

The new 24-hour public restrooms could be available this summer if approved by the City Commission.

By Jessi Phillips

Visitors to Kalamazoo's downtown can access a handful of public restrooms. But most are not available after business hours. That could change by this summer when the city hopes to add two new 24-hour public bathrooms downtown.

Kalamazoo installed its first Portland Loo in 2019 near downtown's Arcadia Festival site. It recently announced plans to put a new one near Bronson Park on the corner of St. John's Place and West Lovell St. A second location near the Kalamazoo Mall is still being finalized.

Assistant City Manager Rebekah Kik said the maintenance of each bathroom would run about \$15,000-\$20,000 a year. Kik said the restrooms are intended to serve all visitors and residents of the downtown community.

"It's certainly just as much about folks who may be living in our city in an unhoused situation, but it's also about just being a totally 100% welcoming city to anyone who wants to be here," she said. "And restrooms are a big part of that."

Jessica Thompson owns Bee Joyful Shop, which is located on the Kalamazoo Mall. She agreed that bathrooms would make things easier for downtown shoppers as well as the unhoused.

"I mean, everybody has to go to the bathroom. They have to go to the bathroom as well," she said. "So that's an awesome thing, I think. Because then we don't have them going somewhere else. That's good human stuff that we're doing."

According to the City of Kalamazoo's web site, there are currently eight public restrooms available downtown. Only a few are open past 6 p.m., and most are not available on the weekends. The Portland Loo on Water St. is the only one that's open 24 hours.

If the City Commission approves the purchase, each Portland Loo would cost \$100,000. This is less than half of what they cost in 2019.

Kalamazoo resident Jay Tatara said he's worked downtown for more than five years, and that there's a definite need for more restrooms downtown to serve the unhoused population.

"Or people who aren't unhoused, just people going into the festival sites etc.," he said. "It'd be nice to have some more restrooms. I think it's a human dignity issue."