

Clause embodied in Report No. 13 of the Community Services Committee, as adopted by the Council of the City of Toronto at its meeting held on December 4, 5 and 6, 2001.

14

### **Enhancing Access to Public Washrooms**

*(City Council on December 4, 5 and 6, 2001, adopted this Clause, without amendment.)*

**The Community Services Committee recommends the adoption of the following report (November 1, 2001) from the Acting Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services:**

Purpose:

To respond to a request to report on options to increase access to public washrooms, in particular for people who are homeless.

Financial Implications and Impact Statement:

Financial impacts are contingent upon the directions adopted by Council. Expanding the hours of operation at Harrison Baths will require an additional \$251,868.00 per year for program and staffing costs. Expanding the hours of operation at the outside washrooms at City Hall and Metro Hall will require an additional \$144,164.00 per year for program and staffing costs.

Funding for either option is not provided for in current budgets for Economic Development, Culture and Tourism or Corporate Services and cannot be absorbed internally without corresponding service cuts, and is therefore not recommended by staff in this report. The Chief Financial Officer has reviewed the financial implications and concurs.

Recommendations:

It is recommended that:

- (1) this report be forwarded to the Board of Health and the Works and Emergency Services Committee for information and appropriate action;
- (2) the Acting Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services, in conjunction with the Commissioner of Works and Emergency Services, the Medical Officer of Health and other relevant City departments, be asked to investigate and report back on the feasibility of automatic public toilets for the City of Toronto similar to those used in European and U.S. cities;

- (3) City staff continue current activities to promote co-ordination, training and incremental improvements under existing program funding to address this issue; and
- (4) the appropriate City officials be authorized and directed to take the necessary action to give effect thereto.

Background:

A January 25, 2001, report from the Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services, entitled, "Response to the Toronto Disaster Relief Committee's State of the Disaster Report", recommended that staff from Parks and Recreation, Public Health and the Shelter, Housing and Support Division review the Parks and Recreation inventory of toilet, shower, bathing and towel programs, determine opportunities to improve interagency co-ordination and improve access for people who are homeless and report back to the Community Services Committee by fall 2001.

While this issue has been raised by homeless advocates, the reality is that access to public washrooms is an issue for the general population in Toronto because of the limited public facilities in the City. This staff report discusses this issue and identifies several options for action for Council's consideration. An interdepartmental staff group prepared the report with representatives from Social Development and Administration, Shelter, Housing and Support and Public Health in Community and Neighbourhood Services, and Parks and Recreation in Economic Development, Culture and Tourism. Staff from Facilities Services in the Corporate Services Department and Technical Services in Works and Emergency Services were also consulted.

In addition, consultations were held with community-based homeless service providers including the Health Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee on Homeless and Socially Isolated Persons and a group of East End drop-in providers.

Comments:

The lack of public washrooms in Toronto is an issue that is relevant to everyone in the City. Local residents as well as tourists often have need of public facilities as they make their way around the City shopping, attending community events or other activities. This is not an issue that is unique to Toronto; cities around the world have implemented innovative strategies to expand their public washroom systems.

The City of Toronto does not have a formal system of public washrooms. In the past, there were more stand-alone public washrooms but the high costs associated with building, maintaining and supervising these facilities along with security concerns, resulted in closures.

While the lack of public washrooms may be an inconvenience for the average person, it can be a serious problem for someone who is homeless. For this group, attending to basic human needs, such as going to the washroom, is a constant challenge. Furthermore, whereas a parent may be able to take a child into a coffee shop to use a washroom, people who are homeless are often denied the same privilege because of their appearance. With few options, some homeless people resort to going to the washroom outside in parks and other public spaces.

Some services, such as drop-in centres, do provide washroom and shower facilities for people who are homeless. Public washrooms are also available in libraries and some community centres. However, these services are limited and provide daytime access only.

#### Overview of the Issue:

The community groups consulted in the preparation of this report emphasized that the lack of public washrooms should be viewed as a serious public health issue not only for homeless people but also for the general population.

With respect to people who are homeless, agencies report line-ups in the morning before they open as well as line-ups to use washrooms and showers through the day. They are unable to meet the demand. They have neither the physical infrastructure nor the staff needed to monitor these facilities. Showers in drop-in centres are limited and operate with variable hours depending on the program. The chronic lack of hot water, safe storage for personal belongings and the availability of towels are also problematic.

Agencies highlight the health issues associated with many people, some with communicable diseases, using public showers. Location is also a barrier if people have to travel outside of their neighbourhood to find available washrooms and showers. This problem is compounded for seniors, people with disabilities or others who have difficulty getting around.

Agencies also identified inadequate access to washrooms as an issue for residents of some rooming and boarding houses because of limited hot water and irregular cleaning and maintenance of bathrooms in an environment where many people are sharing few bathrooms.

The community groups consulted expressed frustration that the City has yet to take action on this issue. They feel they are being put in a position of compensating for the failure or withdrawal of governments to provide even the most basic of services such as public washrooms. Through the consultations, a number of strategies to address or even ameliorate this problem were proposed. They included the following, in order of preference:

- (1) a City-wide system of public washrooms that addresses the need for public washrooms for the general population;
- (2) specific strategies to improve access for people who are homeless such as port-a-potties, expanding access to existing washrooms or altering them to be more accessible (for example, adding external entrances so that people can use them at night); and
- (3) training for City staff to ensure that homeless people feel welcome to use the washrooms that are available in public facilities such as community centres.

In the following sections, these and other options are reviewed as possible strategies for Council to consider in its deliberations on this issue.

## Long Term Strategies to Improve Access to Public Washrooms for the General Public:

### (1) Explore the Feasibility of Automatic Public Toilets:

Major cities around the world have implemented innovative strategies to expand their public washroom systems in recognition of the needs of both local residents and visiting tourists.

A common issue associated with the development of public washroom facilities is security. The concern, and in some cases the experience, is that washrooms are used for illegal activities such as drug use or prostitution or that they are used as makeshift housing by homeless people.

One approach that helps to address these concerns is automatic public toilets. These toilets are used in many cities in Europe and recently in U.S. cities such as San Francisco and Boston. In Canada, Vancouver is currently seeking Council approval for a Request for Proposals that includes automatic public toilets. This approach is often utilized as part of a co-ordinated community revitalization plan.

Automatic public toilets are free standing, self-contained, self-cleaning, one-person washrooms that are open 24 hours a day. The company that manufactures them services the toilets. After every use, the toilet seat retracts into the wall where it is disinfected and steam dried for the next person. High-pressure water cleans the floor. There is a recess in the wall from which water is mixed with soap and flows when hands are placed in the opening, then a blow drier dries them. There is no chemical odor and a hook is provided in the unit for coats and bags. The toilets cost a quarter to use and the patron is allowed only 15 minutes. Thirty minutes is allowed for disabled people. The wheelchair units are accessible by special magnetic cards and access is free. Tokens are also made available for distribution to people who are homeless.

A few companies will lease automatic public toilets. Average costs are \$150,000.00 per toilet, per year. However, most companies provide them as part of a package of "street furniture," which includes telephone booths, information kiosks, newsstands and bus shelters. In this approach, cities receive the street furniture, which is also maintained by the manufacturer, at no cost in exchange for advertising rights. In some cases, cities have also negotiated additional revenues, as much as 40 per cent of the gross advertising revenues.

The advertising requirements are seen as a barrier by some cities concerned about advertising monopolies. However, to address this issue some cities negotiate a certain percentage of ad space for "social" advertising for non-profit groups, public service announcements or for City services and programs. In Toronto, there are a number of different advertising contracts already in place such as for bus shelters and recycling bins. Any new advertising contracts would need to be negotiated with a view to recognizing the terms of all existing agreements.

Clearly, more research is needed to determine if automatic public toilets are viable or even desirable for Toronto. However, given the need for this type of service, the success of this approach in other cities and the potential for this option to be cost-neutral for the City, it is recommended that the Acting Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services, in conjunction with the Commissioner of Works and Emergency Services, the Medical Officer of Health and other relevant City departments, be asked to investigate and report back on the feasibility of automatic public toilets for Toronto.

### Action Taken to Enhance Access to Washrooms for People who are Homeless:

#### (1) Promoting Access to Parks and Recreation Washroom Facilities:

Parks and Recreation staff have completed an assessment of access to public toilets, baths and showers for people who are homeless. The Division has also compiled an inventory of when and where washrooms and showers are open in community centres across the City. Most centres are open daily between 9:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. and anyone is free to use the on site washrooms during these times. There are also some specialized programs for people who are homeless, including all day bathing, shower and towel programs at several downtown locations. City staff will distribute this inventory through existing homeless networks and committees to ensure that the word gets out that this resource is available for people who are homeless.

A related issue that was raised by the agencies consulted was the need for staff training about homeless issues to ensure that homeless people are made to feel welcome at community centres and all other public buildings where washrooms are located. The Parks and Recreation Homelessness Strategy has incorporated plans to expand staff training on issues related to homelessness. Toronto Libraries will also be providing staff training on homeless issues.

#### (2) Enhancing Washroom and Shower Capacity in Homeless Services:

The need to increase access to washroom and shower facilities was identified as a priority area in the "Community Plan for Homelessness in Toronto", the document that outlines how the City will spend the federal Supporting Communities Partnerships Initiative (SCPI) funding allocated for Toronto. Opportunities to expand the infrastructure for showers, baths and toilets in drop-in centres, Out of the Cold locations and with other community-based homeless services were promoted in the spring and fall 2001 proposal calls for the SCPI Small Capital Improvement envelope. In the spring, 10 services were funded for a total of \$303,856.00 for various washroom and shower improvements. More proposals are expected through the fall proposal call.

While this capital support will help to improve the washroom and shower facilities in these services, it will not provide the capacity needed to meet the broader demand. It also does not address the need for additional staff resources required to monitor these spaces.

In terms of providing access to washrooms through emergency shelters, these services are not open to the general public. They are intended to provide accommodation, food and support for the people residing there. In most shelters, the toilets and showers are located near the sleeping quarters and therefore allowing the public to come and go throughout the day and night is problematic in terms of privacy as well as in terms of the safety and security of the residents.

### Short Term Strategies to Increase Access to Washrooms for People who are Homeless:

#### (1) Expanding Hours of Operation at Harrison Baths:

Parks and Recreation does operate some specialized programs for people who are homeless, that provide all day bathing, shower and towel programs, such as Harrison Baths located near Grange Park. Expanding the hours of operation at Harrison Baths is one option to improve access for

homeless people in the downtown core. This facility is well-used and well-known by homeless people and already has the physical infrastructure and equipment in place (washrooms, showers, towels, etc.)

However, the Parks and Recreation budget cannot accommodate these additional costs to keep Harrison Baths open on a 24-hour basis without corresponding service cuts elsewhere. It is estimated that an additional \$251,868.00 is needed annually to expand the operation. This includes costs for staff, utilities, cleaning supplies and repairs.

(2) Expanding Hours of Operation for External Washrooms at City Hall and Metro Hall:

The washrooms on the basement level at City Hall are open daily between 7:30 a.m. and 11:00 p.m. The washrooms on the ground floor of Metro Hall are open daily between 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m. Any member of the public is free to use the washrooms during these times. In addition, there are outside washrooms located in exterior buildings at both Nathan Phillips Square and Metro Square. The exterior washroom at City Hall is open daily between 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. At Metro Hall the exterior washroom is open daily between 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m.

Expanding the hours of operation in the exterior washrooms at City Hall and Metro Hall would require additional annual staffing costs of \$144,164.00. This would provide for the extra security officers that are needed at each site to monitor the washrooms to ensure that they remain safe facilities for the public to use. The Corporate Services budget cannot accommodate these additional costs without corresponding service cuts elsewhere.

Conclusions:

The lack of public washrooms is potentially an issue for everyone in Toronto. Local residents as well as tourists often have need of public facilities as they make their way around the City shopping, attending community events or other activities. While the lack of public washrooms may be an inconvenience for the average person, it can be a serious problem for someone who is homeless.

Major cities around the world have implemented innovative strategies such as automatic public toilets to expand their public washroom systems. Most manufacturers of automatic toilets provide them free of charge as part of a larger package of “street furniture,” (telephone booths, information kiosks, newsstands and bus shelters) in exchange for advertising rights. Given the need for more public washrooms, the success of automatic toilets in other cities and the potential for this option to be cost-neutral, it is recommended that the Acting Commissioner of Community and Neighbourhood Services, in conjunction with the Commissioner of Works and Emergency Services, the Medical Officer of Health and other relevant City departments, be asked to investigate and report back on the feasibility of automatic public toilets for Toronto.

In terms of targeted strategies to improve access to public washrooms for people who are homeless, some action has been taken. Funding is available for washroom and shower infrastructure improvements for homeless services under the Supporting Communities Partnerships Initiative. In addition, Parks and Recreation are promoting an inventory of when

and where washrooms and showers are open in community centres across the City. It is recommended that City staff continue current activities to promote co-ordination, training and incremental improvements under existing program funding to address this issue.

There are two additional options discussed in this report for Council's consideration. One is to expand the hours of operation at Harrison Baths. This will require an additional \$251,868.00 in the Parks and Recreation annual operating budget. The other is to expand the hours of operation in the outside washrooms at City Hall and Metro Hall. It is estimated that an additional \$144,164.00 would be needed for the Corporate Services operating budget for cleaning and security staff to ensure the washrooms are maintained and safe for public use. Funding for either of these options cannot be absorbed internally without corresponding service cuts elsewhere. Given these financial implications, it is not recommended that the City pursue these options at this time but rather to focus on investigating more sustainable, and potentially cost-neutral options such as automatic public toilets.

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Attachments:

Appendix A: Street Furniture Prototypes from Boston, Massachusetts

(A copy of the Appendix A, referred to in the foregoing report, was forwarded to all Members of Council with the agenda of the Community Services Committee for its meeting on November 15, 2001, and a copy thereof is on file in the office of the City Clerk, City Hall.)