try pop-up restrooms.** In Winnipeg, Manitoba, downtown leaders move a “pop-up” restroom from spot to spot throughout downtown. You need not go that far: Just as a vacant storefront can be a pop-up holiday store, empty retail or office space also could be turned into temporary public restrooms.

- **Hire homeless people as attendants.** In some cities, downtown leaders have made the best of the problem of homelessness by hiring homeless people to keep an eye on public restrooms. Or, Brooks says, you could seek out volunteers or retirees, or you could hire students looking for a low-skill job.

- **Make it a destination.** If you’re feeling ambitious, move beyond basic bathrooms to catchy ones. Brooks notes that Sulphur Springs, TX, revived its downtown in part by building glass-walled public potties that turned into an attraction



Exterior and interior photos of the glass-walled restroom in Sulphur Springs, TX, appear on TripAdvisor.com.



in themselves. Photos from this attraction abound on social media. “We are now in the world of toilet tourism,” Brooks says.

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