

# Public Toilets in Ottawa

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Status Report for  
World Toilet Day 2021

NOVEMBER 19, 2021



GottaGo! Campaign





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## Status Report for World Toilet Day

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### Key Developments

The COVID 19 Pandemic continues to disrupt access to all Public Toilets downtown

Our count is that there are the following 24 public toilets (PTs) in downtown Ottawa:

- 2 we classify as “stand-alone” - on Major Hill’s park and to the West of the Centre Block of Parliament Hill;
- 15 in public buildings (e.g. the National Arts Centre, Byward Market, City Hall and the National Gallery); and another
- 7 in commercial or other buildings (identified in the Ottawa Tourist Map).

As almost all of these public buildings have slowly allowed limited access over the past few months, these toilets have similarly provided limited access.

A major development has been the decision by the City to build two new stand-alone PTs on Sparks St. and at Byward Market (part of the Federally funded COVID Infrastructure Program). City planning officials have invited GottaGo! to participate in the discussions about design and type of toilets, with the current thinking favouring self-cleaning.

A further positive development has been that the Province has proposed regulations that delivery drivers have the right to use the toilets of businesses to whom they deliver.

The Porta Potties introduced by the city during the early days of the pandemic have largely disappeared.

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## One quarter of LRT stations have Toilets

4 toilets for 17 LRT stations and 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 its stations. OC Transpo announced its plans for the next stages in 2020 and we were pleased to see that the plan includes ten PTs (public toilets) in the next 24 stations, thus, maintaining this ratio.

While we would like to see a toilet at every station, we believe that this is almost certainly one of the highest ratios 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 in the entrance of LRT stations need to indicate which stations have toilets.

***There are zero toilets elsewhere in the OCTranspo System.***

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

## Public Toilets Outside of the Downtown Core

The City's open data set lists a total of 177 locations with a PT. Their existence does not mean they are open and available. We know from previous research that many have limited hours during the day and many close in the winter. (*Flushing Inequality* Research by Carleton University students, 2016).

## Hidden Downtown Toilets

### *In Public Buildings*

Ottawa continues to have no street-level signs about where to find PTs or when they are open. Similarly there are no signs on the exterior of public buildings which have a toilet that could be used by the public.

***Ottawa has one million residents and 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 somewhat more available to non-

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customers. With COVID 19 restrictions on their businesses, this was significantly cut back in 2020, and we understand that these restrictions basically remain in place.

## **Gaps in Toilet Coverage**

### *Sidewalk toilets*

There are zero permanent public toilets on a sidewalk, although, as discussed above, we hope there will soon be two.

Meanwhile, Montreal is building 12 public toilets along high pedestrian traffic sidewalks, and about half of these are now in operation.

Two years ago we welcomed 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 new building codes that recognize the different amounts of time required by each gender and encourage twice as many stalls for women. (*Parliament Hill's new public bathroom fails Canada's women, Lezlie Lowe, Globe and Mail 22 November 2019*).

There are over 100 splash pads, dozens of parks and playing fields, and many kilometers of bicycle / walk paths in Ottawa, many with no toilet facilities.

## **People With Disabilities, Those With 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 in and close the door, some of them have no press button to open the door. People with medical issues (Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis or other incontinence issues) need frequent toilet visits and not having a readily accessible toilet is detrimental to their health and well-being. People living on the street must urinate and defecate outdoors which is a serious health risk. This means human waste is left in doorways, alleys and even bus shelters when public toilets are closed.

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## Women and Girls

Women, and female identifying populations require the space of a stall to include waste receptacles for menstrual products and to empty their bladders. Yet many buildings continue to provide the same area toilet facilities for both men and women gendered facilities, although it is now argued women-gendered toilets require double the area. We are pleased to note that the renovations to the National Arts Centre completed in 2019 have provided more toilet facilities for women.

## Gender Inclusive Design

There remain few gender neutral public toilets in Ottawa. Building non-gendered, accessible toilet facilities equipped with individual waste receptacles create a safe and secure site for all persons. The gendering of public toilets poses a safety risk for gender diverse people who need access to hygienic sanitation. According to the [2018 analysis](#) by the Public Service Affiliation of Canada, almost 70% of transgender people have experienced a “negative experience” in gendered bathrooms. In Ontario alone, 57% have chosen at least once to avoid bathrooms altogether out of fear of harassment.

## Signage

Malls and other public buildings use the same or similar gendered characters for both elevators and toilet facilities. It would be less confusing to use the ‘holding it in’ graphic, or simply one with a toilet.

For example, 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.

## Apps And Web Pages

We welcome the fact that web pages and apps such as Ottpee.ca, Flush, GoHere, Quench and ToiletFinder are available for those with smart phones and who know these tools exist. The last times we

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checked there were still lots of gaps for Ottawa.

### **Ottawa's history of Public Toilets**

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 realized the only downtown PT was in that station and would be required for the crowds coming to the 1967 Centennial celebrations

### **GottaGo! Campaign's Activities**

Our major activity this year was a competition for artists in Ottawa and Gatineau to submit a poster, poem, song, video etc. on the theme of “ *Our Ottawa Needs Public Toilets*”. With support from the Ottawa Community Fund we offered seven cash prizes of \$500. We were very pleased to receive 36 submissions from which the GottaGo! group selected the winners. We managed to save some funds on other budget items and were also able to provide another six submissions a prize of \$100.

***This project finished only recently and we are now working with these artists to see how we can make best use of their works.***

More routinely, we have continued to increase our social media presence to reach decision makers and the wider public as well as raise the profile of the PT issue.

Our web site is stronger and we invest more time in Facebook, Instagram and twitter activity posting out relevant news items and resulting in more traffic.

Our recurrent website hosting costs continue to be reduced thanks to one member offering to host the web site on her home server.

### **Overall Assessment And Grade**

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The toilet status of the LRT and proposal to build two stand-alone PTs in downtown Ottawa are exceptionally bright spots for the city.

The lock-downs and closures have disrupted all other toilets and Council did well to provide *porta potties* at a minimal service level.

There remain many outstanding needs for more direction-providing signs, more sidewalk public toilets, and more porta-potties at sports fields, splash pads and park-and-ride locations.

**The New Official Plan, approved recently by city council, makes no mention of PTs. Does this mean that the public will need to ‘hold it’ for the next 25 years?**

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

***What grade does the GottaGo! Campaign give the City of Ottawa for its network of public toilets?***

**C+** (the plus for the new toilets, and the LRT; the remainder for the continuing mediocre performance by the city).