

Staff Report



To	Committee of the Whole
Service Area	Office of the Chief Administrative Officer
Date	Wednesday, September 4, 2024
Subject	Improving Access to Public Washrooms in Guelph

Recommendation

1. That the inclusion of appropriate underground infrastructure to facilitate the installation of self-cleaning, autonomous prefabricated public washroom structures be incorporated for each phase of the Downtown Infrastructure Renewal Program, including the design of St. George's Square, as appropriate.
 2. That staff work with the Downtown Guelph Business Association to explore opportunities to provide public access to washrooms through a "Community Toilet Scheme."
 3. That portable washrooms continue to be used to expand access to washrooms in public spaces until permanent facilities are provided.
 4. That staff continue to explore opportunities to make new and existing permanent washroom facilities in parks and other locations available during all seasons as these facilities are constructed, modified or upgraded.
 5. That staff incorporate public washroom locations into the City's wayfinding strategy.
 6. That the inclusion of accessible and gender-neutral options continue to be considered for new, modified or upgraded public washroom facilities.
 7. That the provision of publicly accessible washrooms be considered during the planning of future capital projects in order to continuously expand the City's network of public washrooms.
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Executive Summary

Purpose of Report

This report presents the findings from the "Somewhere to Go: Improving Access to Public Washrooms in Guelph" report (see Attachment 1) which has been prepared by The Guelph Lab (a collaboration between the City and the University of Guelph) in response to concerns raised about the prevalence of public urination and defecation Downtown. The final report makes recommendations on how the City can and should improve public washroom access Downtown and throughout the City. This staff report converts those findings and recommendations into decisions the City can make today to lay the groundwork for the future installation of public

washrooms and improving access to public washrooms throughout the City through projects that have already been initiated as well as future projects.

This report should be considered in conjunction with the following reports:

- Downtown Infrastructure Renewal Program – Streetscaping Level-of-Service and Construction Mitigation
- Solid Waste Resources Recycling Program Transition Audit
- Downtown Collection Area Update
- Downtown Guelph Heritage Conservation District Study

These reports outline key elements of the Downtown Renewal Program, a comprehensive vision to transform how Downtown Guelph looks, feels, and functions, while also preserving its unique cultural heritage.

Key Findings

- There are two main reasons why public washroom access matters: on an individual level, it is a matter of preserving dignity and not creating a situation where people are forced to violate social norms and customs. On a more macro-scale, access to facilities that allow people to be in a public space for extended periods of time in comfort and dignity allows for more full participation in public space and public life for residents, employees, and visitors.
- Access to washrooms is a human right and is critical to human dignity.
- Public space is vital to the life of cities, and washrooms are essential to an inclusive and accessible public space. Washrooms are necessary for residents and visitors to the city to enjoy events in public squares, to travel on public transit, and to access parks, trails, outdoor rinks, splashpads and other public amenities.
- Public washroom access is particularly important Downtown because: there are lots of busy public spaces, events and nightlife; many unhoused people access critical programs Downtown; and public urination and defecation has been prevalent which reduces the overall appeal of Downtown, poses a public health hazard and creates additional strain for business owners and their employees, as well as City employees as they handle cleaning it up.
- A minimum of two public washrooms that are accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (24/7) are recommended for Downtown, one of which specifically caters to the needs of people experiencing homelessness.
- Providing 24/7 access to a public washroom creates both capital and operational costs that must be carefully considered and planned for. Laying the groundwork for the future installation of additional public washroom facilities provides a balanced approach between current budget constraints and providing this vital service that will make our City's public spaces more welcoming, inclusive, and accessible for residents and visitors.

Strategic Plan Alignment

Improving access to public washrooms advances the Strategic theme of 'People and Economy.' The recommendations coming from the project assist in advancing several of the objectives, initiatives, and supporting actions under this theme including: supporting business, tourism and investment attraction to Guelph by implementing the Economic Development and Tourism Strategy; creating a beautiful community space through the Downtown Renewal project; fostering a thriving, competitive and safe Downtown through collaboration with our community

partners; and, partnering to address systemic gaps and opportunities related to homelessness, mental health and substance use in our community.

Future Guelph Theme

People and Economy

Future Guelph Objectives

People and Economy: Support community well-being

Financial Implications

Many options for improving access to public washrooms have a capital and operating cost that are not currently budgeted. These improvements would be tax levy funded and have an associated tax levy increase upon implementation.

Report

Public washrooms are important for everyone in Guelph and are vital to creating vibrant, inclusive and well-used public spaces. As public washrooms are not always available, people sometimes have to go outside, which can be embarrassing and creates aesthetic and sanitary concerns for others. The prevalence of this occurring Downtown led the City to engage Guelph Lab to identify ways to improve access to public washrooms in the City. Over the course of this project, the research team has examined public washroom access in the City, compiled an inventory of public washrooms, and prepared recommendations on how to enhance year-round accessibility to public washrooms for everyone.

Access to washrooms is a multilayered issue with different consequences for different parts of the population. The effects of not having access to a washroom can range from mild discomfort, to social isolation, to humiliation and loss of dignity. Through the research, the needs of different people for washroom access began to emerge. While this list is not extensive, some general groups with differing needs began to emerge:

- people experiencing homelessness
- people who are housed but may have inadequate access to bathrooms (e.g., large number of people living in a residential unit with a limited number of bathrooms)
- people with disabilities
- people with medical conditions
- people who don't work jobs in one location such as drivers of all kinds (taxi drivers, Uber or Lyft drivers, Canada post drivers, bus drivers) who move around the city during their day
- people who are visiting the City

The final report resulting from this research is titled "Somewhere to Go – Improving Access to Public Washrooms in Guelph" and is included as Attachment 1 to this report. The research generally concludes that access to permanent public washroom facilities should be increased throughout the City, however, access to public washrooms in Downtown Guelph is particularly important. More specifically, the recommendations from the report are:

To address immediate issues in the Downtown, the City should consider:

- A staffed washroom open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (24/7) in the Downtown, as soon as possible.
- Funding to keep a local drop-in centre open 24/7 with washroom access to specifically serve the needs of those people experiencing homelessness.
- A program for businesses to participate in the provision of daytime washroom access.
- Investigating the possibility of improved or extended use of portable washrooms, especially on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays.

To improve access to washrooms throughout Guelph and over the longer-term, the City should consider:

- Winterizing park washrooms (to allow them to be used in the winter).
- Improving signage and information.
- Improving inclusion and accessibility.
- Planning ahead for more facilities.

Access to Public Washrooms in our Downtown

The research team concluded that washroom access is particularly important Downtown for the following reasons:

- There are lots of busy public spaces, events, and nightlife.
- Many unhoused people access critical programs Downtown where washrooms are not fully accessible 24/7.
- This is where the issues created by lack of public washrooms are most visible. Public urination and defecation create additional strain for business owners and their employees, as well as City employees as they handle cleaning it up; reduces the appeal of Downtown; and poses a public health hazard.

Based on the research, it is suggested that a minimum of two 24/7 public washrooms be available in Downtown Guelph: A 'general public washroom' for everyone's use, which would have a lighter staffing requirement, and another public washroom that should include extra amenities that cater to people experiencing homelessness.

Downtown 24/7 General Public Washroom

Based on the research a few options for providing a 24/7 public washroom Downtown for the general public could be considered. These options include, but are not limited to:

- Using an existing facility such as Market Square. Based on the City's experience to date, modifications to the existing building and washroom facilities would be required, along with additional staff resources, to make the existing washrooms accessible 24/7.
- The installation of a self-cleaning, autonomous prefabricated public washroom structure (or structures) similar to those that have recently been installed in municipalities such as Elora, St. Catharines and Waterloo (<https://urbanblu.com/en/>). As we work through detailed design for various phases of the Downtown Infrastructure Renewal Program (DTIRP), providing the necessary infrastructure for the future installation of self-cleaning, autonomous prefabricated public washroom structures should be considered. Phase 1 of DTIRP includes St. George's Square which would be an appropriate location for a public washroom to be considered. This could include "roughing in" the

underground infrastructure required to support such a facility later when budget permits.

- Incorporating a 24/7 public washroom into the design of any new buildings, such as a potential building at Guelph Central Station, is another way the City can consider providing this amenity.

Drop-in Centre 24/7 Washroom, focused on the needs of people experiencing homelessness

Unhoused people experience high rates of trauma, addiction, and other health issues and therefore may have more specific needs than the general population. They also may be forced to use a public washroom for a range of purposes including personal care and hygiene. In order to address some of these needs, the research concluded that partnering with an existing organization to provide this more specialized 24/7 washroom would be an appropriate approach and has been done successfully in Winnipeg (see Appendix 1 of Attachment 1 for further details).

In the spring of 2024, the County of Wellington held two separate Health and Housing Symposium events to bridge the gap between health and housing inequities, and find tangible solutions amongst service providers to better provide care and services for those living unsheltered. Following the symposium, a number of smaller working groups were developed to tackle common issues that were brought forth during the Health and Housing Symposium event by persons with lived experience and service providers. The "Provision of Basic Needs for People Experiencing Homelessness" working group was developed with the intent of reviewing barriers to basic needs from a human rights perspective, which includes access to toilets, showers, warmth, consistent access to three meals a day, and a place to sit or rest that offers safety and dignity, as well as storage solutions for their belongings and wound care. The work being done by members of this group and the County of Wellington will continue to re-shape the ways in which services such as washroom access are delivered to ensure more basic needs are accessible to all community members.

Community Toilet Scheme

In addition to 24/7 public washrooms, increasing access to public washrooms throughout the day is also seen as positive. One way to increase access to public washrooms is to consider whether a 'Community Toilet Scheme' may be appropriate for Downtown.

We have all seen signs at businesses that washrooms are for customers only. Community Toilet Schemes are a relatively low-cost way to potentially expand access to public washrooms during business hours. Currently used all over the United Kingdom, this system provides an annual grant to businesses that are willing to provide public access to their washroom rather than just access for customers. Participating businesses are usually identified with a sign and/or sticker, as well as on the City's website.

For Downtown Guelph, staff should work with the Downtown Guelph Business Association to determine with their membership (Downtown business owners) if there is interest in a program like this.

City-wide Access to Public Washrooms

The research also concluded with recommendations to improve city-wide access to public washrooms which include:

- Winterizing park washrooms so they can be used all year round.
- Improving signage and information by including public washrooms in the City's wayfinding strategy.
- Improving inclusion and accessibility by ensuring that there is a gender-neutral and accessible option when providing public washroom facilities.
- Planning for future public washroom facilities as part of future capital projects (such as parks or public buildings).

Financial Implications

The costs of public washroom improvements will vary depending on the recommendations implemented. Many of the recommendations have a capital cost and an operating cost, both of which can be significant.

The timing and the cost of the recommendations will be considered through the budget process. The associated costs are not currently budgeted and would be funded by the tax levy. Implementation would result in a tax levy increase or deferral of other tax levy supported projects and services.

Consultations and Engagement

The report titled "Somewhere to Go – Improving Access to Public Washrooms in Guelph" (Attachment 1) was circulated to the following Departments and Service Areas for review and comment before being finalized:

CAO Service Area

- Strategic Initiatives and Intergovernmental Services
- Economic Development and Tourism

Public Services

- Transit
- Parks
- Culture and Recreation
- Operations

IDE

- Engineering and Transportation Services
- Facilities and Energy Management
- Building Services

Corporate Services

- Strategic Communications and Community Engagement
- Finance

Attachments

Attachment –1: Somewhere to Go – Improving Access to Public Washrooms in Guelph

Departmental Approval

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