

Let it mellow or flush it down? A one-year check-in on Philly Phlush, the city's public restroom project

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Breaking a promise is like breaking the seal — there's no going back after you do it — so while checking up on Philly's stand-alone public bathrooms during an excessive heat wave last week wasn't my idea of a perfect summer day, I accepted the challenge head on, lest I be accused of dereliction of doody.

Some of you may remember that when I reviewed the city's pilot public restroom project upon its debut last July, I promised to return in six weeks, six months, and a year to keep you privy to the state of this great excrement experiment and the conditions of the Portland Loo model bathrooms, which the city renamed Philly Phlush.

Why would I give myself such a crappy assignment? Because I want these bathrooms to succeed, because the U.S. is way behind Europe in providing access to public restrooms, and because if Philadelphia can't meet people's basic human needs, how can we expect to meet the more complicated ones?

Lay of the land

While I'm happy to report I found no fragrant violations at the existing units, I'm concerned that the five-year, six-unit project may be clogged up, or at least behind schedule. There was supposed to be three Philly Phlushes up and running by now but there are only two, the same two that opened last summer — one at 15th and Arch Streets in Center City and another at Fotterral Square Park in North Philly.

What's even more concerning is that the city may not be able to fund all six units it had planned for the project, which has an annual budget of \$656,864.

"As the city installs more units, we will have a better understanding of if we can reach our goal of six units with the available funding, which was allocated pre-pandemic prior to significant increases in fabrication and construction costs," said a spokesperson for the Managing Director's Office, which oversees the Philly Phlush project.

If Philly may not be able to fully fund its pilot project, what hope is there that we'll ever see these bathrooms be more than just an experimental pipe dream? Previous attempts

at proliferating public restrooms across Philadelphia have tanked, like in 2007 when a bathroom that played music was put on the north apron of City Hall with plans to install 35 more across the city. Nobody in today's administration can say why that project failed. I don't want the Phlush to suffer the same fate.

We need these bathrooms for the tourists, people experiencing homelessness, and cyclists who use the one in Center City, and for the families, teens playing basketball, and senior citizens in Fotterral Square Park. People are using these restrooms. I know, I've talked to them. I've been one of them.

They're also using the items within the bathrooms — so far more than 3,000 doses of naloxone, which reverses the effects of an opioid overdose, and more than 6,000 sanitary products have been restocked in the units. It's clear the Phlushes are more than just bathrooms, they're micro-community hubs helping to save lives and combat period poverty.

And when the world comes to Philly for the semiquincentennial, the World Cup, and the MLB All-Star game in 2026, we're going to need somewhere for all those people to go.

The next Phlushes

The third Phlush that was supposed to be put in West Philly's Clark Park by the end of last year is on order and expected to be installed this fall, according to the spokesperson.

The porta potties that the Friends of Clark Park purchased as the community awaits the arrival of the Philly Phlush unit slated for the park.

In the meantime, visitors to the park have had to make do with two porta potties that were funded by donations to the Friends of Clark Park, according to an April post on the group's Facebook page. They were open but hot as heck inside when I stopped by recently, and I noticed both had been tagged with graffiti (the Phlush units have a graffiti-resistant finish).

The Managing Director's Office spokesperson said the city will get a fourth Phlush, but the site for it hasn't been chosen yet because "the new administration is familiarizing itself with the public restroom pilot and assessing options for the next location in the context of its vision for Philadelphia."

I'd urge the administration not to hold it any longer. It's not good for you, or for people who need to use the bathroom but don't have \$5 to spend on coffee.

The test

Now it's time to get down to business and tell you whether the existing Philly Phlush units are clean latrines or if they've gone down the drain and become city dumps over the last year.

At the Philly Phlush in Fotterral Square Park everything was in working order, including the door, which had a sign on it that read, "DOOR IS BROKEN PLEASE SHUT DOOR UPON EXITING" (it shut on its own for me).

Despite oppressive temperatures outside, it was surprisingly cool in the unit and the toilet's flush power was solid. The bathroom was very clean, except for an errant roll of toilet paper on the ground, and there was one pad, one tampon, and one naloxone product stocked (in what appeared to be an attempt to cut down on people taking mass quantities at once).

At the Center City Phlush, the floor around the toilet was wet and the flush power had greatly deteriorated since my last visit in January. But everything was stocked and working and the unit has a fancy new "ABCs of Viral Hepatitis" poster on the outside, which extols the virtues of washing your hands and using dental dams.

As I used the sink on the exterior of the unit, someone walking by yelled to me, without stopping: "How was it?"

"It was alright," I said, a bit stunned.

"Oh, that's cool!" they replied.

The future

A team of three public restroom specialists visit the Phlushes regularly and, along with cleaning and unclogging the toilets daily (*yes, daily*), they also speak with people who use the bathrooms. In the course of those conversations, they've referred 243 people to resources for shelter, treatment, food, and clothing, and they've handed out 120 doses of naloxone, according to the spokesperson. These city workers aren't just restroom specialists, they're people specialists too, making a valuable difference in the lives of those they encounter.

No crimes have been reported and a professional plumber has only been needed once to handle a clog. The biggest problem with the Phlushes is keeping the changing tables intact. Both units have had their tables damaged, removed, and replaced (the one in Center City is gone again).

A third, rogue Portland Loo unit that appeared last year in Vernon Park in Germantown and is not part of the city's Philly Phlush pilot project is now fully-operational, as of February. The loo, which was proposed by Councilmember Cindy Bass' office and

purchased with Rebuild funds, is maintained by a Parks and Recreation Department staff maintenance attendant.

Despite a sign on the door that said the loo is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, the bathroom was locked when I stopped by at 1 p.m. Wednesday. The spokesperson said the door may have been accidentally locked by someone as they left, a problem that's happened at the other units and one for which the city is seeking a solution.

To the existing Philly Phlush bathrooms, I say this: On a scale of one to 10, urinate — clean and dependable, with just a few hiccups.

I am worried about the state of the project as a whole, though. The city's website on it hasn't been updated in a year, the third unit is significantly delayed, a fourth site hasn't been chosen, and there may not be enough money to fund all of the proposed units.

Plus, I haven't heard any elected officials talk about the Philly Phlush and I sure haven't heard of them using it. This project — the future of which seems as precarious as single-play toilet paper — needs more love and attention if it's to survive (just think of what happens to your own bathroom when you neglect it).

Perhaps Mayor Cherelle L. Parker could include the Phlushes in her "clean and green" initiatives. Giving people a safe place to go when nature calls will surely reduce illegal dumping and keep our city cleaner, greener, and on track to host people from around the world in 2026.

Philly Phlush fast facts

Doses of naloxone restocked in a year

1. Center City: 2,310
2. Fotherall Square: 744

Pads and tampons restocked in a year

1. Center City: 2,751 pads and 2,484 tampons
2. Fotherall Square: 632 pads and 647 tampons

Toilet paper restocked in a year

1. Center City: 2,168 rolls
2. Fotherall Square: 546 rolls