

Where to go when nature calls? Seattle has a public restroom problem

Oct. 8, 2023 at 6:00 am | Updated Oct. 8, 2023 at 6:00 am



A chained-up port-a-potty outside the Pioneer Square light-rail Station is out of commission. A century ago, Pioneer Square had a fancy public “comfort station” underground. It was shut during World War II, sealed up and never reopened. (Daniel Kim / The Seattle Times)

By [Daniel Beekman](#) and [Anna Patrick](#)

Seattle Times staff reporters

To understand something that stinks about Seattle, stop by the University District light-rail station. You’ll see buses zipping past. Cranes erecting new apartments. Foodies scarfing snacks. People living without shelter.

What you won’t see there, despite the bustling neighborhood pleading with the powers that be for years? Public restrooms.

“It’s a basic human right” and yet, “I guess no one ultimately wants to be responsible for it,” said Cory Crocker, president of the University District Community Council.

Seattle has a crappy supply of public restrooms. They’re often old, messy or closed. In spots, they don’t exist at all, with government entities operating roughly 25 restrooms per 100,000 city residents.



It's a familiar message around the city: A sign at the Greyhound bus station south of downtown Seattle reads "No public restrooms" as a light-rail train passes by. (Daniel Kim / The Seattle Times)

King County Metro has zero restrooms for bus riders. There's only one light-rail station in Seattle with public toilets. Restrooms in parks, community centers and libraries open at various times and close after dark. Many stores have restricted access since COVID-19 struck.

All that makes life harder for transit riders with long commutes; parents of kids with diapers to change; people with disabilities, tourists, Uber drivers and homeless people; coffee shops forced to fill the void, workers who clean the city's parks — almost everyone.

In extreme cases, people without adequate access have soiled themselves while waiting for buses, caught diseases through contact with human feces and been arrested for using portable toilets on private property. Others have simply stopped going downtown.

"It is utterly ridiculous for a city with such wealth" to offer so little, said Camilla Walter, executive director at the Real Change Homeless Empowerment Project. "Especially because when we're talking about who benefits from public restrooms, it's everyone."



Sokha Nop, Remy Shannon and Deborah Amituanai, from Seattle Parks and Recreation, clean out the bathroom stalls at Cal Anderson Park. (Daniel Kim / The Seattle Times)

Some local agencies are taking steps, with Seattle Parks and Recreation scheduling \$2 million-plus in renovations per year [through 2028](#) to renovate its restrooms and keep more available during the winter, and with Sound Transit building public toilets into some new suburban stops.

But past attempts to make change have run into resistance over maintenance costs and security headaches, or hit bureaucratic walls. As negotiations over Seattle's next multibillion-dollar budget get underway this month, there's no bold, comprehensive plan to add new options.

When asked for a mayor's office interview about City Hall's vision for public restrooms, a spokesperson for Mayor Bruce Harrell declined, saying the mayor was unavailable that week and it was "challenging to identify a single ... representative with subject matter expertise across the various departments and issues this topic touches."

At the U District station, advocates seeking restrooms have petitioned City Hall. Sound Transit. The University of Washington. Real estate developers.

And no one has delivered, with predictable results: Workers who clean the streets for the local business association logged more than 100 encounters with human waste last year (and thousands in 2020). It's a yucky problem.



Under Pioneer Square, a 1909 public restroom sits entombed. It was once an elegant example of public convenience and hygiene. (Daniel Kim / The Seattle Times)

Past and present

Most U.S. cities have similar woes, though it wasn't always this way, said Steve Soifer, a retired social work professor who manages the American Restroom Association, an advocacy organization.

Through the mid-20th century, U.S. cities took pride in building public restrooms, he said. In Seattle, a prominent example was a set with marble stalls, brass fixtures, white-tiled walls and terrazzo floors, built under the pergola in Pioneer Square.

"Whether or not there were enough is another question, but they were large and clean and met the needs" of working people, Soifer said.

The Pioneer Square restrooms closed during World War II. Starting after the war and accelerating in the 1970s and '80s with funding cuts at all levels of government, more public restrooms closed or began to deteriorate, he said.

Social program cuts pushed more people into homelessness, putting pressure on the public restrooms that remained open, Soifer said. Pay-to-use toilets were shut down in the name of equity and not replaced.



It's a no-go for this portable toilet. (Daniel Kim / The Seattle Times)

Seattle's park restrooms decayed in the 1990s and 2000s, with the city relying on boom-and-bust real estate taxes. Not until this year did officials dedicate money from a special property tax specifically for restroom renovations.

The consequences are evident today.

Most of the city's about 200 public restrooms are in parks, and more than a third of park restrooms currently close during the winter, while about a quarter were out of order when The Times requested a snapshot this spring. Only one is officially open 24 hours.

They're also missing in critical spots. A \$25 million park that opened [in 2020](#) on the Lake Washington Ship Canal was built without toilets. There are no permanent public restrooms at Westlake Park, in the heart of downtown.

Soni Sukhwinder knows the gaps. An Uber driver whose blood pressure medication makes him pee, he can't count on scarce public restrooms and too often gets turned away by businesses, he said. He's held it so much he now has swelling in his bladder, he said, and takes pills for that, too.

Missed opportunities abound. For decades, Sound Transit has made decisions about where to include restrooms on a station-by-station basis, rather than a master scheme.



Josh Mink, of Tacoma, waits near Stadium Station for a bus to Bellingham that was delayed for nine hours. "I'm a middle-aged man — sometimes things happen suddenly and you get caught half a mile before..." (Daniel Kim / The Seattle Times) **More** ✓

Starbucks stores at one point served as a widespread substitute, because the company was opening branches with no-cost restrooms everywhere. But increasingly, businesses don't want to deal with messes or drug use, so they're limiting their restrooms to customers and staff.

And it's not just residents who suffer. It's visitors, too.

Josh Mink spent a day here in July but stuck near the Greyhound bus station rather than exploring across the city, because he didn't want to stray from a reliable restroom.

"Sometimes things happen suddenly," he said.

Equity issue

Some groups are particularly affected by restroom scarcity. People who rely on transit, for example.

Here's one horror story: A woman who requested anonymity because she works for a government agency was pregnant when she took light rail to a Mariners game this summer and needed a restroom. No stops had them, and no businesses near the ballpark would assist. She held it so long, she got a urinary tract infection and stopped attending events in Seattle.

Being unable to use a restroom while waiting for light rail is something most Sound Transit riders have experienced, said Jon Cracolici, board president for Seattle Subway, which lobbies for high-capacity transit across the region.

Seattle Subway holds there should be restrooms in every station, and cities should help maintain them, Cracolici said. Anything that makes the system hard for passengers to use is bound to depress ridership, he said.

There are agencies that do better. [Basically every station](#) in the Bay Area Rapid Transit system has a public restroom, for example.

On a trip downtown, Jake Cooper couldn't find a place for his son to go. The toddler "ended up peeing his pants (and my shirt) and riding the bus home upset at his 'failure,'" Cooper said. "The failure wasn't his, of course."

Public restrooms can also be crucial for people with disabilities, said Sarah Eaton, a program director at Disability Rights Washington. Some have conditions that require frequent toilet use and others need privacy for medical injections or tests, Eaton said. People in wheelchairs can't always use portable toilets.

Since being diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome, Bonnie Thompson has been forced to jump off the bus during her Seattle commute and beg nearby stores to use the restroom. She's tried a \$20 bribe. Once, she had an accident.

"It's very embarrassing, humiliating," Thompson said.

When public restrooms aren't clean, accessible and abundant, people with disabilities may simply stay home, Eaton said.

"It's not just inconvenient, it's an equity issue," Eaton said.

When shops pick and choose who gets to go, unconscious bias or overt discrimination can creep in, added Richard Weinmeyer, a DePaul College of Law health law fellow researching restrooms. It's a way to wield power, he said. People may be rejected because they can't afford a latte or because of what they look like.

Businesses are trying to avoid people "shooting up, starting fires and damaging the plumbing," said Sharon Lynch, a longtime Seattle retail worker.

But James Foster and others pay the price.

"Especially being brown," he said. On a recent night at 7-Eleven, he tried to use the toilet. "I didn't have any money, so they kicked me out the store."

No home, no toilet

Joe Bernstein was [practically living at the UW's Suzzallo Library](#) when COVID began and the library shuttered. Overnight, his life recentered around finding a restroom with running water.

No group suffers more from Seattle's lack of restrooms than the thousands of people living in tarps and tents, RVs and vans.

"I think defining homeless people as subhuman is an extremely common thing," said Bernstein, who writes [a blog about Seattle's public restrooms](#). "And one of the most obvious ways to define homeless people as subhuman is to deny them access to plumbing."

In 2019, a report by Seattle's auditor criticized the city for operating only six 24-hour restrooms, and only two with lights, running water and flushing toilets. A United Nations standard for refugee camps calls for one toilet per 20 people, the report noted, estimating the city would need 224 to serve just its unsheltered population at that standard.

The audit recommended Seattle add more 24-hour restrooms and locate portable toilets at well-lit sites where workers are always present, like fire stations.

During COVID shutdowns, city leaders faced intense pressure to address homeless hygiene needs, said Alison Eisinger, executive director of the Seattle/King County Coalition on Homelessness.

In 2020, Seattle [installed portable toilets and hand-washing stations](#) in six locations. Since then, there's been little improvement.

"Not even a fig leaf of a respectable response," Eisinger said.

Currently, there are nonflushing toilets with hand-washing stations at nine sites, and four other places now have shower trailers with toilets. Just one city restroom with flushing toilets is officially open 24 hours (in Green Lake Park, at North 65th Street), however, and no portable toilets are located at sites like fire stations.

"It's not a comfortable feeling to walk into, for example, some fancier coffee shop where everybody is working remotely on their laptops. And you've got a backpack with your entire everything in it and you're wearing clothes that haven't been washed in a month and every head turns to look at you," said Dee Powers, who lived in an RV south of downtown for years.

Georgetown has one park with a restroom and Sodo has zero, leading Powers to rely on a Starbucks until the city launched a [new program](#) that pumps wastewater from RVs.

Trina Hunter, an outreach coordinator for the nonprofit REACH, said a lack of restrooms and running water prevents many of her homeless clients from seeking jobs. Although there are hygiene centers and day shelters sprinkled across Seattle, visiting them can be time-consuming and physically taxing.

Without toilets and sinks, ["medieval diseases" can run rampant](#). Since October 2020, 316 shigella cases have been reported in King County's homeless population, Public Health – Seattle & King County said. The bacteria spreads through infected stool.

Josephine Ensign, a UW nursing professor who provides health care to Seattle's homeless population, said many of her patients avoid taking diuretic medications for heart disease or hypertension and others wait to eat until they can access a bathroom.

Tough job

Parks workers who clean restrooms, like Deborah Amituanai, deal with poop, vomit, trash, drugs and more.

"Every time, I clean it the way I would want it cleaned for my kids," said Amituanai, a mother of six, using a power washer to spray out a stall in Cal Anderson Park.

Some park restrooms close down because copper pipes get stolen. Fires are another problem. The city has insurance but the deductibles "aren't cheap," and keeping busy restrooms usable means cleaning them three times per day, said Andy Sheffer, a Parks deputy superintendent.

"The vandalism is intense," Sheffer said.

These are the type of challenges that decision-makers typically point to when debating whether to add public restrooms. Sound Transit ran the numbers a while ago: In 2017 and 2018, the agency dealt with 2,252 maintenance and 132 security incidents at seven in-station restrooms.

"We have a finite amount of resources for operations," and amenities like restrooms can take away money from the trains, said Russ Arnold, a Sound Transit deputy CEO.

The only light-rail restrooms in Seattle, at Northgate, got so battered after opening in 2021 that Sound Transit closed them for renovations this summer. They're reopening soon but riders will now have to get buzzed in via camera from the agency's headquarters.

A Sound Transit study in 2021 pegged the annual cost of maintaining and securing restrooms at \$320,000 per site. Yet stations without toilets still incur costs, Seattle Subway's Cracolici noted, because some people end up pooping and peeing in elevators, on escalators or onto the tracks.

Real Change's Walter said concerns about drug use in restrooms shouldn't be used as an excuse to withhold access.

"If we were to invest in safe public consumption sites or other resources that drug users need, then this would not be an issue," she said.

New restrooms aren't cheap: Seattle paid \$550,000 to install one "[Portland Loo](#)" toilet in 2019 — \$125,000 for the unit itself and \$450,000 on utilities and overhead. The cage-like structures pioneered in Oregon are heavy-duty, semitransparent and easy to clean.

And tech isn't the answer. Back in 2004, Seattle spent \$5 million on self-cleaning public toilets. But the units were quickly trashed, and the city sold them on eBay for \$12,000.

What works

There are signs that restroom access could improve somewhat.

The city plans to build a six-stall structure by 2025 to serve the downtown waterfront, which has been getting a broader overhaul.

Sound Transit is including restrooms at suburban stations set to open soon in Shoreline, Mountlake Terrace, Lynnwood, Kent and Federal Way, and has considered criteria that would require them at certain other stations with at least 10,000 daily boardings.

Seattle installed Portland Loos in Rainier Beach and Ballard before the pandemic. And Parks has budgeted \$2 million to \$3 million per year in additional property taxes to bolster access, aiming to make all its restrooms open year-round by 2028. The money is paying for renovations, more maintenance and automatic locks for some restroom doors.

"Public restrooms are a priority for the mayor because he's got grandkids," Deputy Superintendent Christopher Williams said at meeting in August. "He likes to take them to the park on occasion, and guess what, sometimes those bathrooms have been closed."

This summer, Parks launched [an online dashboard](#) where residents can check which restrooms are open. It's updated weekly; 15 restrooms were listed as closed and five as "limited use" last week (it doesn't include portable toilets placed in parks temporarily — 32 as of late September). It's helped Parks workers track repairs and get them done quicker, crew chief Kristy Darcy said.

But some cities are doing more. Like San Francisco, where officials attribute the success of their public toilet Pit Stops to one key ingredient: staffing.

They're monitored and cleaned all the time, whereas only Seattle's shower trailers have attendants and security.

Since 2014, San Francisco's program has grown from three sites to more than 30, now costing \$14.5 million per year. Some are open 24/7. The model has taken off in other cities, including Miami and Denver.

Meanwhile, in Seattle's U District, advocates [are still collecting](#) petition signatures for a restroom near the train station. The booming neighborhood deserves better, said Don Blakeney, executive director of the U District Partnership, which markets and cleans the area.

There was a moment in 2018 when Seattle leaders almost agreed to site a Portland Loo in the U District, said Crocker, from the community council. But ultimately, officials said the city could afford just one unit and chose Ballard.

Blakeney sees potential in a public-private arrangement. Maybe the city could install restrooms and the Partnership could manage them, he suggested.

"I have yet to meet a public leader who doesn't see this as an important issue," Blakeney said. "But I don't think we've put together a plan."

This coverage is [partially underwritten](#) by Microsoft Philanthropies. The Seattle Times maintains editorial control over this and all its coverage.

Daniel Beekman: 206-464-2164 or dbeekman@seattletimes.com; on Twitter: [@dbeekman](https://twitter.com/dbeekman). Seattle Times staff reporter Daniel Beekman covers politics and communities.

Anna Patrick: apatrick@seattletimes.com; on Twitter: [@annaleapatrik](https://twitter.com/annaleapatrik).

 [View 280 Comments / 280 New](#)