



Public Toilets in Ottawa

Status Report for World Toilet Day, November 19, 2020

GottaGo! Campaign

The COVID 19 pandemic disrupted access to all public toilets downtown

Our count is that there are public toilets (PTs) in 14 public buildings and another seven in commercial or other buildings (identified on the Ottawa Tourist Map). Since almost all these buildings were closed in March to curtail the spread of the virus, the toilets were also closed.

Ottawa City Council began to respond after a few weeks by installing a few *porta potties* in areas of high pedestrian and bicycle traffic, and reportedly, having them cleaned, up to five times a day.

One quarter of LRT stations have toilets

4 toilets for 17 LRT stations but more to come

The two Ottawa LRT lines have public toilets in only 4 stations - Tunney's Pasture, Bayview, Hurdman and Blair - out of 17, i.e. in 24% of the stations. OC Transpo announced its plans for the next stage of the LRT this year and we were pleased to see that the plan includes ten PTs in the next 24 stations. While we would like to see a toilet at every station, we believe that this is almost certainly the highest ratio in any urban train transit system in North America, and, better than similar (though older) transport systems in London, Paris and other major European cities.

LRT system maps need to indicate which stations have toilets.

Zero toilets elsewhere on the OC Transpo System

There are, however, still no toilets at any of the 19 OC Transpo Park and Ride locations nor at any bus stations.

Our hidden downtown toilets

In Public Buildings

Ottawa continues to have no street-level signs about where to find PTs or when they are open. Ottawa has one million residents and, in a normal year, 10 million visitors every year - how do they easily find a public toilet?

Coffee shops

In 2019 we reported that Starbucks, Bridgehead, Tim Hortons and others were increasingly making their toilets more available to non-customers. With COVID-19 restrictions on their businesses, they have significantly cut back this commitment in 2020. "Toilet code", an initiative from kindred spirits in Toronto, provides a spreadsheet that lists the code for toilet entry at many coffee shops, and has made some overtures about replicating this in Ottawa.

Signage

We love the unambiguous toilet sign at the new Ottawa Art Gallery, which uses an outline of a toilet seat and water closet, and is also in braille.

Malls and other public buildings use the same or similar characters for both elevators and toilet facilities. It would be less confusing to use the 'holding it in' graphic below.

Inequitable and Gendered Access

Building non-gendered, accessible toilet facilities equipped with individual waste receptacles creates a safe and secure site for all persons. The gendering of public toilets poses a safety risk for gender diverse persons.

The majority of Ottawa's public toilets are gendered and provide inequitable design and access along the lines of the assumed anatomy of its users. Notably, as women-coded public toilets include individual stalls, these facilities provide fewer toilets. In many cases, women-coded public toilets have fewer waste receptacles than the facilities coded for men. Regardless of gender, equitable toilet access is a human right. If women-coded public toilets include individual stalls, then larger facilities for these sites are required. However, many buildings continue to provide the same square footage for gendered toilet facilities. We are pleased to note that the renovations to the National Arts Centre completed in 2019 have provided larger toilet facilities for women-identifying persons.

Gaps in toilet coverage

Sidewalk toilets

There are zero permanent public toilets on a sidewalk anywhere in Ottawa. Meanwhile, Montreal is building 12 public toilets along high pedestrian traffic sidewalks. We believe three have been built to date.

One significant advance was the completion of a new stand-alone PT on the west side of the Parliament Hill complex. Unfortunately, it provides more facilities for men, than for women. This is despite widespread research and the new building code that recognizes differing time needs and usage of toilets between genders. These reports have encouraged twice as many stalls in women-gendered public toilets. (*Parliament Hill's new public bathroom fails Canada's women, Lezlie Lowe, Globe and Mail 22 November 2019*)

At any one time, about half of the approximately 200 toilets listed by the City are closed, except during programming hours. (*Flushing Inequality* Research by Carleton University students in 2016).

People with disabilities and health issues, and the un-housed

Toilet facilities in some older buildings make inadequate provision for wheelchairs, or require users to enter by a back door. Some toilets are not wide enough to roll wheelchairs into and close the door, some toilet facilities don't have a press button to open the door, and do not safely accommodate those who identify as transgendered, who risk harassment using their preferred toilet. People living on the street must urinate and defecate outdoors, which means sometimes in doorways and alleys when public toilets are closed.

Apps and Online Resources

Local and international organizations have launched publicly accessible apps and online resources providing information and maps for users to find toilets. Notable sources include OttPee.ca, Flush, Nette Toilette, etc. However, access to this information requires an iOS or smart phone. It's important for this information to be available for all persons, regardless of access to or ability to use the apps and resources.

Ottawa's history of PTs

The *Lost Ottawa* historians informed us that Ottawa has a history of paying minimal attention to PTs. In 1966, the City had to delay its plan to demolish Union Station when it realised that the only downtown PT was in that station and would be required for the crowds coming to the 1967 Centennial celebrations.

GottaGo! Campaign activities

- Organizing a letter campaign co-signed by 29 organizations, coalitions, associations and individuals. This letter was then sent to the Mayor and Councillors asking them to include public toilets as essential public health infrastructure in the 2021 budget.
- Engaging at the City level: We are always reaching out to city decision makers to take a much-needed leadership role in providing safe, clean and accessible public toilets in Ottawa like other cities - Edmonton, Vancouver, Montreal, Nelson, Smithers and Victoria - in Canada have done.
- Increasing our on-line presence through a new website with social media platforms to engage the public and to reach out to decision makers. We have two people taking the lead in posting news on the website, twitter and Facebook. This has greatly enhanced our visibility and reach.
- Conducting research and documentation on the impact of the lack of PTs in Ottawa. We documented how poor and marginalized people were coping with the pandemic-caused reduction in toilet and shower facilities by preparing a report on the services offered, as well as the clients being served at the McNabb Respite Centre. This report was distributed to City Councillors and others, and garnered coverage in the mainstream media.
- Increasing public dialogue and engaging local and mainstream media about the need for public toilets. For example, the media attention GottaGo! has received during the pandemic has intensified public awareness and increased the urgency of public toilets to be recognized as a serious public health issue.
- Implementing Ottawa Community Foundation modest grant in July as part of its support the pandemic emergency. We gratefully acknowledge OCF for the support.
- Recruiting volunteers to join our team. We are always looking for more people.
- Working to maintain an up-to-date list of porta-potty locations.
- Ongoing campaigns, research and public outreach. For more information, visit our [website](#).

Overall assessment and grade: C+

The planned inclusion of toilets in many stations of the next phase of construction of the LRT line is the one exceptional bright spot for Ottawa residents and those who visit our city. The lock-downs and closures have disrupted access to all other public toilets, and the City of Ottawa did well to provide *porta potties* at a minimal service level.

There remains an outstanding need for more direction-providing signs, more sidewalk public toilets, more fully-accessible public toilets, more single and/or non-gendered public toilets, and more porta-potties at sports fields, splash pads and park-and-ride locations.

We understand that City decision makers face a deluge of needs and a tight budget, but we will continue to make the case for PTs to be recognized as essential public health infrastructure.



Why a grade of C+: (the plus for the Porta Potties, the services provided by the McNabb Respite Centre, and the inclusion of toilet facilities at many stations of the LRT Phase 2 plan; the rest for a very mediocre performance by the city)

The GottaGo! Campaign is an advocacy group founded in 2013 by residents of Ottawa campaigning for a network of safe, clean, and accessible toilets with signage in the City of Ottawa.

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