

### 3. Explore Options: Renovate, Build, Purchase, or Rent

For your group to make a sound proposal you'll have to do some homework, for which we provide tools. Some groups quickly embrace their chosen solution and present only that to officials, only to have it die in committee on a technicality. In a really strong proposal, you demonstrate that you considered many options for increasing public toilet availability. Then explain why you are ruling some out and prioritizing others.

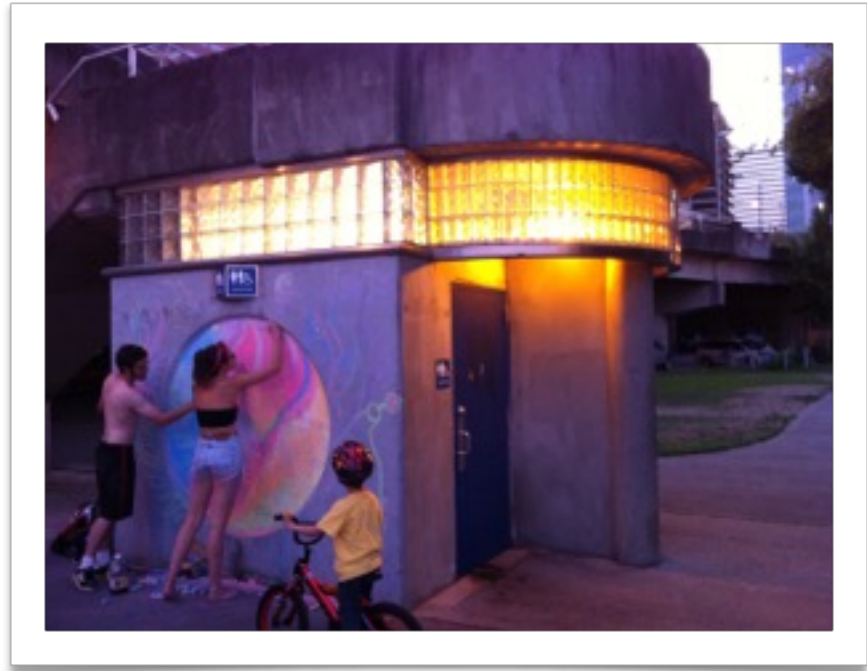
Start with a quick walk about to map existing restrooms, determine where more are needed and note or photograph sites where new ones could be established. As not all options fit all sites, a quick preliminary mapping exercise will get you started.



Public toilets can fit unused spaces such as under this stairway.

If your area has facilities that are closed or have fallen into disrepair, an option you'll likely consider is renovation. Comfort stations are often fine structures and may even be protected as historic monuments. Can they be renovated to meet needs of contemporary users and standards of the ADA? Determining the costs of renovation may take time and quality renovation may be prohibitively expensive.

If a new building is called



These two direct access toilet rooms were built in Portland's Waterfront Park under an existing stairway to a bridge

for, you'll have to line up some technical help to design the facility. Student teams from a local university might be available. Since there are now tools for online conferencing and collaboration, you might pitch your design project to graduate students at institutions elsewhere. Civic groups or volunteer groups may be able to identify skilled volunteers able to serve without a fee.

Purchasing and installing a unit is generally less expensive than building one. Numerous models similar to those used in parks, golf clubs and campgrounds are available on the market. These units are delivered on site as a kit or entire unit and placed on a foundation. They may be fitted with toilets connected to water and sewer or be fitted with composting toilets or rainwater flush toilets with blackwater tanks.



Some models are transported to site as kits or fully assembled. Photo courtesy GreenFlush Technologies.

Sidewalk toilets are easier to site in urban areas. Automatic Public Toilets (APTs) are the enclosed, self-cleaning kiosks that first appeared in Paris. For a variety of reasons, they have enjoyed very limited success in North American cities. In contrast, the non-automatic Portland Loo<sup>5</sup>, which fits on the sidewalk or in an adjacent parking space, is gaining popularity in cities throughout North America.

There are options for renting public toilets if purchasing one is not in the budget. First, there are portable sanitation units, which may be single plastic porta potties or trailer-mounted multi-stall restrooms with sinks and running water. Composting portable units have been

<sup>5</sup> The Portland Loo, <http://theloo.biz/>, accessed Oct 2015.

available in Europe and Australia for nearly a decade and are becoming available in the United States. These are suitable for events, work sites and seasonal use. A town that is well served during most of the year may need to add portables when there is heavy foot traffic. What's more, some groups have used porta potties during their period of research to help determine the best site for a permanent structure.

Second, municipalities may "rent" toilets in parking garages, restaurants and other private businesses. This approach is popular in the United Kingdom, where it is known as a Community Toilet Scheme. Hundreds of local governments, from the City of London to rural villages, now pay businesses to open to the public restrooms on their premises in return for a stipend. The UK Department of Communities and Local Government offers how-to guidance and the practice is documented by municipalities as well.

A few U.S. cities have implemented similar



A crane lowers a Portland Loo from truck to sidewalk

schemes, among them Santa Barbara, California<sup>6</sup> and Geneva, Illinois.<sup>7</sup> In late 2015, Canada's Northern Rockies Regional Municipality approved a strategy to pay gas stations, hotels and restaurants along the Alaska Highway to open their washrooms to the public. The immense municipality in British Columbia plans to reallocate budgetary funds currently used to pay contractors for roadside maintenance. Assuming that enough businesses opt in to the program, the old system of outhouses will be abandoned.<sup>8</sup>

A third option applies to Victorian era or larger comfort stations that have fallen into disuse. The local government can renovate the space to create a retail space along with smaller modern direct access toilet stalls. The space is then rented to a business that maintains the toilet facility at its own expense. As with any toilet in or adjacent to a business, signs and maps need to clearly indicate that the facility is public and open to customers and non-customers alike.

Your group may prioritize and develop a favorite solution such as the purchase and installation of a new toilet unit or the renovation of an existing structure. Just don't stop there without exploring other possibilities. Generating options is a great opportunity to educate decision makers who may have never thought much about public restrooms. Present the options one by one and show their strengths and weaknesses. Then explain why some should be rejected, why others might work, and why your chosen option is the best. Above all, stay excited about the creative possibilities eloquently expressed by architectural writer Lydia Grozdanic:

*Over the years, we've seen a new trend emerge in the design of small urban facilities which often elevates objects of rather prosaic functions to the level of superb design work. The pavilion-like quality of public restrooms provides an opportunity to experiment not only with their volume, shape, and organization, but more importantly, to push boundaries when it comes to the relationship between extremely public spaces and one of the most private human acts. The character of the entrance, visual exchange between inside and outside, and the layout of the toilets are all elements that define the pace and intensity of traversing the line between complete exposure and extreme intimacy.<sup>9</sup>*

### Case Story:

#### Old facility is converted to a shop offering a public toilet

After local authorities closed aging public toilets in the Larkhall district of Bath, England, a developer proposed converting the structure into a one-bedroom house. Aware of the continuing need for toilet facilities, two local women made an alternate proposal: create a commercial space with an attached toilet facility. As tenants, they would open a shop selling toys, gifts, and housewares and maintain the public toilet during business hours. The city council quickly approved the plan.

Source: *Bath Chronicle*, Sept 2, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Downtown Santa Barbara. (Map of public restrooms and list with addresses). <http://www.downtownsb.org/visit>, accessed October 1, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Rhonda Sciarra, "At last, downtown Geneva residents will have a place to go." *Daily Herald*, Aug. 7, 2003, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-106432864.html>, accessed September 23, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Bronwyn Scott, Northern Rockies may compensate businesses for opening washrooms to the public Alaska Highway News, September 25, 2015, <http://www.alaskahighwaynews.ca/regional-news/fort-nelson/northern-rockies-may-compensate-businesses-for-opening-washrooms-to-the-public-1.2069139#sthash.C14FzSjK.dpuf>, accessed September 27, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Lydia Grozdanic. "Complete Exposure to Extreme Intimacy: 10 Stunning Public Restrooms." Archaizer, Sept 22, 2014, <http://architizer.com/blog/complete-exposure-to-extreme-intimacy-10-public-stunning-restrooms/>, accessed October 21, 2015.