

# PUBLIC RESTROOM MASTER PLAN FOR PORTLAND'S DOWNTOWN DISTRICT

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presented by:



The public restroom as a basic human right is outlined in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 6 focuses on "clean water and sanitation for all." The stated goal is to meet this standard by 2030.

Or to borrow the title of a book by children's author Justine Avery, Everybody Pees!

Portland Downtown, a nonprofit organization committed to improving Portland's downtown, has long recognized the need for increasing the number of public restrooms in our city. Portland, Maine is a world-class destination, so our visitor experience must be world-class. But the need for more restrooms is not just about visitors and tourism—it's also about the people who live and work in our city, because no downtown can be a robust commercial center unless it has the kind of facilities that cater to the needs of the existing as well as the desired community.

It has long been true that there are too few public restrooms in downtown Portland. As of this writing, there are restrooms available at the Ocean Gateway Pier, the Casco Bay Lines Ferry Terminal, on Commercial Street at the Maple Street intersection, at the intersection of Cross and Spring Streets, at the Portland Public Library during working hours, and at City Hall during operating hours. Until recently there were restrooms in the Fore Street Parking Garage, but a renovation of the facility led to

their elimination. There were also restrooms at the Spring Street Parking Garage, but they have been closed for two summers owing to extensive plumbing issues.

**We think of it this way - there are fewer public restrooms in downtown Portland than there are Harry Potter movies.**

Historically, Portland has tried a few other creative efforts in terms of downtown restrooms. One summer DiMillo's Restaurant hosted porta potties. During the height of the pandemic, Portland Downtown paid for several porta potties that were installed in the downtown district. Portland Downtown advocating for American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding to be dedicated to public restrooms. We were successful in our efforts and \$600,000 was allotted for this usage. A portion of that funding led to the "vaulted toilets" seen downtown (Cross & Spring, Commercial & Maple) and in some of our parks across the city.

**While an army may run on its stomach, a craft beer city runs on its bladder.**

*"Nearly everyone has a need for a public restroom, it's not just folks with specific medical conditions. Beyond paruresis, Chrones, Colitis or other more well-known issues, parents of young children, those dealing with menstrual management, and just the general 'need to go' put the likely number of folks with needs closer to a practical 100%"*

- Steve Soifer, PhD  
American Restroom Association

## WHAT WE HEARD

On February 13, 2024, Portland Downtown, in conjunction with its partners Cruise Portland and Visit Portland, hosted a Public Restroom Forum. Over 100 people registered; over 50 people attended. Afterward, anyone who wanted to watch the forum could do so on the [Portland Downtown YouTube channel](#).

Citizens who participated in the forum expressed their strong support for improved restroom facilities across the community, particularly in the downtown district. Visit Portland noted that over two million visitors came to Portland last year. Their number-one complaint was the lack of public restrooms. Sometimes lines for the restrooms at the Ocean Gateway Pier were out the door.. At least there are three public restrooms along

Commercial Street, but they become quite scarce when you move away from the harbor.

The forum highlighted another major issue the lack of signage directing people to the existing facilities. It would be easy and inexpensive to place seasonal or permanent signage that would direct people to nearby restrooms.

The Forum also clarified a third point about public restrooms. We tend to badly underestimate the difficulty of installing public restrooms because bathrooms seem to be everywhere—in our homes, in our offices, in restaurants, and in hotels. But they are NOT everywhere, and in particular, they are far too rarely in public places that are open to everyone. Bathrooms are perceived as simple because they

are in every home, restaurant, and office building.

### **LOSS OF VISITORS OWING TO LACK OF RESTROOMS**

In our preparation and marketing of the Restroom Forum, we received emails from visitors who advised us they departed owing to the lack of relief stations. Wrote Laura:

*"My husband and I actually left Portland last fall before we were through walking around because I could not find a public bathroom."*

This is just one example of some of the communication we received. Visit Portland and Cruise Portland note that the top complaint they received is the lack of public restrooms.



# LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

## What We've Learned in Portland

Detailed consideration of public restroom placement is paramount. Over the years we have learned that when facilities are in locations that don't offer a high level of visibility, both from the perspective of allowing passersby to function as "eyes on the street" and being a visual symbol of welcoming, the facilities do not work at their highest and best purpose. Jane Jacobs said it best (as she always did):

*"First, there must be a clear demarcation between what is public space and what is private space. Public and private spaces cannot ooze into each other as they do typically in suburban settings or in projects. Second, there must be eyes upon the street, eyes belonging to those we might call the natural proprietors of the street. The buildings on a street equipped to handle strangers and to insure*

*the safety of both residents and strangers, must be oriented to the street. They cannot turn their backs or blank sides on it and leave it blind<sup>1</sup>."*

Two examples stand out - the Spring Street facility and the former facility hosted in the alley of the parking garage on Middle Street. Both locations lack (or lacked in the case of the Middle Street alley) a 360-degree level of visual accessibility, which is the highest and best. In fact, both locations only allowed for a 90-degree view (e.g. a view directly facing the entrance).

Parking garages, which can offer construction advantages for restroom facilities, are often too dark and isolated in terms of public viewing to truly be the ideal location for public restrooms. This feeling of discomfort for users is real when a restroom is poorly sighted.

Perception is reality and public restrooms must be both actually safe and perceived as safe.

We've done well in recent years placing public restrooms in our parks. However, public restrooms in urban areas require a different approach. As we contemplate the evolution of our public investment addressing this continuous public health concern, we must consider the context of the urban fabric. Downtown Portland hosts well-regarded and regulated architecture. Any new construction must be "of the place" not "on the place". It must blend, it must fit and it should have an element of beauty. It must be well-lit. Ideally, it will be placed where there is a 360-degree view of the facility. This is critical to the feeling of safety. At a minimum, there must be a 180-degree view of the access points.

"While being able to access a bathroom easily is important for those without stable housing, plenty of clearly marked and accessible restrooms are vital for anyone, without them — and especially without facilities that are available after regular business hours — people are being forced to ask local businesses for help or relieve themselves in public spaces."

- Bangor Daily News, September 5, 2023

**Clean Public Restrooms Increase Consumer Spending**

**60%**

of Americans say they are likely to spend more at a business that has clean, well-maintained restrooms

HEALTHY HANDWASHING STRATEGY  
BRADLEY COMPANY

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# RECOMMENDATIONS

Access to public restrooms is a basic human right. Formally acknowledging that fact and developing an appropriate plan is a responsibility the City Council should adopt. This will place the City of Portland in line with the United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights.

Formalizing new construction requirements mandating revenue streams for public restroom usage. This particularly includes but is not limited to City facilities. We must evolve our thinking when it comes to public toilets. It is critical this issue become embedded in our community planning on the same level we include public trash cans, recycling, bike racks, and other so-called “amenities” that are in-fact public necessities.

*“Age-friendly foster health and community engagement. Many people, not just older people, are trapped in their homes by the uncertainty that they will be able to find a restroom when they need it. Accessible and convenient bathrooms are essential for people to go out to shop, socialize, or simply run errands, confident in the knowledge that there will be a place to go when they need to go.”*

*- Patricia Oh, Ph.D. Senior Program Manager, Lifelong Communities  
Co-Director, Consortium for Aging Policy Research & Analysis  
Advisor, AARP Livable/Maine  
University of Maine Center on Aging*

## ACT NOW

Too often action is slowed by process. This makes sense when it comes to many major projects and initiatives. But we know one thing about our shared need - when you have to go, you have to go. A similar philosophy applies here. We can't wait any longer. Seasonal restrooms are a pathway to permanent restrooms. They are learning laboratories of the public realm.

## PLAN FOR AGGRESSIVE CLEANING/STAFFING

There's no way around it, public restrooms cost money. But they yield impressive results. According to a recent study by the Bradley Company, 60% of Americans say they are likely to spend more at a business that has clean, well-maintained restrooms.

We also know that one of the things people remember most about a visit to a place is their experience in a restroom. This is not just tourists, but locals alike. The best way to have a “positive experience” in a public restroom is for it to be clean and safe. This means we must overinvest in ensuring that the facility is as clean as possible. It is common for “good service” in public restrooms to be cleaned one to two times per day. Our recommendation is to double that. Cleaning services should be provided four times per day, at a minimum.



## AMPLE SIGNAGE

As noted above, ample signage is a key part of a public restroom strategy. While this report isn't the place for a detailed strategy we also note that there are significant technological opportunities here. Portland Downtown is working to lead

these efforts with the use of our Vibemap app subscription but we recognize that there is work to be done. Credit is also due to Creative Portland and their app which lists Public Restrooms in their menu.

## EMBRACE/LEVERAGE THE TIES TO WALKABILITY

If we as a community want to be as serious as possible about non-car-focused transit solutions, public restrooms are a critical part of that plan. If people cannot count on a public restroom, they are more likely to drive as that allows them the ability to more quickly access a fast food restaurant, gas station or other commonly found public toilet option. Public restrooms are truly the missing

link of walkability and urbanism. They are essential urban infrastructure that serves a universal need. They are as important as trash cans, recycling, and benches. This is a key factor in being an age-friendly city and for our citizens to age in place.

Specifically in Portland, this ties directly to the [Council's Common Goals](#) (Goal 3, Tacticals 1 & 3).

## UTILIZATION OF TECHNOLOGY

Beyond Portland Downtown's Vibemap, the Creative Portland app and various website/social media listings, there are technological options to consider. Among these include self-cleaning restrooms. This is a consideration for when we advance to discussions on permanent restrooms.

There are also smartphone apps such as 'Sit or Squat', 'Flush Toilet Finder' and 'Bathroom Scout' among others. These three are noted as the ["top choices"](#) by the [National Association for Continence](#). The [Chrones & Colitis Foundation](#) offers the [We Can't Wait](#) app, as well.

We recognize that reliance on smartphone technology isn't an equitable solution.





# ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS



## WHAT WE HAVE

In the past three years, the City of Portland has installed 13 new “vaulted toilets” across the city. The majority of these are outside of downtown. Two are within the Downtown Improvement District (Cross & Springs Streets and Commercial & Maple Streets/ near the Fish Pier). The units are cleaned one-to-two times per day, 365 days per year. They are stocked with toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and sharps boxes. One unit was located in Monument Way during the summer of 2022. That unit was eventually moved to the Cross & Spring Street location. This move has improved the functionality of the unit and we’re

seeing significant improvements in community behavior at the unit. This move reinforces the idea that location selection is one key to the success of public restrooms.

## RECOGNITION OF PRIVILEGE

Many at the Forum and our Pee-Shed Walks<sup>2</sup> recognized that if one is well-kempt and had other socially accepted behaviors they stood a higher chance of being admitted to or “getting away with” using a restroom at certain locations. Factors include, but are not limited to being pregnant, walking with a small(er) child, being in the company of an older person, etc. These factors contribute to inequity across communities.

All of these efforts can feel a bit “ivory tower” when you’re a small business or person walking around yet in need of relief. We know that some Maine smaller communities have made progress.

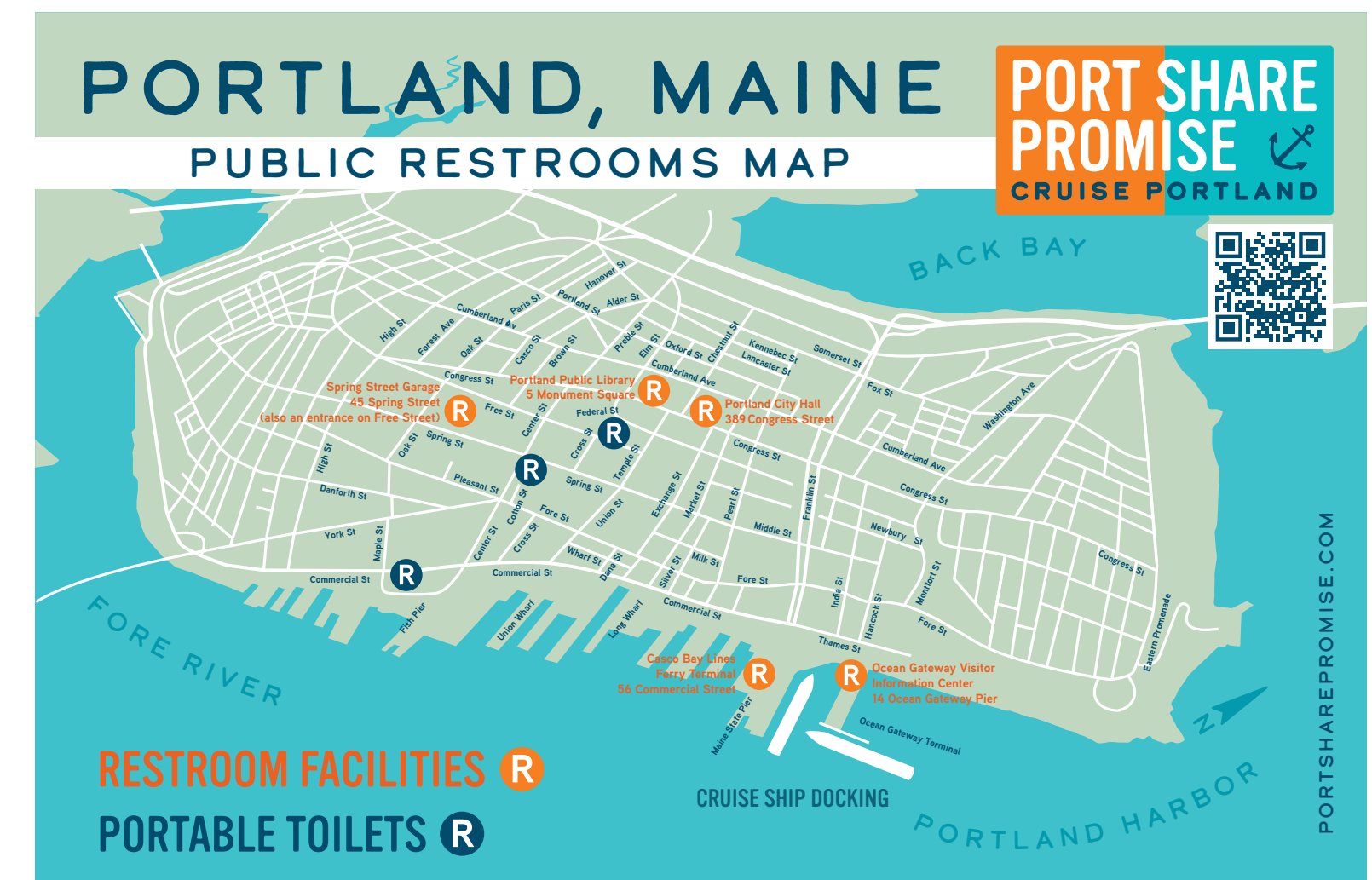
## FACTOR IN BEING AN INCLUSIVE CITY

The inability to have confidence in finding a public restroom is a barrier for people with Chrones, Colitis, IBS, and a variety of other medical issues. Too often it prevents people from spending time outside of their comfort zone (places where they know they can gain quick access to toilet facilities) including participating in things like exploring downtown shops, attending

certain events, or having a generally unplanned outing. Beyond the medical barriers, there are barriers for gender nonconforming people’s ability to fully engage in community activities owing to the barriers, both real and perceived, faced. According to Dr. Steven Soifer, Program Manager of the American Restroom Association, between 25-33% of the population faces barriers in managing bathroom issues.

As noted, the number one question asked by tourists is where they can find a public restroom. Various

sources are denoting the availability of public toilets including the Portshare Promise, Portland Downtown, and the City of Portland’s website. While the various maps can make it appear that restrooms are fairly plentiful they become significantly less accessible after 5:00 p.m. with the closure of the Public Library and City Hall. This map was produced when the Spring Street restrooms were in operation but they are closed for significant overhaul until further notice.





# MODELS IN MAINE

Portland is far from alone in the need for additional public restrooms, be it in Maine or elsewhere in the country. Some towns seem to have found (better?) ways to address the need. Some non-exhaustive, examples include:

## Damariscotta



[Damariscotta downtown public restroom info](#)

## Old Orchard Beach



West Grand Ave



Union Ave, near downtown & the beach

## Winthrop



Facilities are available in Winthrop, though there is discussion regarding their demolition and reconstruction.



## ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS CONT.

### OPERATIONS FACTORS

As noted during the Forum, the highest and best form of operations for a public restroom is for the facility to be staffed. This is true of what are often thought to be the nation's best public restrooms, Bryant Park in New York City and the Pit Stop Program in San Francisco. We recommend:

Locking & Access<sup>3</sup> - during nonoperational times, the facility should be secure be it by autolocking technology or by human beings.

Each stall or facility should allow universal access. More specifically, each should be ADA-accessible and not marked for gender specificity.

### ACCESSIBILITY

Any new construction of a public restroom requires compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Consideration must be given

to other factors as well. For example, if new construction hosts more than one stall (access point) there is no need to assign gender usage.

Only during the busiest of times are there waiting lines for use. To that end, allowing usage by any person lowers the waiting time for everyone. Inclusivity is the goal.

### Sharps Containers

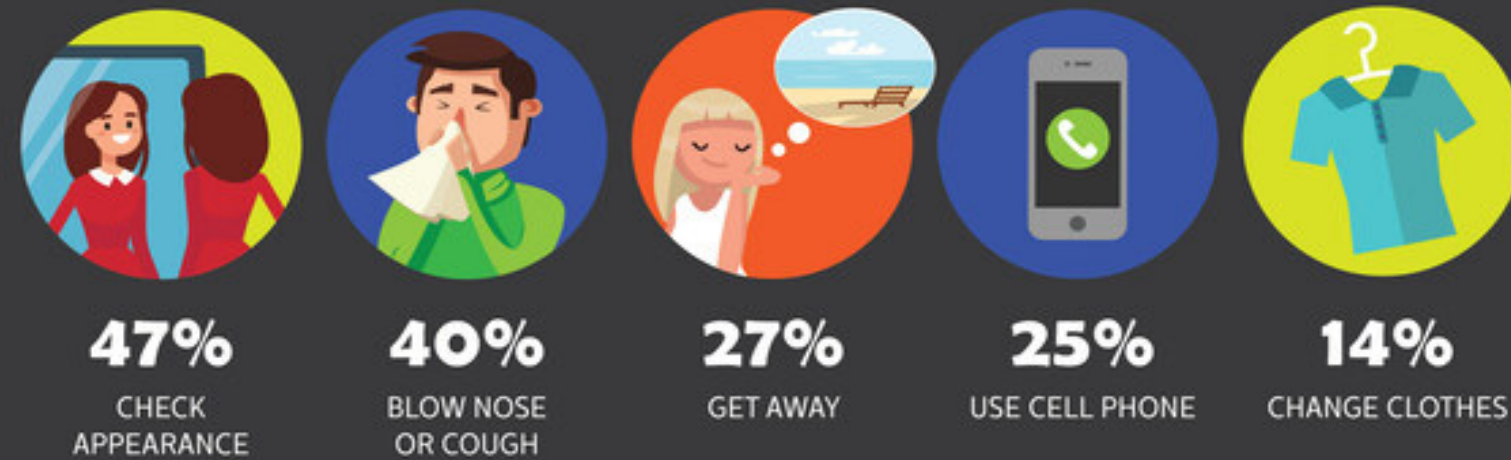
Each facility should offer a container for "sharps" (needles, etc.)

### Care for Children

Changing tables are an ideal inclusion. Height considerations are also important as facilities are not just used by adults. This includes but is not limited to, handwashing stations, urinals, paper towels/blowers, etc. We recognize there is significant debate about other uses for changing tables and that this inclusion may be difficult for that reason.

## Public Restroom Uses

Besides using the toilet and washing hands, Americans visit a public restroom to:



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### SHORT TERM SIGNAGE EFFORTS

Downtown wayfinding signage is an entirely separate issue altogether. It requires a separate plan. Related and encumbered in that plan should include significant and frequent signage directing citizens to the public restrooms downtown. This is the most simple, inexpensive, and

effective way to address the number one question asked by visitors and locals alike. Maine and Portland's excellent and strong visual pollution laws mean such an effort must be undertaken with great thought and care. This report will not delve into the details or nuances here beyond including this effort in our recommendations.

## RESTROOM ACCESS ACT

*aka Ally's Law*

[FULL TEXT OF THE MAINE CODE CAN BE FOUND HERE](#)

A retail establishment that has a toilet facility for its employees shall allow a customer to use that facility during normal business hours if:

- The customer requesting the use of the employee toilet facility suffers from an eligible medical condition;
- Three or more employees of the retail establishment are working at the time the customer requests the use of the employee toilet facility;
- Allowing the customer to use the toilet facility would not impose an undue burden on the retail establishment;
- The retail establishment does not normally make a toilet facility available to the public;
- The employee toilet facility is not located in an area where providing access would create an obvious health or safety risk to the customer or an obvious security risk to the retail establishment
- A public toilet facility is not immediately accessible to the customer.



# NEXT STEPS

Portland Downtown is committed to investing in this important piece of public infrastructure, both with our time and treasure. We are working with key partners to host a seasonal restroom in the summer of 2024. We will use this as a learning laboratory with the goal of helping produce permanent, plumbed, and year-round restrooms downtown in the years to come. We welcome partners, input, and constructive discourse about this issue.

Simply put, public restrooms are expensive. They are also necessary and an important part of public infrastructure. We must continue to advocate for and invest in this critical need.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Death & Life of Great American Cities (emphasis ours). Ms Jacobs is referring to streets but the principle applies here as well.*

<sup>2</sup> *Pee-Shed Walks were held in conjunction with the Portland Society for Architecture in the Summer of 2022. These were walks across downtown where participants were provided with ample water and done to determine how far is manageable to walk with a full bladder. The determination was a five (5) minute maximum, with 2-3 minutes being ideal.*

<sup>3</sup> *We recognize that 24/7 access is ideal. This is for if/when it is determined unachievable.*