

Cleveland Planning Commission Gives Green Light for City's First Four Outdoor, Public Bathrooms

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By Mark Oprea
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Long-gestating efforts to install public bathrooms downtown cleared another hurdle recently as the Cleveland City Planning Commission [approved both construction and conceptual designs](#) for Cleveland's first four public restrooms to be installed anywhere in the city outside of the Metroparks. Four permanent, metal-clad bathrooms that will soon go up in Canal Basin Park, Perk Plaza and on the corner of East 17th and Payne.

Billed as the "national standard" of public johns, the four Portland Loos coming to Cleveland are a response to both the growing need for public toilets—evidenced by Public Square and Chester Avenue sidewalks—and a response to the demands of a burgeoning Downtown as place-to-be.

"This has been a long time coming," CPC director Joyce Huang said at Friday's meeting. "We're very, very grateful because this is such an important service that the city ought to provide to our residents."

A byproduct of the housing crisis after the 2008 Great Recession, the idea of the Portland Loo came out of—yes—Portland engineers [collaborating with their city on an ideal design](#) for a sidewalk lavatory. Hence the design's tagline: "A Unique Design to a Universal Solution."

Out came a stainless-steel, graffiti-proof oval-shaped kiosk, with two handwashing stations, a built-in pressure washer and an open top and bottom to, the city said, "allow sight and sounds to carry outside the restrooms while maintaining privacy."

Hundreds have been set up in at least 18 U.S. cities in recent years, with more on the way in Fort Wayne, Indiana; Reno, Nevada; Asheville, N.C. and Anchorage, Alaska. All so far without much controversy. Reporting on a year of its own Portland Loo in Philadelphia, the Philly Phlush, a writer for the Inquirer was happy to note "no fragrant violations."

What will cost the city a total of about \$600,000 started, in part, in the activism of Mark Lammon. The director of Downtown's Campus District, Lammon had overseen a years-long public restroom study after pandemic-era closures spelled chaos for the district's homeless population. A district that became, Lammon said, "the public restroom of our city."

A grant funded 10 porta-potties. The study, which wrapped up in 2022, confirmed that drastic worries—of people shooting up, of illicit sex, of vandalism—were not warranted.

"We didn't encounter any safety issues. No maintenance issues," Lammon recounted at Friday's meeting. "We didn't even lock them up at night."

City Planner Dan Shinkle told the CPC that the loos installed will “cost less than a port-a-potty to maintain.” Because they’ll be set up near pre-existing water and sewer lines, the johns won’t cost extra to install.

And the Loo’s smart engineering will be a boon to Cleveland Police on usual patrols.

“It’s supposed to be an in-and-out use: we don’t want people lingering,” Shinkle said. The venting “helps with, um, smells and things of that nature.”

The city suggested bathrooms should be going up in Canal Basin and on the corner of East 17th and Payne, in front of the Virgil E. Brown Building, in the next few weeks. Once approved at the city and county level, the one at Perk Plaza will be installed, as well.