

REPORT

Planning and Development and Engineering Services

To: Mayor Johnstone and Members of Council
Date: September 23, 2024

From: Jackie Teed, Director,
Planning and Development
File: #2563808

Lisa Leblanc, Director,
Engineering Services
Item #: 2024-523

Subject: **Report Back on Council Resolution to Develop a City-Wide Public Toilet Strategy**

RECOMMENDATION

THAT staff be directed to develop a City-wide Public Toilet Strategy as outlined in the staff report titled “Report Back on Council Resolution to Develop a City-Wide Public Toilet Strategy” (dated September 23, 2024 from the Directors, Planning and Development and Engineering).

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is threefold: (1) to provide an update on the Council resolution regarding a City-Wide Public Toilet Strategy and increased signage to facilitate wayfinding to existing publicly-funded toilets; (2) to propose next steps for undertaking the work in question; and (3) to outline possible financial and work program implications.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to public toilets and the increasing presence of human waste in public and private spaces have become significant community issues. In response, and at the Council Workshop on June 17, 2024, staff brought forward a proposal for a permanent, prefabricated, free-standing toilet on Begbie Street. Council members expressed a number of concerns regarding the proposal, including that it was not available 24/7 and that it was limited in both scope and reach.

At the Regular Council Meeting on June 24, 2024, Council requested that staff develop a work plan and a budget for a City-Wide Public Toilet Strategy and that staff immediately enhance signage to facilitate wayfinding to existing publicly-funded toilets. In response to the Council resolution, staff are proposing that the strategy have three target populations: (1) the general public; (2) seniors and people living with disabilities and underlying health conditions; and (3) people who are unhoused. Staff believe that each population has different needs, and that a one size fits all approach will not work.

Staff are proposing a number of next steps which will inform a detailed work program with regard to developing the strategy and enhancing signage. Given that this is a new work program item, staff are proposing that program management and consultant services be retained. The Social Planning section of the Planning and Development Department will be leading this work, and it is recognized that it could extend the timelines for some of their other work program items.

The proposed budget to complete the strategy and enhance signage is between \$85,000 and \$125,000, and this funding will be derived from the existing budget for the permanent, prefabricated, free-standing toilet. It is anticipated that this work will take eight to twelve months to complete; and staff will bring an interim report to Council which will outline progress made, preliminary findings, suggested strategies, and any staffing capacity and work program challenges.

BACKGROUND

Access to Public Toilets and the Increasing Presence of Human Waste

Access to public toilets and the increasing presence of human waste in public and private spaces have become significant community issues. Contributing factors were the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing homelessness crisis.

Access to public toilets is a human rights, dignity and public health issue, and is essential to facilitating independence for seniors and people living with disabilities and underlying health conditions. It is also often the only option for people who are unhoused, who otherwise must use public and private spaces, which negatively impacts overall community health and wellbeing.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the City, with senior government funding and grants, installed portable toilets throughout the city. While they did enhance access, particularly for people who are unhoused, they were costly to operate and difficult to clean and maintain. They also did not meet the needs of all community members, including related to accessibility, comfort and safety.

Council Direction

At the Council Workshop on June 17, 2024, staff made a presentation on a permanent, prefabricated, free-standing public toilet on Begbie Street. Council members expressed a number of concerns regarding the proposal, including that it was not available 24/7 and that it was limited in both scope and reach.

At the Regular Council Meeting on June 24, 2024, and as a follow-up to the Council Workshop on June 17, 2024, Council approved the following resolution:

1. That Council request staff to develop a work plan and budget to prepare a City-Wide Public Toilet Strategy and report back:
 - a. That the strategy be informed by engagement with the community;
 - b. That the strategy recommend locations and options for different service levels, including 24/7 operations;
 - c. That the strategy recommend options for working with community partners to ensure access to public toilets for all members of the community.
2. That staff be directed to immediately begin the installation of increased signage throughout the city to enhance awareness of all publicly-funded toilets.

DISCUSSION

While access to public toilets benefits everyone, staff have identified the following three target populations regarding the strategy: (1) the general public; (2) seniors and people living with disabilities and underlying health conditions in which access facilitates independence; and (3) people who are unhoused in which access is often the only option.

Strategy

The General Public

Most housed members of the general public have access to a toilet within their own home, and will therefore require access to a public toilet only while they are circulating in the community, typically during the day. Their needs can predominantly be met through existing public toilets, and private toilets in businesses, including malls. Strategies to enhance access could include improved signage, which is already a Council direction; extended hours; improved maintenance; and increased number and availability of public toilets.

A review of existing public toilets, including their accessibility, condition, hours, and location will identify gaps to be addressed to meet the needs of the general public.

Seniors and People Living with Disabilities and Underlying Health Conditions

Some seniors and people living with disabilities and underlying health conditions, including Crohn's disease and Colitis, require enhanced access to public toilets to facilitate independence. For this target population, existing public toilets and their locations may be insufficient, and their movements may be limited as a result. Strategies to enhance access could include those listed above for the general public but also include access to apps and maps; partnerships with businesses, and other measures.

Case study research will be employed to identify best practices and innovative strategies, and focused engagement will occur to better understand needs and gaps and to ensure that interventions are effective.

People who are Unhoused

Access to a toilet and other hygiene services is a human rights, dignity and public health issue. People who are unhoused often do not have an option with regard to accessing a toilet, especially during late-evenings and early-mornings when businesses and civic, faith-based and non-profit facilities are typically closed. Even when available, people who are unhoused may not feel welcome and may be subject to judgment and monitoring. They also face other barriers such as the safe storage of their belongings when availing themselves of a toilet. With limited to no access, many must resort to using public and private spaces, including alcoves and recessed doorways, landscaped areas and sidewalks, which negatively impacts overall community health and wellbeing.

The City contends that all community members should have access to a toilet and preferably in their own home. To this end, the City is advocating for adequate supportive and non-market housing for people who are unhoused, and is working with the senior levels of government to realize it. Only when this happens, will issues related to access and human waste associated with homelessness be adequately addressed.

In the interim, the City is proposing to explore strategies to enhance access to toilets for people who are unhoused. This could include:

- developing an anti-stigma campaign and offering staff training within existing civic facilities;
- converting the nightly shelter to a temporary 24/7 shelter and working towards a permanent one;
- increasing overnight extreme weather and winter shelter capacity between October 15 and April 15;
- continuing to operate the 24/7 sanitation trailer on Front Street until a permanent 24/7 shelter is in place and adequate supportive housing is built;
- designating one or more faith-based or non-profit organizations as hubs where people who are unhoused can access a toilet and other services and supports during late-evenings and early-mornings.

Given that homelessness is a senior government responsibility, the City will advocate that all costs associated with enhancing access to a toilet for people who are unhoused or addressing human waste in public and private spaces reside with them.

Enhanced Signage

Enhanced signage incorporating icons to facilitate wayfinding to publicly-funded toilets has already been implemented in Downtown and Quayside. This included signage to 24/7 public toilets, including the former portable toilet at the nightly shelter, which has since been replaced by the sanitation trailer, and the accessible public toilet at the New Westminster Police Station. A key challenge is ensuring that signage is updated when changes occur to apprise people of their options.

As staff move to enhance signage throughout the city, there will be a need to engage a signage and wayfinding consultant. Staff are currently developing a scope of work for the consultant, and anticipate that it will take a few months to conduct the necessary review and develop recommendations. Signs can then be fabricated in the City's Sign Shop and installed by City crews.

PROPOSED NEXT STEPS

To develop a City-Wide Public Toilet Strategy, staff propose the following next steps:

1. retain the services of a Project Manager and develop a Project Charter;
2. retain the services of a Gerontologist to inform strategies to address the needs of seniors and people living with disabilities and underlying health conditions;
3. create a representative working group to inform the development of the strategy;
4. conduct a city-wide analysis of all current public toilets, including their accessibility, hours, location and maintenance to identify needs and gaps related to the three target populations;
5. conduct case study research to identify and examine best practices regarding the provision of public toilets and related signage, and to explore their applicability to New Westminster;
6. conduct an in-depth review of the findings from previous engagement with people who are unhoused which formed part of the 2022 Homelessness Action Strategy;
7. engage seniors, people living with disabilities and underlying health conditions, and people who are unhoused as subject matter experts as it pertains to needs, gaps and suggested actions;
8. engage businesses as to possible strategies that can address needs and build a loyal customer base;
9. engage faith-based and non-profit organizations as to suggested actions to address the needs of people who are unhoused;
10. engage senior levels of government regarding their role in funding enhanced access to toilets for people who are unhoused and covering the cost of human waste collection and disposal;
11. bring an interim report to Council outlining progress made, preliminary findings, suggested strategies, and any staffing capacity and work program challenges;
12. bring back a City-Wide Public Toilet Strategy for Council's consideration and possible endorsement.

Approaches to enhancing signage and wayfinding to facilitate access to publicly-funded toilets will be considered as part of the strategy. In the interim and with the support of a signage and wayfinding consultant, quick improvements will be made to signage which currently exists in the Downtown and Quayside.

WORK PROGRAM IMPLICATIONS

The development of the strategy will engage project management and consultant services, which will assist in limiting the impacts on the Social Planning work program. The addition of the Crises Response Policy Development and Collaboration Planning Analyst, which forms part of the Social Planning team, will also assist, particularly with case study research and engagement activities. The development of the strategy could extend some timelines for other Social Planning work program items, and staff, as part of the interim report, will inform Council if any work program items may need to be paused.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The initial cost estimate to develop the strategy is between \$85,000 and \$125,000, which will cover the cost of project management and consultant services, engagement and research activities, catering, honorariums, and related costs. This funding will be derived from the existing budget for the permanent, prefabricated, free-standing toilet.

INTERDEPARTMENTAL LIAISON

The Planning and Development Department, which will lead this work, will engage a number of other City Departments, including Engineering (Civic Buildings and Properties and Operations), Community Services, Library, and Parks and Recreation.

OPTIONS

There are two options for Council's consideration:

1. THAT staff be directed to develop a City-wide Public Toilet Strategy as outlined in the staff report titled "Report Back on Council Resolution to Develop a City-Wide Public Toilet Strategy" (dated September 23, 2024 from the Directors, Planning and Development and Engineering).
2. THAT Council provide staff with different direction.

Staff recommend Option 1.

APPROVALS

This report was prepared by:

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