

## **Portland Loo in Lancaster city receiving positive reviews in first months**

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“I went and I used it, and it was an amazing experience, I'm not going to lie,” said Kay Ferguson.

The “it” is downtown Lancaster’s only 24/7 permanent public toilet - put in place in mid-March in response to public outcry over better services for the homeless and general public and winning positive reviews from users and its keepers alike.

Ferguson’s assessment is informed from a before and after perspective that spanned her time working on her mural at the corner of Prince and Orange Streets – tentatively titled “The Tree of Live Music.” That work started before the metal structure – a Portland Loo – was put in place at the Prince and Orange Street intersection, sharing space with the likes of Nooks bookstore, Kim’s Custom Cleaners dry cleaning and the restaurants Passerine and Sprout Rice and Noodles.

In those before days, she’d have to pack up all her gear to walk several blocks to find a public restroom. Then came the Loo. Not knowing what the structure was at first, Ferguson continued seeking out the city’s bathrooms until eventually trying out the structure for herself.

The 6-by-10½-square-foot unit cost the city \$172,710 and \$15,000 for installation. The Loo is also fully Americans with Disabilities Act compliant, with low sinks and grab bars for those that use a wheelchair or walker.

### **What’s it like?**

So, what exactly do you get with a six-figure Loo and what is it like?

The first noticeable aspect of the Loo from the inside is the view to the outside, through a series of ground-level grates. These serve two purposes: to naturally air out the smell of an otherwise enclosed bathroom and provide just enough of a view inside to determine if the Loo is being used for its stated purpose.

While the outside of the Loo suggests a sleek experience within, the bathroom’s biggest strength is arguably that inside, it’s just a regular bathroom. There’s a spot to hang a bag or coat, as well as a Koala Kare changing station. On the outside, there’s a handwashing station with an air dryer.

There are no fans inside, but the aforementioned top and bottom grates make it so that there’s enough airflow that you won’t potentially be trapped inside with whatever you – or, worst case scenario, someone else – had for lunch.

Since it is attached to the city sewer system, it works just like any bathroom. According to the Portland Loo company, the system can sustain up to 300 flushes a day, which is comparable to an airport bathroom.

How does one review a bathroom? Marking a toilet with a letter grade feels wrong, so on a purely pass-fail basis, this writer gives a proper thumbs up to both the existence and application of the Lancaster city Portland Loo.

The Loo's all-purpose nature is even reflected in its anti-drug features – at night, the bathroom is illuminated by a blue light to prevent users from easily finding a vein. Nevertheless, there is also a needle disposal system built into the Loo just in case.

The design as it stands in Lancaster city has been years in the making.

Evan Madden, sales manager at Portland Loo Inc., said that the original idea for the Loo came as the city of Portland was attempting to learn from the mistakes of nearby neighbor Seattle.

In 2004, the city of Seattle purchased five automated public bathrooms for a total of \$5 million, which were later sold in a sale in 2006 for \$12,000, claiming that they had become havens for drugs and prostitution. Initially designed and sold by Portland, Portland's Madden Fabrications has sold the Loos directly to cities since 2014, though Madden still works with the city on design improvements to this day.

"It's certainly intended for the homeless and to help them kind of take the relief off," said Madden, "but it's for everyone that needs to use the restroom and everyone that just shouldn't have to encounter human waste on the streets, as well."

## **Positive reviews**

On a hot afternoon, this writer encountered at least two individuals experiencing homelessness use the Loo. Though they did not give their names due to safety concerns, they said that it has been a big help in their day-to-day lives knowing that there is a restroom that will be open to them to use.

Regardless of who is using Loo, it may take some adjustment getting used to doing one's business in the natural ambiance of that particular intersection – Ford F-150s slamming on the gas to get through a yellow light, a group of siblings walking down the street and yelling about Central Market bagel flavors, etc. - but City of Lancaster Communications Manager Amber Strazzo Righter said a foot traffic study and accessibility led to the location.

"This spot made sense because the (Prince Street) garage is right there, and we can have it be accessible to the public without it blocking any public right of way," Righter said. "There's not really many places that you can put it on the sidewalk."

Given its location, steps have been taken to ensure the Loo remains usable even as it gets busy.

Downtown Investment District Clean Team member Jay Fells is one of a handful of workers who carries the keys to the Loo supply closet. Three times a day Fells or another member of the city staff check the bathroom and restock any essentials through a built-in storage unit attached to the back of the Loo.

The D.I.D. team is officially on patrol throughout the city from 7 a.m. to 11:30 p.m., so whatever happens overnight is left to be addressed in the morning. That being said, the worst I encountered on five trips to the Loo was merely an absence of toilet paper on an early weekday morning. Fells and Righter say that, both anecdotally and officially, they haven't yet heard of any problems inside or outside the Loo.

"People walk by as I'm working inside and I'll hear them go, 'Wow, they put an actual bathroom here? It's even got soap! The dryer works!'" Fells said. "So yeah, people are gassed about it."