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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The provision of restrooms in the public realm remains a longstanding challenge, and the number of municipalities grappling with ways to address this basic need, particularly in and around downtowns and activated areas, is widespread. City alleys and other public and private spaces, chosen for convenience or out of necessity, are increasingly utilized as latrines by restaurant and bar patrons, construction and office workers, downtown visitors, people without a home and others.

The City of Denver has been considering effective ways to manage its rapidly expanding population and accompanied needs, including human waste in public areas and E.coli in the waterways. To confront this serious issue, the City used a comprehensive approach to seek input from working groups inside and outside of the city government, conducted technical analysis based on extensive data collection, and created thematic maps to identify user groups and areas in the city that offered opportunities for improvement. Public listening sessions were held and best practices from several U.S. and Canadian jurisdictions were researched.

In recognition of the need, the City established a public restroom pilot project, and program goals to create a safe restroom environment, with facilities that had minimal impact on the community and met the requirements of a variety of users, resulting in key information about usage to inform the process. In March 2016, the pilot program launched with the first mobile restroom located on Clarkson St. in Denver’s Capitol Hill neighborhood. After 50-plus days in operation, strong evidence supported a continuation of the test with user groups consisting of commuters, pedestrians, transients, visitors and others.

Constituents continued to report ongoing issues with human waste in Capitol Hill and downtown Denver. This spurred a broader effort in which existing restrooms at centrally located public buildings were opened and promoted as available for use by the general public, and an additional mobile restroom unit was added for rotation at various test sites in downtown Denver. The mobile unit in Capitol Hill was also moved to numerous test locations along East Colfax Avenue.

The City hired Progressive Urban Management Associates (P.U.M.A.), a national downtown and community development consulting firm located in Denver, to conduct outreach to merchants and constituents in the two study areas. Aside from the predominate misperception that the mobile restrooms are intended for people without homes, a vast majority of the more than 100 merchants interviewed supported the public restrooms, as daily requests for the use of their facilities, even by patrons, are increasingly denied, mostly due to occurrences involving drug use and drug overdoses. Other stakeholders expressed concerns that the restrooms encouraged vagrants to “hang out,” while some felt that City resources allocated for restrooms should be used to provide more meaningful assistance to those in need.

Best practices research conducted by P.U.M.A. illustrated how other U.S. cities address the ongoing challenge of providing public facilities. Formal and informal partnerships between city departments, business improvement districts (BIDs) and others were commonly employed. P.U.M.A. was also retained to assess the economic impact public restrooms have on municipalities and local merchants.

Based on need, economic dynamics and social factors, combined with input from local merchants and constituents, it is recommended that the City of Denver proceed to install three fixed restroom facilities: one in Capitol Hill and two in downtown Denver. Additional facilities should be included at future Bus Rapid Transit stops along East Colfax Avenue and incorporated into the anticipated 16th Street Mall upgrade. Retaining an onsite attendant for each restroom is critical for the program’s continued success. Effective directional signage will be key for promoting the restrooms, as will ongoing communication with citizens, various business and neighborhood advocates, nonprofits, service providers and other groups or entities that have been consulted as the program has evolved.
**INTRODUCTION**

The City of Denver has been proactively exploring solutions and effective ways to manage Denver’s rapidly expanding population and accompanied needs. More specifically, and as it relates to this report, the City has sought to address concerns regarding human waste in public areas and E. coli in the waterways.

This report, authored by the City’s consultant Progressive Urban Management Associates (P.U.M.A.), will provide background and logistical information related to the City’s public restrooms pilot program. It will also highlight the consultant’s best practice research from other cities, feedback from businesses and other stakeholders, and offer a series of recommendations.

**BACKGROUND AND LOGISTICS**

Several years ago, the City applied a comprehensive approach in determining how to better identify and address human waste in public places. Technical analysis was conducted based on extensive data collection, and thematic maps were created to identify user groups. Input was solicited from working groups, both inside and outside of city government, there were public listening sessions and consideration was given to best practices from cities in the U.S. and Canada. Early findings informed the process to establish the public restroom pilot program and the City set forth a series of specific goals:

- Create a restroom environment that feels safe
- Restrooms should meet the needs of a variety of users
- Facilities should have minimal impact on the community
- Learn specific information about restroom usage to inform the process

It was envisioned that the public restrooms would not only be safe but also clean, closely monitored and available for bar patrons, bicyclists, commuters, disabled people, dog walkers, drivers, joggers, pedestrians, people without homes, residents, tourists, transients, and workers; virtually available for everyone to use.

The City of Denver considered modeling San Francisco’s Tenderloin District’s “Pit Stop” program whereby a mobile port-a-pottie is deployed to different sites around the city each day.

Denver also explored utilizing the Portland Loo, a popular restroom model, designed with top and bottom louveres, as a security feature. The unit popularized and heavily used around Portland is also utilized in numerous U.S. cities.

The City of Denver stated that, “As Denver grows and changes, we have to rethink our public spaces and the amenities we provide to those who visit and enjoy all that downtown and the surrounding areas have to offer.”
PILOT STUDY INITIATIVE

To get Denver’s pilot project underway, a mobile restroom unit was leased from the local vendor, Liberty Waste Management. In March 2016, the facility was placed in Capitol Hill for a 12-hour daily operation, with an attendant on site, to determine feasibility and initial demand for advancing the public restroom pilot. The unit was positioned on the west side of Clarkson St., just south of 16th Ave., in relative proximity to Colfax Ave. and related bus routes, bike lanes, the District 6 Police Station and security cameras, businesses and various entertainment venues.

Denver’s initiative involved input from the Mayor’s Office, City Council and numerous city departments (Denver Public Works, Denver Department of Public Health and Environment, Denver Police Department, Denver Parks and Recreation, Denver’s Road Home), neighborhood organizations, businesses and business advocates, various social service agencies and advocacy groups, churches, etc. To establish the initiative, the City designed a strategy for outreach, and developed a public relations campaign which included coordination with the aforementioned entities.

During the first month of operation, data was collected by the on-site attendant which substantiated use, along with varied user groups for the mobile restroom unit. Preliminary findings from 106 surveys were:

- 74% of the users were male
- 87.7% of the users arrived on foot
- Nearly half of the users were visiting the area for entertainment purposes
- A vast majority of users found the restrooms in good condition

More than 50 days after the pilot was initiated, strong evidence supported the continuation of the mobile restroom pilot. The user base consisted of commuters, pedestrians, transients, visitors and others. Consistent demand for the restroom was often independent of special activities and events, even with its close proximity to a large venue.
Usage and response to the mobile restroom unit on Clarkson St. was compelling, and City officials continued to receive feedback from constituents regarding ongoing issues with human waste in Capital Hill and downtown Denver. This feedback coupled with Denver’s destination success, resulting rapid growth and the desire to create an inclusive environment prompted an effort to broaden the provision of public facilities. The City’s stated mission was:

“Create and nurture a sustainable city through providing a legible, accessible and safe network of publicly-accessible facilities, improving the health and livability of all.”

To expand the offering of facilities, the city identified existing public restrooms, advertised hours of operation and promoted use at the Wellington E. Webb Municipal Office Building and other centrally located Denver City and County buildings, in addition to opening the facilities located at the McNichols Civic Center Building and in Skyline Park, with on-site monitoring provided by the City’s parks and recreation staff.

The City began evaluating additional sites to expand the mobile restroom pilot in Capitol Hill. Findings from the thematic mapping and constituent input helped to determine multiple sites to test the mobile restroom. The illustration below shows both usage numbers and the streets adjacent to Colfax, where the mobile unit was located.

Key factors in selecting sites for the mobile restroom were proximity to major pedestrian corridors, points of interest, bus stops, bicycle routes, dining/bar areas, and entertainment. Other fundamental requirements for the unit itself were heating and air conditioning, a baby changing table, and sharps containers for injection needles. Another important element was establishing requirements for the on-site attendant. Additional logistics included obtaining right-of-way permits to bag three metered parking spaces to accommodate the mobile restroom unit, trailer tow and generator.
Various promotional elements were coordinated for the pilot program, including a customized “wrap” designed and applied to the mobile restroom units. Large sandwich board type signs were placed in key locations, predominately at sidewalk corners, to promote restrooms to the general public. A webpage entitled “Denver Public Restrooms,” was created, with an explanation about the City’s restroom initiative, including an interactive map highlighting mobile restroom locations along with hours of operation. Additionally, Denver’s 311 Service line was set up to receive feedback about the mobile restroom program.

Several months after the pilot got underway, the City hired a full-time public restrooms program administrator to oversee all aspects of this important initiative. Furthermore, the response and demand for the public restroom in Capitol Hill, prompted the City to locate an additional unit in downtown Denver.

The chart below highlights usage and the various downtown sites that briefly hosted the unit. While usage at a number of the sites appear significant, the restroom at 14th and Broadway and 14th and Colfax were eliminated when facilities at the Webb Building and the McNichols Civic Center Building were promoted for public use. In other locations, new property development or serious conflicts with property owners, residents and businesses prompted removal. The City then settled on three downtown Denver locations adjacent to the 16th St. Mall, and rotated the mobile restroom approximately 30-60 days at a time, between Champa St., Tremont St., and Welton St.
ADDITIONAL OUTREACH AND RESEARCH

To conduct outreach to the local business community and other cities, Denver hired Progressive Urban Management and Associates (P.U.M.A.) to serve as the consultant for the public restrooms project. P.U.M.A., a national leader in downtown and community development, advises clients on a wide range of management, marketing, financial, urban design and implementation tactics to help communities and organizations create and sustain dynamic places.

P.U.M.A.’s Best Practice Research

After reviewing Denver’s process, progress and information related to the pilot program, P.U.M.A. conducted research to gain further insight and determine best practices in providing and managing restrooms in the public realm. The consultant interviewed more than a dozen program managers from municipalities in California, Colorado, Hawaii, Minneapolis, Ohio, Portland and Texas. Numerous restroom programs are highlighted in this report.

LOCALITIES WITH PUBLIC RESTROOMS

Boulder, CO

The public restrooms located on the Pearl St. Mall in downtown Boulder, CO were installed in the early 1990’s and are open 7 days a week, from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., with an extra hour added to closing time in the summer. The facility includes 4 stalls for women (3 standard and one ADA), and 2 urinals for men (one standard and one ADA). They are maintained by the City’s Facilities and Asset Management division with the Parks and Recreation Department providing the regular cleaning, at an approximate cost of $28,000 per year. Services from the Downtown Boulder Business Improvement District staff are occasionally utilized. An independent contractor addresses bio-hazards or extreme messes on an as needed basis.

Staff at the Downtown Boulder Visitor Information Center, located adjacent to the restrooms offer a set of “eyes and ears” to monitor the restrooms. The Boulder Police Department provides security for the facility.

Boulder’s Zone Supervisor explained that the public restrooms do not meet the current demand especially during the weekends and when special events are held. To address the persistent need for restrooms, the City of Boulder is installing a modular, prefabricated restroom west of the public library, not too far from downtown. As one of few areas in the flood conveyance zone, it is intended to serve users of the Boulder Creek Bike path, including the transient population.

Downtown Portland, OR

Beginning in 2009, the City of Portland introduced their popular public restroom model, the Portland Loo. The stainless-steel units are strategically located in high traffic areas and visible to the general public. The restroom
structure features louvers at both the top and the bottom of the unit, along with other design elements that follow Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) standards to discourage illicit activity. Each unit costs approximately $100,000 to fabricate. They are managed and maintained by the Portland Parks Department, and also utilized in numerous U.S. cities.

Santa Monica, CA

The Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, CA, is a very busy shopping and tourist destination that provides public restrooms near the entrance/exit of each of their six major parking structures. These restrooms, located adjacent to the Promenade, are easily accessed and used frequently. They are maintained by the area’s Business Improvement District (BID) ambassador team, that also serves a concierge role at one of the garages’ larger restroom facilities. The restrooms are closely monitored to ensure that they remain clean and safe. The BID reported 501,848 restroom users in 2016, and 480,578 users in 2017.

Santa Cruz, CA

In Santa Cruz, CA public restrooms are primarily located in the parking structures and at the bus station. The restrooms, which have a slightly open design to see in more easily, are paid for by the parking district. Santa Cruz also had a program where businesses were paid a stipend by the city to make their bathrooms available to the public. As of spring 2017, the local bookstore which had a longstanding practice of availing their restrooms, was one of two businesses participating in the program, but in 2018, the bookshop is the only participant in the program. Other businesses had pulled out of the program due to the high volume of non-customer traffic and vandalism, which caused businesses to incur costs which far exceeded the stipend.

Santa Cruz also provides port-a-potties. Three port-a-potties are in downtown, on or adjacent to surface lots, one block off the main street. Only two of the three potties remain open at night, after the garage restrooms close. The downtown manager explained that maintenance of the potties is very costly, and yet there’s been a big push to address the need for 24-hour bathrooms. The area also has “Uncle Poop,” a guy who has been under contract with the property BID to do daily scooping of poop. His initial contract amount was $10,000 for a certain amount of calls. The number of calls were exceeded right away, so the Department of Economic Development contributed more money; and he gets closer to $20,000 a year. He remains on call and does a good job, picking up poop from store entrances, etc. The Santa Cruz manager stated, “I can’t imagine what things would look like without his service,” but in April 2018, shared an update that Uncle Poop will not be renewing his contract. No replacement has been found. Also, more recently, the amount of public defecation near the river where people were sleeping has decreased slightly, mostly attributed to progress in providing legal places for people to sleep.
Lower Polk District, San Francisco, CA

In the downtown San Francisco area, the Lower Polk District originally deployed “Comfort Units.” The intentional and targeted endeavor was piloted to provide facilities for people living on the streets. Though deliberate in offering a compassionate approach to dignify a human requirement, the initiative was also spurred by concerns about risks that the area’s maintenance teams continually encountered as they removed human biohazards in the form of feces, urine, needles and blood. The effort got underway with a needs assessment, whereby service providers, residents, merchants and other relevant partners were contacted for input to determine how to best tackle the challenges associated with human waste in public places along with other human needs. In response to feedback, a mobile unit was used beginning in early 2017 to make rounds to the alleys and other areas during evening hours when demand was greatest. It had the dual purpose of offering a dignified way for people to relieve themselves but also provided an important outreach function. Users expressed deep gratitude. Feedback about the initiative was very positive as business owners could open their stores and begin operations without needing to scoop human poop from their door stoop, due to a decrease in incidences of this type. The initial pilot morphed into a slightly different service that is still operated independent of the Lower Polk District, but its success was influential in the March 2018 launch of the popular “Pit Stop” facility. It is the 18th facility located in the San Francisco area, and a two-year $400,000 City grant supports its operation, which includes Lower Polk District staff monitoring the restrooms and distributing information about social services available for its predominate user groups. As stated by the Public Works Director Mohammed Nuru, “The key to the Pit Stop’s success is that all the facilities are staffed by paid attendants who help ensure that the toilets are well maintained and used for the intended purpose.”

San Antonio, TX

After a downtown council member saw the Portland Loo during his travels, the City of San Antonio, TX purchased the Portland Loo. The Loo has been in place downtown for more than a year and was selected due to its recognizable name. It is located at the city’s busiest intersection and is managed and maintained by the City’s parking division maintenance team. Ambassadors with the Business Improvement District (BID) provide an extra set of eyes as ambassadors’ staff a mobile information center that is located nearby. While servicing the district, they also make regular checks of the Loo and report issues to the City when attention is needed.

There was a lot of conversation from the BID expressing concerns about Loos not being kept up, as 80% of downtown guests are walking to or from hotels and the Convention Center. People without homes are not hanging out there because the police move them along. The overall reception to the Loo has been good. They are most heavily utilized during major events.
Sulphur Springs, TX

The Public Glass Bathrooms on the Square serve multiple functions; it’s an Italian art project, a public restroom and a bit of a tourist attraction in the small Texas town of Sulphur Springs. The town spent $54,000 to place two, code-complying glass bathrooms with one-way mirrors and stainless-steel facilities on the downtown square. Mirrors allow the users inside to see out, but it’s promised that no one can see in. Visitors are drawn to the town to check out the facilities which are managed by city government.

Downtown Minneapolis, MN

The Minneapolis Downtown Improvement District (DID) piloted "A Downtown Pop-Up Park" in response to complaints about human waste in public spaces and the need to provide public restrooms in downtown Minneapolis. Decorative port-a-potties were set up in a high traffic location during October and November in 2015. The “Little Free Lav” restroom pilot study was originally slated for a 30-day trial, but warmer weather allowed the program to be extended for an additional month. The program was deemed a success and although an extensive redesign and construction project was completed on the well-known Nicollet Mall at the end of 2017, the installation of public restrooms was not given serious consideration. Yet, demands for restroom facilities persist. Public urination has been particularly problematic for parking garage/lot operators and is a continual challenge along Hennepin Ave., the popular destination for theaters, restaurants and other entertainment venues. City officials and the DID are currently exploring ways to address the need for public restrooms.

The programs summarized above, offer a glimpse at the various ways that municipalities are striving to accommodate a human necessity. Several managers shared that they are doing their best to provide facilities but feel that offering an adequate number of restrooms to meet the demand and ensuring that they are clean is a continual challenge. These accounts also demonstrate formal and informal partnerships that exist between city departments and Business Improvement Districts and others to supply this need, including one city’s attempt to compensate local businesses to make their business restrooms available to the general public.
Outreach to Downtown Merchants and Stakeholders

During the spring of 2017, P.U.M.A. consultants began their initial outreach to the businesses in downtown Denver. The consultant returned to downtown for numerous, subsequent follow-up visits, to check in with merchants for additional feedback, most recently in March 2018. Over the 10-month period, the initial interviews with merchants and subsequent check-ins accounted for nearly 80 separate visits in downtown Denver.

The merchants interviewed in downtown Denver, were predominately located along the 16th Street Mall, between Court Pl. and Curtis St. This particular group of merchants were chosen because after testing the restroom in various locations throughout downtown, the restroom was primarily staged a few months at a time, between three locations, a few feet from the Mall, namely at the corner north of 16th and Tremont, the corner north of 16th on Welton St. and the corner just south of 16th at Champa St. The consultant conducted additional outreach along Champa St., just north of 16th St. up to 14th St., with attention focused on the heavy concentration of food-oriented businesses along this active corridor.

Feedback from 16th St. Mall Merchant’s About Public Restrooms in Downtown

For a vast majority of the interviews, the consultant spoke with business owners and managers and utilized an approach that was informal and conversational, to create ease and prompt conversation in response to open ended questions. If close by and available, feedback was also solicited from employees.

- Downtown merchants visited included: TJ Maxx, Ross, Rite Aid, Walgreens, Starbucks, Caribou Coffee, McDonald’s, 7-Eleven, Famous Footwear, Payless, Sports Fan, Ann Taylor, Subway Sandwiches, Modern Market, Corner Bakery, Krispy Kreme, Duck Soup, Key Kiosk and numerous souvenir shops. The findings from each merchant which were surprisingly consistent and similar, are summarized below.
• During each initial and subsequent visit, nearly all merchants stated that the demand for public restrooms is extremely high, with most merchants sharing that they respond directly to requests to use business restroom facilities throughout each day.

• While all merchants interviewed stated that they get requests to use their facilities, the fast food type eateries and convenience type stores like 7-Eleven seem to field substantially more requests for restrooms.

• As one of few stores open until midnight, Walgreens responds to an increased number of requests in the evening hours.

• McDonald’s shared that during special events, the lines for the restrooms are typically longer than the line for food purchases.

• Most merchants have policies that limit the restrooms to customers only. One business that strictly enforces their “Customer Only” policy, shared a story about a pregnant woman rushing into the business to use the restroom. Since she was not a customer, she was denied access. Paying customers displayed strong negative reactions toward the store manager for enforcing this policy. In defense of his decision, the manager reaffirmed that their business will not discriminate, but also emphasized that there is a great deal of stress associated with taking this position, as people have thrown food and cursed at employees of this particular business.

• Some merchants previously made their restrooms available to the public but now limit their facilities to employees only. Drug use, and in some instances drug overdoses combined with other less favorable occurrences like people bathing, flushing excess toilet paper and generally making a mess, or locking the door and occupying the restroom for extended periods, prompted the restricted use.

• Businesses that serve food items at a lower price point, are challenged more than other businesses. Fast food managers explained that there is a tendency for some customers to purchase an inexpensive item, like a cookie or a beverage for the sole purpose of accessing the restroom to do drugs. This practice has prompted some businesses to be more discerning regarding prospective restroom users.

• During the consultant’s initial visits, only a few downtown merchants were familiar with the City’s mobile restrooms, and only one merchant had the small flyer, which had been distributed by City staff, providing information about the mobile restrooms.

More than six months later, subsequent follow-up visits were conducted, and at that time, all of the merchants interviewed were aware of the restrooms. While only a few had actually used the mobile restrooms, merchants were appreciative for having somewhere to refer people. They also shared frustration with not knowing where the restroom was going to be located at any given time and stressed that this factor influenced whether, and how often they referred people to the mobile facilities.

The consultant’s suggestion that merchants should visit the city’s website for information about mobile restroom locations, was met with pushback and an explanation about the lack of time that is afforded when a customer is in urgent need of a restroom, combined with the need to focus attention on paying customers.

• Numerous merchants shared a common tendency to refer customers to other businesses where restrooms could be accessed, with Starbucks most frequently mentioned. Toward the 16th St. Mall’s easterly end, people were directed to the Corner Bakery and Denver Pavilions, though a purchase from one of the merchants at Pavilion’s is needed before a code to the restroom is provided.

• During initial interviews, when merchants were asked to suggest locations for the public restroom, the dominant response was adjacent to the light rail stops at California St. and Stout St. as the most ideal locations for public restrooms in downtown. Merchants also felt that restrooms should be located near the middle of the Mall and on each end.

• Having an attendant to staff the public restroom, and to ensure that the facility is kept clean was mentioned repeatedly as a critical element.
In early 2018, a majority of the businesses interviewed suggested that the demand is now so great that public restrooms should be on every block or on every other block along the 16th St. Mall.

**Feedback from Downtown Stakeholders**

Another tier of P.U.M.A. interviews involved downtown Denver property managers with Denver Pavilions, Independence Plaza, Republic Plaza, the Masonic Building, the Tabor Center and the University Building, in addition to hotel managers with Embassy Suites, Hyatt Regency Denver and the Sheraton.

- This group of downtown stakeholders was interviewed in May of 2017. At that time, most managers were familiar with the mobile restrooms while a few were not, and only one had actually used the mobile facility. Even so, favorable opinions were expressed about the restrooms being made available to the public and several stories were shared regarding misuse of property restrooms and subsequent restrictive policies being implemented.
- It was generally felt that the mobile restrooms offer a better option to having people urinate and defecate in stairwells, or in a building lobby, which did occur in the lobby of a large downtown building. And, while most property owners were in support of the restrooms being provided, a lack of enthusiasm was expressed about restrooms being located near their respective properties.

The consultant also met with representatives from the Downtown Denver Partnership, the Downtown Denver Business Improvement District and Visit Denver, The Convention and Visitor’s Bureau, including the Visitor’s Center. Representatives from these organizations were familiar with the public restroom pilot program and the ongoing challenges associated with public defecation and urination. Some expressed initial skepticism and concerns about misuse of the restrooms but acknowledged the need and viewed the accommodation more favorably as the pilot program became more established.

The Visitor’s Center was most vocal in its support of the mobile restrooms as they respond to many visitors requesting to use facilities at their storefront location south of the 16th St. Mall on California St. Moving forward, each organization expressed the desire to be kept in the loop regarding feedback, and recommendations resulting from the pilot program.

**Outreach to Colfax Merchants And Stakeholders**

In spring 2017, the City of Denver extended P.U.M.A.’s consulting contract to include outreach for the public restroom pilot on East Colfax Ave. Beginning late spring, and into the winter of 2017, P.U.M.A. consultants visited more than 70 individual merchants located between Vine and Grant streets on East Colfax Ave., and also met with numerous property owners and constituents.

**Feedback from Merchants on East Colfax Ave.**

Much like in downtown, the consultants were fortunate to speak with merchant owners, managers and assistant managers, and while much of the feedback was similar to that heard in downtown, Colfax merchants seemed to be more actively involved with cleaning urine and feces around the perimeter of their businesses.

Both in downtown and along East Colfax, there was a general misperception that the mobile restrooms were being provided to serve the population of people that do not have homes. In instances where this was expressed, the consultant informed that the restrooms were being made available for everyone to use.
Still, as it relates to populations in need of homes or other services, a great deal of compassion was expressed, as well as an appeal for the restrooms. That said, there were naysayers, that shared concerns about the restrooms encouraging more vagrancy, which can serve as a deterrent for customers.

Overall findings were very similar to those in downtown Denver, but in contrast to merchants in downtown, nearly all of the merchants interviewed along East Colfax were aware of the mobile restroom. It is presumed that this is due to clearer sightlines on the linear corridor of East Colfax Ave.

- Much like the downtown merchants, many East Colfax merchants are asked for the use of their public restrooms, with the 7-Eleven locations, gas stations and fast food merchants getting the most frequent requests.
- Of note was the unabashed expression of gratitude from several East Colfax merchants for the mobile restroom units. These particular merchants detailed the constant requests for restroom use and the burden associated with cleaning up feces behind or around their businesses. They repeatedly thanked the City for providing this amenity.
- Due to misuse, many merchants no longer offer public restrooms.
- Merchants do like the mobile restroom program but felt that more restrooms are needed.
- Some merchants expressed concerns about the restrooms being a magnet for people without homes, and illicit activity.

Though not a dominant opinion, a few merchants felt that the mobile restrooms made it comfortable for some people to just “hang out.” In a similar vein, it was suggested that providing the public restrooms makes it comfortable for people to remain without homes and on the street. One particular interviewee likened the public restrooms to the free meals that are handed out, in that in lacks dignity as people being served the meals are not also given a comfortable place, like a chair and table at which to sit and consume the meal. It was felt that the City should devote greater attention and substantial resources to creating opportunities for employment, moving people into homes and providing services to more effectively address mental illness.

Both in downtown and along East Colfax there is a predominant misperception that these facilities are being provided for people without homes

PUBLIC RESTROOMS AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

The full economic impact and scope related to providing or not providing public restrooms is not easily quantified. For the duration of the public restroom pilot, the City of Denver has expensed the approximate $34,000 monthly cost to operate both of the mobile units, which includes the cost for the trailer, electricity, pumping fuel, operating the generator, disposal of syringes and compensation for the on-site attendant. Most cities are incurring the costs for public facilities and those costs vary depending on the type of restroom unit, where it is located and whom is it intended to serve. For example, fabrication costs for the popular Portland Loo is about $100,000 per unit. Installing and preparing that unit to become fully operational is an additional expense that varies dependent on location. The unit’s design negates the need and expense for an on-site attendant, and most municipalities with the Loo receive maintenance services as part of a Parks and Recreation or Public Works function.

In Santa Monica, CA, public restrooms exist in longstanding parking garages, and the Business Improvement District provides maintenance and oversight. The City of San Francisco offers “Pit Stops” using a combination of portable
toilets and the JCDecaux, a semi-permanent, self-sustained unit that generates revenue from its highly visible advertising panels. In fact, the Lower Polk District featured in this report became the City’s 18th public restroom location as of March 2018. The District received a $400,000, 2-year grant from the City to staff and maintain the facility.

Providing public restrooms is a costly proposition that is closely aligned with quality of life issues. San Francisco’s program in the Tenderloin area started in 2014 “by a plea from neighborhood middle schoolers who were fed up with having to carefully navigate around human waste on their walk to school.” As the cost to live in cities continues to rise, the likelihood that more people will be without homes and possibly living on the street, rises too.

Merchants along East Colfax and in downtown cannot easily quantify the economic impact of having or not having public facilities, but the challenges that they face offer meaningful insight, particularly as the opioid crises worsens. Whether allowing customers or non-customers access to the facilities associated with their business or directing visitors to places where restrooms are available, merchants in downtown Denver and along Colfax Ave. are constantly responding to requests for restrooms. They have been shouldering a lion’s share of the responsibility regarding the public demand for facilities.

**Business Losses/Theft**

When merchants make public restrooms available for customers, they do so at the risk of offering thieves, posing as customers, an avenue for concealing stolen merchandise. This type of loss can be mitigated, by simply not allowing access to restrooms. Yet, not providing public restrooms can translate into the loss of patronage as customers interrupt a shopping excursion to focus attention on addressing a more primary need, setting out to seek a restroom instead.

Merchants spend money on advertising and special promotions just to get customers in the door. Therefore, losing customers and possible revenue to the search for a restroom, which may or may not be readily available, does have an economic impact on business, as customers might leave without returning to make a purchase.

**Misuse**

A majority of the merchants interviewed in downtown Denver and along East Colfax had previously made their restrooms available to customers, and to the general public. Issues related to extended use with people bathing, sleeping, injecting drugs, copulating and extreme instances of vandalism, like what occurred at the Taco Bell on East Colfax in October 2017. Someone using drugs inadvertently started a fire in the restroom, leaving a charred door and other damage. Various incidents have prompted business managers and owners to change policies and disallow public access. Persistent misuse of restrooms translates into a significant ongoing expense for the upkeep and maintenance incurred by business owners.

**Misbehavior**

When denied the use of a business restroom, non-customers have urinated in public areas while people were eating. This occurred in several downtown businesses and at least one large office building lobby in downtown.

**Clean-Up**

Merchants or their employees are typically the ones tasked with cleaning the toilet, sinks, floors and emptying trash in their business restrooms. Various merchants described separate situations where trash had been strewn throughout the bathroom, feces were smeared on the bathroom walls, graffiti and etching appeared on walls and the mirror, and one merchant on East Colfax recalled that the entire store bathroom had been "painted black."
When businesses allow public use of their restrooms, owners, managers or employees assume the risk of coming into contact with bodily fluids like urine, feces, vomit and blood. These bodily fluids are considered biohazards and they require special handling and procedures to clean, remove and disinfect. A related issue involves drug paraphernalia, condoms or other items that might also contain bodily fluids and require special handling for disposal.

In the instance of a Starbucks in downtown Denver, there is a recurring cost associated with providing restrooms that are easy to access. When biohazards like blood or feces are discovered in their restrooms, Starbucks pays for a professional service to come in, conduct a thorough cleaning and to properly disinfect.

Along the East Colfax corridor, merchants shared that they are frequently required to clean up human feces and urine in alleys, behind their buildings, trash dumpsters, storage areas and other places on their private property.

**Employee Morale and Retention**

Business owners, operators and employees shared that the responsibility of cleaning the messes left by restroom users can be daunting and demoralizing. Particularly humiliating is cleaning up human feces, urine and other bodily fluids. What cannot be underestimated is the toll of this work on wage earning employees that are not adequately compensated or properly trained to clean up biohazards and/or address social challenges related to visitors that may be traumatized as a result of living on the streets, being drug addicted or mentally ill. These issues factor heavily into employee satisfaction and retention.

Merchants commonly disclosed concerns about incidences that occurred in relation to drug use. Whether encountering someone that was passed out or a person that had actually overdosed, the situations involving drug use took the greatest toll on both employees and employers. A manager at one of the Starbucks locations in downtown Denver explained that several baristas encountered unfavorable conditions related to drug use. The manager shared insight about challenges, such as the loss of time from work when an employee is dealing with the trauma of having found someone that has overdosed in the bathroom. Regrettably a recent overdose occurred in early April. Several merchants candidly stated, “my employees don’t get paid enough to deal with someone that has just OD’d.” These occurrences are becoming increasingly more common as the opioid crisis worsens.

**Public Health**

In addition to issues related to urine and feces, many merchants articulated concerns about the impact that the opioid crisis and increased drug use is having on their businesses. In fact, issues related to drug use, were cited as a primary reason for businesses restricting use of their restroom facilities. As stated previously, numerous merchants have dealt with the emotional trauma and monetary expense associated with overdoses or drug use gone wrong, requiring the clean-up of excessive amounts of blood. There is an added concern about customers encountering an unfortunate situation.

**Harm Reduction**

In a separate but related effort, to ease the impact of opioid addiction, the local non-profit, Harm Reduction Action Center (HRAC), located on East Colfax Ave. near Grant Street, is actively engaged in addressing the current crisis and has conducted outreach to the local merchants. The Center provides a needle exchange and other services to offer a safe environment for injection drug users. Local legislators are giving serious consideration to Denver’s first Safe Injection Facility, or SIF. SIFs provide a sterile, secure place for injection users, with the intent of limiting drug use in public spaces and more private enclaves like restrooms.
Of the 102 SIFs operating globally, none which are currently in the U.S., not a single person has died of an overdose at those sites because a trained professional was present to intervene, recognize and respond. Comparatively, there were 174 overdose deaths in the City and County of Denver in 2016 and 200 in 2017. Many of these deaths occurred in public places like restrooms. Working hand-in-hand with the harm reduction model, providing a SIF to compliment a monitored public restroom facility could help to mitigate drug overdose deaths in public spaces and drastically reduce the number of overdose deaths over all. This could also help to alleviate the stress on merchants, allowing them to make restrooms available for patrons, and limit the risk of their employees having to encounter drug related situations, including overdoses.

**Recommendations and Summary**

There is an increasing need to provide restrooms in the public realm. Many of the cities that have responded to the need are actually expanding the number of facilities that are provided. Numerous cities target restrooms for specific populations. These municipalities are applying a very compassionate approach regarding the needs of people without a home, those with mental health issues, or those with substance use issues. These same cities are candid about the challenges associated with meeting the needs of these populations, and yet maintain a commitment to offer a dignified, humanitarian approach in providing facilities for everyone to use. Furthermore, as the costs to live in many cities continues to rise, the likelihood that more people will be without homes and living on the street, rises too.

In Denver, people without homes have not been the overwhelming user group of the mobile restrooms. As originally intended, the user groups are varied and while not everyone favors this provision, the demand has been substantiated and individual businesses offer strong support, particularly as they restrict use of their restrooms, primarily due to drug use related issues.

Therefore, it is recommended that the City of Denver advance this initiative and establish a more permanent program with fixed units.
As for the fixed facility itself, each unit should be placed in a way that allows relative access to utilities and it should be attached to a concrete base. The preferred material is stainless steel and the design should be aesthetically pleasing, with customization provided for the unique conditions at each location, i.e., space limitations, and the visibility of a unit for patrons at an eatery.

Another key element, is the creation of exceptional directional signage which should be clear, easy to read as a pedestrian, from a wheelchair, or vehicle, possibly whimsical and placed in high traffic areas, including those where public urination and defecation are a continual problem. Additionally, outreach to property owners, merchants, residents, neighborhood and business organizations is also important to promote the provision of restrooms.

For now, the City should continue to operate the existing mobile restroom units or something comparable until the fixed units are installed. In anticipation of a redesigned 16th St. Mall in downtown and the introduction of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) to Colfax Ave., public restrooms should be considered as part of these two upgrades. Merchants in both downtown and Capitol Hill emphasized the dire need for more public restrooms, and rather than one at every block, fixed facilities at each BRT stop and a facility every few blocks along the 16th St. Mall is most ideal.

With the fixed locations, it is imperative that an attendant always be on-site. Their role is critical in the ultimate success of the public restroom. They should:

- Serve as host to the restroom user, greeting them and requesting as much information as the circumstance allows.
  - Ask if they are a commuter, employee, tourist, etc.
  - Secure their zip code.
  - Determine how were they directed to the restroom.
  - Solicit opinions about their experience.
  - Ask for suggestions to enhance their experience.
- Monitor activity.
- Present as a friendly ambassador to people passing by.
- Check the restroom after each use and clean as needed.
- Thoroughly clean the restrooms, preferably after each use; or hourly, at a minimum.
- Ensure that local police have a key or can easily access the restroom if someone is locked in.
- Report illicit activity to the police.
- Distribute informational brochures (tourist related or with social services and related provisions).