

6. Reach Out to the Community

Public toilet initiatives differ from other community-based projects where citizen groups take the lead. It's comparatively easy to rally your neighbors to advocate with your city's transportation department for a speed-bump or with the parks department for a children's playground. In restroom advocacy, significant numbers of supporters do not just appear; they need to be created. Restrooms are only beginning to have the constituencies that traffic safety and recreation have always enjoyed. Getting your issue onto the policy agenda takes consistent effort.

To keep the conversation positive and productive, it's best to meet with individuals and small groups. For certain individuals, any talk of toilets is awkward and disagreeable. That same individual, however, may refer you to a staffer or employee who is enthusiastic and supportive. Avoid confrontations or evoking disgust. Instead, for each person you meet with, frame the issue in appropriately positive terms: urban livability, social justice, basic rights, public health, or economic development. In time, you will find people willing to help as well as your true allies.

As your group studies the options for increasing public toilet availability, you'll need to meet with a wide range of people.

- You might start with neighborhood associations, nonprofit agencies and local faith-based groups to practice your messages and see what works and what doesn't.
- In the business community, talk to those in charge of downtown business improvement districts, your Chamber of Commerce or Main Street Program and members of neighborhood business associations. They can help analyze the problem and share concerns on the costs to business.
- Organizations that work with the disabled and the elderly may share information on the impact of the lack of restrooms on their clients.

- Tourism agencies and visitor and convention bureaus can share information on expectations of non-residents.
- Proposals for new facilities or new sites are likely to require working with several major city departments: parks, water and sewer, transportation and urban planning.
- Find allies in the police department, listen to them and ask others to listen to them. They understand human behavior, the factors that influence it and how to modify structures to "design out" crime.
- Invite key elected officials to join the conversation as soon as you've made progress with your preliminary assessment of the situation. Let them know what you have in mind and the steps you are taking. Promise to keep them informed, either directly or through a staff member.

Case Story: Award-winning comfort station follows seven years of collaborative work

When the La Jolla Shores Association began working with San Diego Parks and Recreation to jointly design a much-needed new beach comfort station, they had no idea it would take so long or be so difficult. An initial plan was rejected as being too large and bulky. A second plan was discarded when it came in at a bid of \$880,000 and the city had only \$316,000.

Led by local parks advocate Mary Coakley, the community pulled together in support of an affordable version. Coakley visited numerous facilities, met with CPTED experts, incorporated the best features and recruited an architect and other volunteers to put forward the proposal. The resulting complex provides maximum function in a minimum of space and features direct access unisex toilet stalls and outdoor sinks and showers. La Jolla Shores Kellogg Park Comfort Station won the Project of the Year Award from the local chapter of the American Public Works Association.

Source: APWA San Diego and Imperial Counties Chapter.

City officials welcome the constructive engagement of citizens in analyzing a problem and proposing actionable solutions. The more spadework you demonstrate that you are willing to do, the better. Since toilet issues are often sensitive or controversial, officials need your help to start the conversation..

your job as advocates to demonstrate not only that toilet facilities foster urban livability, human dignity and public health, but also that the voters want them.

Case Story:

Petition modeled on UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights wins grassroots & City Council support

In the summer of 2009 the lack of public toilets and clean drinking water threatened the survival, health and sense of human dignity of San Diego's homeless community. Members approached Girls' Think Tank (GTT), whose survey of over 200 homeless San Diegans confirmed their vulnerability.

Armed with a petition based on the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, homeless volunteers gathered signatures from the larger community. Six months of organizing yielded 5,000 signatures! Confident of strong grassroots support, volunteer advocates met with City Council members, who in turn lobbied their colleagues. By June 2010, City Council approved state funding to purchase and install two Portland Loos.

Despite the struggling California economy and the disappearance of state funding, GTT did not lose focus. They persevered in working with stakeholders and addressing concerns until in 2013 the Mayor's office recommended, and the City Council approved, municipal funding for the project. The first of the new public toilets opened the next year.

Source: Girls' Think Tank, personal communication.

Take care, however, not to rush an elected official to back your project. When it comes to public toilets, most city council members are hesitant to get out in front of their constituents. It's