

guelph lab

Somewhere to Go

Improving Access to Public Washrooms in Guelph

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Executive Summary

Public washrooms are important for everyone in Guelph, and are vital to creating vibrant, inclusive and well-used public spaces. Washrooms aren't always available though, and not everyone has access to washrooms when they need them. Sometimes people face the indignity of having to go outside, which is embarrassing for them and creates mess for other people, especially in the Downtown area. Other residents may be forced to stay at home if public washrooms are closed or not accessible to them.

In response to these concerns, City staff engaged the Guelph Lab to identify ways to improve access to public washrooms in the city. Throughout 2023, the research team visited and mapped all the permanent washrooms in Guelph, interviewed residents of Guelph about their experiences with public washrooms, and reviewed existing research about washrooms. The recommendations in this report are based on this research.

To address immediate issues in the downtown, we recommend the City provide:


- A *staffed* washroom open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week in the downtown area, as soon as possible.
- Funding to keep a local drop-in centre open 24/7 with washroom access to specifically serve the needs of unhoused Guelphites.
- 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, we recommend the City:

- Winterize¹ park washrooms
- Improve signage and information
- Improve inclusion and accessibility
- Plan ahead for more facilities

We have used quotes from Guelph residents throughout this report to illustrate important ideas, principles, and experiences. The report concludes with some inspiring examples of potential future projects and innovative solutions, many of which were identified by the residents we spoke to. The names of interviewees have been changed to protect their identity, but we are grateful for their contributions.

¹ "Winterize", throughout this report, refers to changes made to buildings to allow them to be used in winter, such as improving plumbing and heating systems, in keeping with the Parks Master Plan and the City of Toronto's usage.



Lastly, we identified key ideas about public washrooms through this project. These important ideas are summarized below, and we hope that readers will keep them in mind as they consider the recommendations we have proposed.

Six ideas about public washrooms:

1. Access to washrooms is a human right and critical to human dignity.
2. 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.
3. A wide range of community members face barriers to accessing washrooms or face issues when washrooms aren't available. This includes people with medical conditions, older people, parents of young children and people who work outside like delivery drivers.
4. People often focus on the visible costs of not having enough public washrooms, like the mess it creates and the clean-up it requires. There are significant "hidden costs" though, including the indignity and embarrassment of people who are forced to go outside and the exclusion of people who cannot be as active in public life as they would like to be.
5. People who are unhoused have acute and specific needs related to washrooms that need to be addressed, as they are particularly impacted by lack of washroom access, both practically and emotionally.
6. Everybody (it seems) pees outside sometimes. In this research, only one interviewee reported not having ever peed outside. We should not assume it is only unhoused people who pee outside, and instead design public washrooms that serve a range of people.

About the Research

This project is a collaboration between the City of Guelph's Downtown Revitalization Advisor, the Guelph Lab, and the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics (U of Guelph). The Guelph Lab is a collaboration between the City of Guelph and the University of Guelph. It links the City with researchers and the community to support and improve new policies, programs and services.

This report gathers findings from an interdisciplinary analysis of the availability and quality of public washrooms in the City of Guelph. The research involved visiting all public washrooms in Guelph, interviews with 15 residents with a wide range of lived experiences, reviews of the existing literature on public washrooms, and conversations with staff from other cities about their public washroom policies.

The team produced three documents from this research:

- ["Top Tips for Improving Your Public Washroom"](#) offers 7 ways managers of individual public washrooms in Guelph could improve their washrooms to better serve all of Guelph's residents.

- [“What’s Open and When”](#) maps all the public washrooms in Guelph and compares when they are available (weekdays vs. weekends, day time vs. nighttime, and summer vs. Winter).
- This “Somewhere to Go” report and set of recommendations. The report discusses the overall issues related to public washrooms, focusing on what we heard in interviews, but also making reference to the other two documents.

Academic-style references (Author, Year) are included throughout this report. Statements that include a reference are directly supported by existing research. Any statements that do not have a reference are the opinion of the research team and are based on the new research conducted as part of this project.

A list of references can be found in [Appendix III](#) of this report. Readers with questions about further reading, or who are interested in accessing any of the references, can contact Edith Wilson Sousa at edith@uoguelph or the Guelph Lab at cesi@uoguelph.ca.

Introduction

This study was conducted in response to City concerns around the availability of public washrooms in Guelph. Several businesses in the downtown core have contacted City staff to express concerns about public urination and defecation.


In response, City staff contacted the Guelph Lab for input. The goal of the research was to explore options for improving washroom access in Downtown Guelph in ways that would address some of the concerns brought to City staff and improve Guelph’s downtown life.

Interviews with a diverse group of Guelphites were chosen as a research method because public washrooms are understudied in both academic and policy literature in Canada, so we know very little about people’s experiences in them, and how they see public washrooms as part of City life.

The project employed classic academic methods (literature review, gathering quantitative data, and interviews) with the goal of giving any future discussions and policies a strong factual basis.

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 public space for extended periods of time in comfort and dignity allows for more full participation in public space and public life. We will briefly discuss both these perspectives below.

The United Nations affirms access to a proper washroom as a basic human right (United Nations 2010). In the global south, substantial investment has been made to improve washroom access, especially for girls and women, who find their educational opportunities curtailed without proper washrooms (Mason et al 2013; McMahon et al 2011; Sommer 2013).



However, public washrooms in the global north have received less attention. Perhaps we assume that in a prosperous society, most people are housed and have access to a washroom at their place of work. Research from North America is focused on the relationship between homelessness and washroom access (Amato et al 2022; Avelar Portillo et al 2023; Swayne et al 2023).

Though the dignity and comfort of those who are not housed is an important part of this conversation, we may be overestimating the security of housed people's washroom access – an anecdote provided to us during this research project by an interviewee shows that some people who are housed may have inadequate access to bathrooms:

Interviewee: The reality is too, with housing...a lot of our community are housed, but a lot of them are in a house with one bathroom and five to eight people.

Researcher: So... inadequate housing.


Interviewee: Yeah, the housing and the bathroom situation...most of us don't live with five to eight people and share one bathroom.

- Chrissy, works in service provision to homeless and marginalized people in Guelph

Research from all over the world has shown that access to proper sanitation is one of the most important factors in allowing all people to access public space (Ochieng et al 2017; Woolrych et al 2021) and education (Mason et al 2013; McMahon et al 2011; Sommer 2013). Since many scholars have discussed the importance of public space to the proper functioning of democracy itself (Flanagan, 2014; Oldenburg 1999; Mitchell, 2003), facilities that allow people to make full use of public space should be seen as essential to the development of healthy public life. The public square is a place where people congregate to spend time – and not necessarily money – with friends, family and neighbors. Obviously, a washroom helps to make long periods of time in public space possible, as in this anecdote from our research:

I saw a group of, like, undergrad mix of people having a birthday party. They had strung "happy birthday" [hand motion referring to a streamer or hanging decoration] and they brought a foldable table with a tablecloth and they had a little spread and...it was the most heartwarming thing. It was so sweet and precious! And then I was like...they're definitely able to do this because there are good public washrooms here [the park the interviewee is referring to has excellent washrooms]. Like you wouldn't have a public gathering like that without access to public washrooms, cause you're not gonna go there just for an hour...

- Ellie, a graduate student living in Downtown Guelph



Even for people who are housed and have safe and easy access to washrooms in their dwelling and at work, freely accessible and inclusive public space is an important part of city life (Nelson and Rosenberg 2022; Woolrych et al 2021; Moreira et al 2022; Liinamaa et al 2021).

Outcomes for people when washrooms are not available vary widely, from mild discomfort to humiliation and a loss of dignity. For people who are homeless, people with disabilities, and people with medical conditions, the consequences of not being able to find a washroom can be very injurious to that person's sense of well-being.

For example, people who are homeless live most of their lives in public space (Smoyer et al 2023), with very little privacy or personal space available. The effect on a person's dignity and sense of self engendered by this situation can be devastating:

I had to in a big hurry, find somewhere. Where I could pee or do number two. Which is really embarrassing. To even say you had to do that. Um...and uh [long pause] yeah, it was it was humiliating it was degrading, you know.


- Merrick, a middle-aged man with a medical condition who is experiencing homelessness

A lack of washrooms where a person can relieve oneself in privacy worsens this sense of want, and further contributes to the feeling that better-off people in society do not care about them or value their lives:

Coming from my point of view - and I think generally the point of view of any of the people that are unfortunately living on the street - it's that we certainly don't matter, and they could care less. When they go home at night and close their office...we're the last thought on their mind.

- Merrick

There are, however, other ways that people can be particularly impacted by a lack of public washrooms. For instance, there are a great many workers who don't work jobs in one location. Drivers of all kinds, like Uber and Lyft drivers, taxi drivers, Canada Post drivers, bus drivers, and other delivery and transport services move about the city or the county during their day, and rely on sanitation services to see to their needs (Marani et al, 2020). As we come to rely on delivery services more than ever, considering the working conditions of those who work in these industries becomes ever more urgent. Marani et al's 2020 study of taxi drivers in Toronto reveals extremely poor working conditions, including "holding it" for hours at a time due to the lack of available washrooms, and a place to park while using them – one of Marani et al's (2020) interviewees reported getting a ticket three times while using the washroom.



Even if a person has access to a washroom in one's home, inadequate access elsewhere can contribute to loneliness and isolation for people who have more urgent washroom needs because of a medical condition, or people who have particular accessibility needs. Research from the UK shows that as many as 1 in 5 of their sample experiences a "loo leash" that puts them off going out of their homes as often as they would like. In the case people with "an illness or condition requiring more frequent toilet use, this figure rose to above two in five" (Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH), 2019). The RSPH's large sample (over 2000 respondents) also showed that over 50% of people practice deliberate dehydration – something that the taxi drivers in Marani et al's (2020) work also did. This, they point out, can lead to deleterious effects to people's health.

All the above points to the fact that washroom access is a multilayered issue, with different consequences for different parts of the population. Effects of not having access to a washroom can range from mild discomfort, to social isolation, to humiliation and a loss of dignity. Therefore, the suggestions offered in this report will be equally multi-faceted, and will address as many of these layers as possible.

As the research team is aware of the tight financial predicament that cities across Ontario find themselves in, we have presented a suite of options ranging in cost that we feel are practical ways to ameliorate the situation in the short to medium term.

However, the [Inspiration and Visioning section](#) offers some suggestions for long-term visioning of this issue. The literature, this research, and experience from other cities leads us to believe that provision of this service is a public good that will improve the lives of Guelphites in many small and large ways, some of which we haven't yet imagined.


Recommendations

Recommendations for Improving Access to Washrooms in the Downtown

Washroom access is particularly important in the Downtown. There are lots of busy public spaces (e.g., Market Square, St. George's Square, the Transit Terminal), lots of events and nightlife. Many unhoused people in Guelph also live downtown and access important programs and services there.

Downtown is also the place where the issues created by a lack of public washrooms are most visible. This project was inspired by concerns brought to City staff by Downtown businesses around public urination and defecation, which inconveniences business owners and employees, reduces the appeal of downtown, and poses a public health hazard.

Our research confirms that there are limited washroom options in the Downtown area. For example, the Market Square washroom is the only permanent washroom available for the whole of downtown on Sunday afternoons, but it's closed in Spring and Fall when the ice rink / wading



pool are not in use. Similarly, the portable washrooms in the MacDonnell Street parking lot are the only public washrooms available on a Friday night. (The [“What’s Open and When”](#) report has more details on washroom locations and opening times in Guelph).

The following recommendations will help to improve access to washrooms in the Downtown.

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

Each recommendation is discussed in more detail in the following pages.

Remember, Everyone Goes Outside Sometimes

“Because everybody gets out from the bar, and then piss and shit everywhere...we have a property downtown and I have to clean it up on Thursday, Friday and Saturday night, and I don’t have to clean it up on the other days of the week. Now, everybody tells me it’s only the people experiencing homelessness that are doing it. But the reality is – people experiencing homelessness are there seven days a week. And I only have to clean it up on bar nights...and it’s not like there aren’t sometimes human waste problems on other nights. But the reality is, I know it’s mostly Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays”

- Chrissy, works in service provision to homeless and marginalized people in Guelph

Although issues of homelessness and public urination and defecation are linked, we should not assume that is *only* people who are unhoused who are forced to go outside. Our research found that almost everyone – from students out at night to seniors out on walking trails - reported peeing outside at least sometimes. Downtown, issues with public urination and defecation appear to be more common on nights when bars are busy. We also found that while unhoused people living in Guelph are certainly forced to go outside more often, they also wait for washrooms to open at friendly businesses and service providers when they can. Our recommendations reflect these findings and aim to meet the different needs of housed and unhoused people in Guelph.

"If I was in, you know, a forest-y kind of area, I would just pee in the forest. And I guess it's up to the City whether they want lots of people pissing in the forest. My mom is like...a seventy-year old middle-class white woman and we've gone for walks when she comes up and visits and like...she's peed in the forest too (giggles)"

- Ellie, a graduate student living in downtown Guelph

"I honestly don't even know where...I've peed in alleyways. I have no idea where I would even be able to access a public washroom at nighttime."

- Tasha, a middle-class graduate student living in downtown Guelph

"Cindy: I remember just sitting outside and waiting for things to open.

Hannah: I didn't have a home and used to try to use the convenience store, too, like...just waiting. Just sitting outside waiting to go in.

Hannah: Yeah. I remember doing that a lot too."


- Cindy and Hannah, two women who previously experienced homelessness

"Um, I peed in a lot of bushes down here and then just...very uncomfortably held anything else until I could go to a Church."

- Cindy

Recommendation A: Provide a General, Staffed 24-hour/7-day Washroom

There are several ways the City could provide a 24/7 washroom downtown. Making **an existing building**, such as Market Square, 24-hour, would save having to build another structure.



Other municipalities, such as Elora, St. Catharines, and Waterloo have installed **self-cleaning, autonomous pre-made structures**. This would be an extra cost, but would also automate some of the cleaning, which would mitigate some of the cleanliness concerns raised about 24-hour facilities. Finally, incorporate 24/7 washrooms that are accessible from the street into **design of new buildings** (like the planned new transit hub).

This report recommends a minimum of two 24/7 public washrooms in Guelph's downtown – one for everyone's use (recommendation A), that has lighter staffing and service requirements, and one that has extra amenities that specifically cater to people who are experiencing homelessness (recommendation B).

The "general" 24/7 washroom should, however, take into account that all kinds of people, in various states of wellness, will use the washroom. Staffing and emergency sensors are crucial to keeping 24/7 washrooms open and functional for everyone. Some ideas for how to accomplish this task are outlined below.

Emergency Detection

A growing number of municipalities employ emergency detection systems in their washrooms as a safety measure (Lombardi et al, 2023). These detection systems reduce risks associated with a range of potentially serious or life-threatening situations, including falls, heart attacks, and overdoses.

There are some systems, developed in Canada, that use Doppler radar to detect when a person has stopped moving and send an alert. They don't use video, which can violate people's privacy, and can be obtained for a fairly affordable sum.

Staffing


Staffing is essential to respond promptly to issues and to keep washrooms clean and useable. Custodial staff are already in place, but more emphasis on public health and harm reduction staff would be an effective way to allay concerns around public safety. Some may feel that security is necessary, but interviewees note that police or security presence is uncomfortable, regardless of housing status or social class:

"It can be protected, but it doesn't have to be guarded because that's...it's kind of a fine line. But a place if someone feels like they're...trying to take a crap and it's being timed... [shakes head]"

Chrissy, works in service provision to homeless and marginalized people in Guelph

"Not police. Nor would that be under their job description anyways. Uh, but I don't think policing bathrooms is ever...do you wanna, like, go through a cop to take a shit? No."

- Charlie, a grad student and artist



The variety of issues encountered in public washrooms would be more suited to a pair of workers that included at least one experienced nurse or harm reduction worker. This way, the workers would not be alone in potentially difficult situations, and any issues that would arise could be capably dealt with and referred to Emergency Services only if necessary.

The goal would be to assign workers most capable of dealing with issues we know are likely to arise, so that Emergency Services (whether police or EMS) would be called if needed as a last resort. For example, we know from experience that drug use, and the potential for concurrent health crises, is a concern in public washrooms. Rather than close the washroom, plan for staff that can effectively deal with these concerns.

Emergency Services are, in Guelph's 2024-2027 budget, some of the most expensive (as they are for most cities) (City of Guelph, 2024). Thus, assigning workers that can deal with issues without paramedics or police spreads the workload (and the funds) out, and provides timely and capable resolution of problems.


If staffing for a "general" 24/7 washroom is provided by workers who do not already have training in first aid, mental health crises and harm reduction, we recommend that the City arrange such training for anyone who will be staffing washrooms. This will help workers feel more confident in these situations, and help further ensure everyone's safety.

Recommendation B: Drop-in Centre Washrooms, Focused on the Needs of Unhoused Guelphites

The research team (and the interviewees, including those serving the unhoused population, and unhoused people themselves) recognize that many people who are unhoused have more specific needs than the general population. Unhoused people experience high rates of trauma, addiction, and other health issues (Berenbaum 2019; Gaetz et al 2016; Guelph-Wellington, 2021) so specialized care is often needed. People who are unhoused are also forced to use washrooms for a range of purposes, including personal care and hygiene, washing, taking medications, putting on make-up, doing laundry or simply as place to have a bit of privacy.

For example, our interviewee Danika fondly recalled experiences of sharing space with unhoused women in public washrooms going through their backpacks and putting on makeup and doing their hair. She also noted that washrooms can be a safe, quiet place for people experiencing anxiety to go be by themselves for a moment. Planning for these uses, instead of trying to prevent them, would be the more humane approach. It would also be in line with the spirit of the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) statement on services to encampments and homeless persons (OHRC 2022).

In providing adequate washroom access to everyone (as in recommendation A), there will be overlap in use of the service with Guelphites experiencing homelessness. Providing a more comprehensive service that suits their needs would distribute the use of resources more broadly.



The City could consider partnering with a pre-existing organization to fund a second, more specialized 24/7 washroom, as has been done in Winnipeg with the Amoowigawig Public Washroom. In that case, the washroom is staffed by a local indigenous harm reduction group (Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre), who provide harm reduction supplies and community care to people who need it (Winnipeg Foundation, 2023). Amoowigawig has needles, crack pipes, condoms, lube, hygiene products, pads, tampons, and other items on hand that people may need. In an interview with the Winnipeg Foundation, the Amoowigawig team lead, Jacob Kaufman, says: “This [Amoowigawig] is in no way, shape, or form a safe injection site, but it is a bathroom, and we know people are going to do things in there.” (Kaufman, in Winnipeg Foundation 2023).

We suggest that Guelph take the same approach, as the academic literature on the benefits of harm reduction is extremely clear (for example: Bartholomew et al 2024; Salvalaggio et al 2023; Kolla et al 2024) , and the pragmatic approach of recognizing that people use washrooms for alternative purposes has worked well in Winnipeg. The staff at Amoowigawig are able to help people find shelter space, medical care, and connect them with other services (Winnipeg Foundation 2023). In only one year, staff at the washroom helped 30 unhoused people find housing (Winnipeg Foundation 2023). Please see [Appendix I](#) for more information on Amoowigawig’s model and successes.

What About Shelters?


“The shelter system yeeeeahhhh...[sighs] let’s not get into that.”

- Dwight, a middle-aged man experiencing homelessness

Relying on the shelter system to provide overnight washroom access to people who are unhoused may not be realistic. A full exploration of the shelter system was beyond the scope of this research, but Guelph-Wellington’s 2021 Point in Time statistics found that 32% of people who participated in the survey on October 20th 2021 were unsheltered. Several interviewees alluded to feeling unsafe in shelters overnight, which may explain why. Merrick, for example, said that he had witnessed on several occasions people being “thrown out” of the shelter during temperatures of -10C and colder, and that many people lived outside year-round rather than face the shelter system. Since many people who are homeless cannot access shelter space or do not want to, they need somewhere safe to go to the washroom at night or seek help in case of crisis. They may also be forced to look for warm places to sleep, as Merrick explained:

“We’re gonna end up having like..as the weather gets colder, we’re gonna have people...our homeless people...ending up sleeping in there [referring to overnight washrooms], if there’s no one there to you know, make sure that it’s used as a bathroom only.”

- Merrick, a middle-aged man experiencing homelessness



This is why suitable staffing and safety measures (like emergency detection) are necessary in all 24/7 public washrooms, and a dedicated washroom serving the unhoused is also necessary.

We suggest that since several people in the interview sample raised the issue of people experiencing homelessness sleeping in washrooms, while referring to issues with the shelter system, more research to understand their perspectives is required. It is beyond the scope of this report to deal with the connections between this and supportive and affordable housing, but we do suggest that, in the long term, more robust support should be planned for supportive housing programs.

*“So much rolls back into housing...if it's [referring to the washroom] open all night, what's to stop somebody from sleeping in there like...build some f*cking housing [exasperated]”*

- Rowan, a person who previously experienced homelessness

Recommendation C: Support Local Businesses Through a UK-Style “Community Toilet Scheme”


All over the UK, cities have developed “Community Toilet Schemes” where businesses make their washrooms available to everyone, not only to their customers. The business is listed on the City website as a public washroom, and the City provides annual grants of £800 to £1000 to offset costs, plus stickers and signs for the business to display. Cities across the UK have different levels of participation in Community Toilet Schemes, from four participants all the way up to Bristol’s 135 participants. Cities manage the budget for these programs by capping the number of participating businesses each year.

While these Community Toilet Schemes are not a solution to the need for 24-hour washrooms, they do increase access during business hours and offer a relatively low-cost way to expand washroom access when many public washrooms are currently closed e.g., on Sunday afternoons. For downtown Guelph, adding just five washrooms in a Community Toilet Scheme would significantly increase access.

Why would businesses participate?

The City of Bristol, in the UK, has a very successful Community Toilet Scheme, with 135 locations participating. Locations include coffee shops, pubs, local museums, and all kinds of other amenities and businesses. They list the following as benefits to draw businesses to the program, in addition to a modest stipend:

- More foot traffic for businesses
- Free publicity: businesses will be added to an interactive online Community Toilet Scheme map, available for tourists and residents at places across the city
- A way for businesses to demonstrate community involvement
- Supporting people with bladder, bowel and other health issues to get out and about
- Supporting people who don't have access to toilet facilities



A business/city partnership to provide additional daytime washrooms would be a tangible symbol of the City's support of Downtown businesses. Businesses may feel more comfortable allowing washroom access if they know that the City, through subsidies and advertising, is supporting their efforts.

Previous research suggests that local businesses, and staff at those businesses, are already impacted by the lack of public washrooms (Wilson, 2018). Many businesses try to implement washrooms for customers only rules (W4CO), but these are hard for staff to enforce and don't stop occasional acts of vandalism or large messes that need to be cleaned up:


"It's such a lousy situation because the people who, for the most part are asking to use your washroom that haven't bought anything are vulnerable people. Obviously not always, but a lot of the time...and then if something happens in your washroom because that person is having some kind of episode or whatever, then it's like...this other very vulnerable person who works at the café who's not equipped to deal with it and is getting paid minimum wage has to you know, deal with this issue that should be dealt with by the government or non-government agencies but like...it's just like...it just seems like everybody loses, cause the person who needs access to this quality of life thing maybe, you know, something's happening and they disrupt your washroom but then who has to deal with that is somebody else who's like just trying to get through their shift...as if their life wasn't hard enough. Nobody wins in this scenario."

- Pete, a worker in an independent coffee shop (excerpt from Wilson, 2018)

Some businesses likely already make their washrooms available and don't have formal W4CO rules but probably have similar cleaning costs. Participating in a Guelph Community Toilet Scheme would help cover these costs and reduce pressure on staff by removing the need to police access to the washroom. Businesses retain the right to ask people to leave the premises if they are being disruptive or vandalizing property, but City support would help alleviate the stress and worry of what happens if these things do happen. Interviewees of all social classes were candid about their resentment of washrooms for customers only rules (W4CO), so a more open access approach may build goodwill towards businesses, and reduce stress and worry for staff.

Recommendation D: Investigate Increased Temporary Options in the Short Term to Deal with Weekend Revelers

Municipalities frequently use Porta-potties to expand access to washrooms. The City of Guelph currently has 51 portable washrooms in summer and 25 in winter. (See the ["What's Open and When"](#) report for more details). Porta-potties are also used during special events, such as music festivals and the City's Safe Semester program, which runs in September yearly. Importantly, however, porta-potties cannot fully replace a permanent washroom. Informal conversations with Parks staff revealed that they are frequently broken or vandalized, and their temporary nature



makes adding sensors or other safety measures impossible. They are rarely accessible (only two of the 51 in Guelph are accessible) and most interviewees expressed either ambivalence or dislike of porta-potties:

“Researcher: Okay. And how do you feel about porta potties?”

Interviewee: I absolutely hate them.

Researcher: [laughs] I don't blame you. So do I.

*Interviewee: I hate them. Because there's all kinds of things...Hygiene. The smell.
... They're unhygienic.*

Researcher: Would you use one if you needed to? Like no judgment; but if you're...

Interviewee: I would have to be...I would have to be pressed beyond the point of being...not being able to find one [referring to a permanent washroom] Would I use one if I was pressed on that level? Yes, I would if I had to, but only if I absolutely did not have anywhere else to go.”


- Celia, a professional

“So if I had to go, I would like walk as far as I needed to...but I don't think I would use one of those...Porta Potties that are in the park, those just kind of seem a little sketchy and I have no idea what their up-keep and stuff is, so I would not go to that...it would be more about, I think...do I have enough time to get home or if there was like an establishment around me or if I'm in a park? The woods is fine.”

- Tasha, a middle-class student living in downtown Guelph

“I don't frequent any of them [referring to porta-potties], because even in the public parks like...I'm in every park in the city through the weekend, they're not maintained either...actually...I think that's the only thing...if they would just come and bring a new one once a month and everybody would be grateful.”

- Dwight, a middle-aged man experiencing homelessness



Despite their drawbacks, they do provide an added resource for those willing to use them. Continuing to monitor available data concerning the foot traffic on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights would be extremely helpful in understanding what times of year more general washroom access is needed. The public perception of porta-potties, given these quotes, seems to be that they are not hygienic, which discourages some people from using them. Given this, the City might consider more frequent replacement and cleaning, and making a foot-pump handwash station available as well, to mitigate some of these hygiene concerns.

Recommendations for Increasing Washroom Access Across the City

Though this project began with Downtown, we should note that people use public spaces across the City. Some parks, trail networks and splashpads have limited access to washrooms, which hampers their use. For example, the splashpads at Waverly Drive Park and Jubilee Park do not have washrooms. Furthermore, all permanent washrooms in parks are closed in the winter.

Though access to washrooms in Downtown is important, the City should work towards expanding washroom access across the entire geographical area, in order to promote Guelphite's use of the City's beautiful public spaces. This section of the report offers the following suggestions for improving access across the City:

- E. Winterize park washrooms
- F. Improve signage and information
- G. Improve inclusion and accessibility
- H. Plan ahead for more facilities

Recommendation E: Winterize Park Washrooms

Many park washrooms are not winterized, which may discourage people from getting outside in the colder months. The City is already considering making two park washrooms all-season. We see this as a positive development, and recommend the City continue moving in that direction. Currently, the City does replace closed washrooms with porta-potties, but they only partially respond to the problem of washroom access. Having facilities available in parks in the winter would help people stay active in the colder months. Winterizing washrooms can be expensive – both updates to the building and continuing maintenance costs will need to be taken into account. Given this, we suggest that this recommendation be undertaken as a phased approach as washrooms buildings are being updated over the medium to long-term to improve washroom access in the City.

Recommendation F: Improve Signage and Information

Many people do not know where currently available public washrooms are:

“Researcher: So given all of this, how would you describe public washroom access in Guelph?”

Interviewee: Umm. A big secret, I think?”

- Tasha, a middle-class student living in downtown Guelph

“Big thing that the city needs to do is where there are bathrooms: Have signage. Public washrooms like even down and freaking Port Dover, which is this itty bitty teeny weeny little place. They’ve got signs that direct you to where the public washrooms are available.”

- Janis, a middle aged woman who experiences urgent washroom needs because of a medical condition

Incorporating washroom locations into the City’s wayfinding strategy (City of Guelph, 2024) would be a simple way to address this issue. This would be useful for both residents and visitors to the city. Posters of the available public washrooms on weatherproof boards and signage pointing towards available facilities are relatively low-cost ways to improve awareness.


Recommendation G: Improve Inclusion and Accessibility

All new washrooms that are being planned by the City are accessible and have gender-neutral options. However, two of the existing 24 permanent washrooms in Guelph don’t have an accessible option, and seven don’t have a gender-neutral option. The washroom at Silvercreek Park doesn’t have either an accessible option or a gender-neutral option. Although there are 51 porta-potties to supplement the permanent washrooms, only two of these are accessible.

Gender-Neutral, Single-Stalls

Many people prefer single-stall, gender-neutral toilets, for a variety of reasons. These allow for easy changing of clothes at splash pads, more private space to deal with menstruation, illness, or other bodily functions, and reduces concerns around the harassment of people who don’t fit into binary gender norms in washrooms.

As violence against people who are perceived to not fit male/female binary gender norms remains a problem, many trans and gender-nonconforming people feel uncomfortable accessing public washrooms (Bender-Baird 2016; Dubin et al 2021). Therefore, an important part of



improving the existing infrastructure is attending to these realities by making public facilities as safe and accessible as possible, for as many people as possible.

Make All Porta-Potties Accessible

As we mentioned earlier in the report, porta-potties are not an optimal solution for most people. However, making sure that all porta-potties are accessible would at least provide a bit more space so that people with accessibility needs would have equal access to the extra washrooms that porta-potties provide.

Lower Sharps Containers to Wheelchair Height

We noticed during our tour of the washroom locations in Guelph that most washrooms have sharps bins – but only half of these are at a height that a person in a wheelchair or a person of small stature can reach. Making sure that all the sharps containers are at wheelchair height would make disposing of needles easier and more consistent for people with accessibility needs.

City staff who manage a washroom and are interested in low cost ways to make their washroom more inclusive in the short term should review the additional report [“Top Tips for Improving Your Public Washroom.”](#)

Recommendation H: Plan Ahead for More Facilities

Two new washrooms are already planned in Guelph’s Parks. A washroom is also planned for the new transit building Downtown. However, since construction projects are often planned years in advance, it would be beneficial for the City to begin incorporating designs for 24/7 washrooms into projected builds now. Continuing to plan ahead for future facilities would ensure that this part of Guelph’s infrastructure continues to grow.

Recommendations A and B, which cover the design of 24/7 washrooms, should be considered in any new building plans.

Inspiration and Visioning

As mentioned earlier in the report, the research team understands that considerable financial pressure is currently being placed on cities all across Ontario.

Many of the desired improvements suggested by interviewees are likely not in the current budget. However, they provide a valuable picture of what people want from a city space. Given this, the research team recommends that, while focusing on the short to medium term suggestions provided throughout this report, an eye on the “ideal” long term can help focus thinking and leave space for future improvements.

Ultimately, public washrooms are a public sanitation issue – a field which encompasses a broad range of potential services. As mentioned earlier in this report, keeping clean and tending to one’s bodily needs other than relieving oneself are important parts of what people use public

washrooms for. This is especially true of those who are struggling with homelessness. Therefore, we encourage broader thinking about what a comprehensive public sanitation program could contain, as adequate provision of services will likely reduce load on other systems. Here, then, are a few ideas – some directly from interviewees – that would help bring forward a more comprehensive view of public health and sanitation in Guelph.

Composting Toilets

Merrick suggested that composting toilets might be of use on Guelph’s extensive trail systems. Composting toilets seem to be an emerging and promising option for increasing washroom access (Anand and Apul, 2014; MacKinnon, 2018). They come with significant environmental benefits, because they don’t use water to flush away waste, and they produce useable compost from waste. They also do not require plumbing, which would reduce installation cost.



Travelling Shower Truck

The research team was struck by the practicality and humanity of this small project from St. Louis in 2015. A refurbished block van contains showers with donated supplies, and mainly serves people who are homeless. Several cities in the US have similar grassroots projects – perhaps something like this could be considered to complement the Community Health Van?



More Plentiful Access to Drinking Water

Several city staff we talked to while writing this report noted that the City is including water-bottle filling stations in new washroom plans. We think that more plentiful access to drinking water goes hand in hand with a comprehensive plan to make public space more comfortable. This particular suggestion may also become more important as summers become hotter.

Public Baths

Charlie pointed out that, considering that so much of what people need from a washroom is to wash oneself and take care of one's body, European-style public baths might be a welcome addition to the City in future. Though they are considered a luxury "spa" experience in much of Canadian society, they are quite common in other parts of the world. Most include hot pools of different temperatures, saunas, and cold baths, for a nominal access fee.

↙ SANDUNOVSKY BANYA,
MOSCOW, RUSSIA. OPEN SINCE 1808!



↻ INCLUDES BATHING ROOMS, STEAM ROOMS, A RESTAURANT,
AND OTHER SERVICES



Conclusion

This research has provided an entry point into thinking about issues around public washroom access in Guelph.

The most immediately necessary suggestions – nighttime washrooms for both the general public and for people experiencing homelessness – would likely curb some of the issues that downtown businesses are experiencing.

However, problems are likely to continue if improvements are not made on a consistent and ongoing basis. One of the most important challenges with washroom access is that, for one of the groups that need it most, it is related to housing. For others, washroom access is related to accessibility. Still others are housed and don't have any accessibility needs, but work a job that does not give them easy access to a washroom. Finally, sociability and access to public space for everyone is improved when washroom access is adequate, as even people who have no special circumstances of any kind need access to washrooms.

This report therefore proposes a suite of suggested improvements to existing infrastructure, and posits some new lines of thinking for future investigation. We hope that this report provides a starting point for further inquiry, and an outline of the most immediately necessary improvements.

Fundamentally, public washrooms are an essential part of a modern city where people are moving about and socializing in public space. As noted earlier in this report, there are many different kinds of people who would benefit from easier access to washrooms. However, it is important to note that the issue of washroom access is in fact comprised of multiple different issues wrapped into one mess: the more groups of people do not have access to washrooms, the more issues there will be with public defecation and urination.

The difficulty is that each group has different needs that need to be addressed to deal with the one problem. As outlined in this report, we suspect that the issue of public urination and defecation stems from several sources, each requiring a different solution. We suggested what we think are some baseline, common-sense solutions to remediate the problem. But, we encourage Guelph (and any other cities that might reference this report) to think of washroom provision in terms of human rights and fostering a healthy city life, rather than a reactive stop-gap for a public health issue. If public washrooms become accepted as an easily-accessible feature of city life, we feel confident that there will be benefits, both practical and esoteric, that will contribute to the well-being and good reputation of any city that implements such programs.

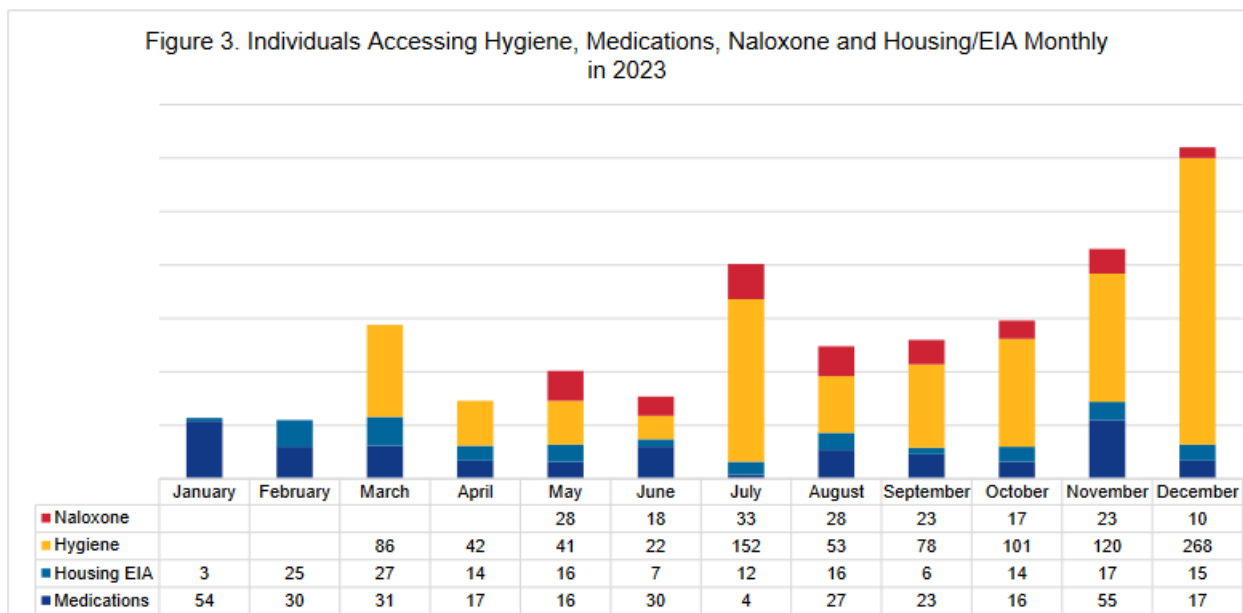
Appendix I: Focus on Amoowigawig – An Inspiring Success Story

Winnipeg has a population of approximately 750,000 people. Of those, over 1,200 experience homelessness (End Homelessness Winnipeg 2022).

The City of Winnipeg has released detailed data on Amoowigawig’s successes, which are summarized here:

- The costs of operating this facility in Winnipeg are split - Council provided \$250,000 in 2022 for the facility operations and peer support services of Amoowigawig. This amount was increased to \$270,500 in 2023 for a 10-hour operating model. Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata (the organization that provides staffing for the washroom) received a grant from the Winnipeg Foundation of \$225,000 each year from 2023 to 2026, a total of \$900,000, for the provision of peer support services, intended to further expand hours of operations. This investment provided the resources needed to move to 16-hour operations mid-2023. Community stakeholders continue to express a need and desire for the facility to be open and staffed 24/7. In Winnipeg, extending hours to 24 hours per day would require a total annual budget of \$650,000 at minimum, for all staff and maintenance expenses.
- In 2023, the facility had an average of 2,690 visitors per month.
- In 2023, 29,445 people visited the facility for peer support services, while slightly fewer (29,335 people) visited to access the washroom.

The figure below shows the quantity of other resources accessed:



Source: City of Winnipeg Decision Making Information System, "March 6, 2024 Standing Policy Committee on Community Services Regular Meeting Agenda"

[http://clkapps.winnipeg.ca/DMIS/permalink.asp?id=A20240306\(RM\)PCS-5](http://clkapps.winnipeg.ca/DMIS/permalink.asp?id=A20240306(RM)PCS-5)

Note: In the above figure, Housing EIA refers to referrals to housing or Employment and Income Assistance (EIA) programs. As the it shows, harm reduction workers at Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata helped 172 people with questions about referrals to these programs, over one year.

- Amoowigawig has adapted to safety concerns by: "limiting the number of people into the space at one time; keeping doors locked so staff are able to control the number of people in the facility and/or provide one-on-one support; temporary suspension for community members presenting violent behaviours; and an increase in staff on-site to ensure safety protocols are met" ("March 6, 2024 Standing Policy Committee on Community Services Regular Meeting Agenda", page 10)
- However, it is important to note that the City of Winnipeg considers that the facility is a "strong example of success for operating a public washroom. As a direct result of the peer support services, the facility has become a community resource with positive impacts on community health, wellbeing and safety, and contributing to positive health outcomes for vulnerable people. In addition, the facility itself has experienced limited instances of structural damage or vandalism such as broken windows" ("March 6, 2024 Standing Policy Committee on Community Services Regular Meeting Agenda", page 10)
- Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata (the non-profit group that staffs the washroom) confirmed to the City of Winnipeg that harm reduction and naloxone was saving lives ("March 6, 2024 Standing Policy Committee on Community Services Regular Meeting Agenda", page 10)
- Programming offered at Amoowigawig "shifted seasonally to provide community members with additional care to support mental health, such as providing gifts over the holidays in December. This approach to service delivery is an important way to establish stronger relationships and support mental health for people who are in difficult situations" ("March 6, 2024 Standing Policy Committee on Community Services Regular Meeting Agenda", page 10)

Figure Description

A graph showing amount of hygiene supplies, medications, naloxone and housing or employment and income assistance referrals given in 2023 at Amoowigawig public washroom. The graph shows that naloxone distribution began in May 2023 and that each month, between 10 and 28 people accessed naloxone at the centre. Hygiene products were distributed from March to December, with between 22 and 268 instances of people accessing hygiene supplies. The numbers vary from 86 people accessing these supplies in March, peaking at 268 accesses in December, with a low of 22 people accessing these supplies in June. Between 3 and 27 people each month were referred to Employment and Income Assistance or Housing services each month, for a total of 172 people helped in this way in 2023. Between 4 and 55 people per month accessed medications at the centre. The high of 55 people occurred in November 2023,

and the low of 4 occurred in July 2023. Overall, the graph shows that additional services were an important part of why people went to the Amoowigawig public washroom.

Appendix II: Meet the Research Team



Edith Wilson Sousa, MA, PhD candidate, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Guelph.

Previous research was a mixed-methods analysis of Washrooms for Customers Only (W4CO) rules in Toronto. Sections of that research are cited in this report. For that project, Edith counted the prevalence of W4CO rules along 5 main strips of downtown in the City of Toronto; conducted archival research on City policy on public washrooms; and interviewed 15 people working in coffee shops and fast-food restaurants about how W4CO rules affected their work environment, and how they managed the rule. Edith also produced the first publicly-available map of public washrooms available in Toronto, which can still be found at torontotoilets.org, though a City-produced map is now available.

Her dissertation research is focused on the life courses of Canadian affordable housing workers and volunteers. She is a Research Assistant on the Sociable Cities research project (<https://www.sociablecities.uoguelph.ca/>) and the Rental Experience Project, and is, in her spare time, the President of the Hamilton Community Land Trust.



Adam Bonnycastle, Geomatics Support Specialist, Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics.

Adam provides Geomatics support – GIS, remote sensing, cartography – to faculty and students in the University of Guelph Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics. Examples of research that he has been involved with include modelling agricultural non-point source pollution, developing spatial variables for various spatial econometric studies of the Greater Toronto Area Greenbelt and renewable energy infrastructure, and assessing the relationship between the location of vehicle collisions with vulnerable users (pedestrians, cyclists) and socio-economic marginality in Guelph.




Sam Laban, Guelph Lab Facilitator.

Sam is responsible for management of the Guelph Lab, which includes developing and managing projects, designing and facilitating workshops, developing partnerships, and brokering research/scholarly work. He is responsible for developing and managing projects, designing and facilitating workshops, developing partnerships, and brokering research/scholarly work. He works with City of Guelph staff, University staff, faculty and students, as well as with citizens of all stripes (businesses, community organizations and groups, individuals) to develop promising solutions to pressing challenges facing the region.

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