OMB No.1615-0090; Expires 03/31/07 Application for Status as a Temporary Resident Under Seg

Department of Homeland Security Winter 2006 No. 13

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services

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Portland Can't Wait

by C.J. Gabbe

Last year, proponents of "potty parity" scored a major victory when New York City and Honolulu passed legislation requiring more women's restrooms in most new public buildings. This year, two activist groups in Portland, Oregon, are calling for potty equality for all, working to get the word out about restroom rights. Portland is already a known trendsetter in urban planning, but newly formed PHLUSH (Public Hygiene Lets Us Stay Human) and a Portland State University group, Relief Works, are striving to make the city the international standard on public restroom issues.

Unfortunately, access to public restrooms is not just a matter of convenience. According to restroom experts (yes, there are some), lack of bathrooms can be a significant barrier to public health and well-being. In livable, walkable urban communities, people must feel confident that there are clean, safe restrooms available, says Robert Brubaker of the American Restroom Association. Evidence from a 2002 Parks and Recreation survey conducted in Virginia's Arlington County shows that many people, especially women, are less likely to exercise outdoors because of a lack of restrooms.

Proposals to close public restrooms in cities, or even to limit their hours, clearly evokes strong emotions. In San Jose, California, Maria Escamilla McPhail wrote to the *Mercury News*, saying a "proposal to close neighborhood park bathrooms during the week is totally shameful. Walking home to go to the bathroom is not an option for a 4-year-old who has to go now. And it's not just the kids who have to use the restrooms ASAP."

This fall, PHLUSH and its supporters were wearing t-shirts at events around Portland with the slogan "I Can't Wait." The group's six core members are interviewing the public (so far they've completed 300 surveys) to help gather data and build awareness about bathroom issues, says PHLUSH activist Carol McCreary. Meanwhile, Relief Works, a group of urban planning students from Portland State University, released a report this summer that is considered a "premiere national resource on urban restrooms," according to Brubaker. It itemizes every public restroom in downtown Portland (including charts, maps, soap and toilet paper tallies, as well as stall and urinal counts) and describes best bathroom practices from other cities. One of those practices is to use Automatic Public Toilets (APTs), coin-operated, single-person restrooms in high-traffic areas, such as those employed in San

Francisco and Seattle. The report calls for more bathrooms in Portland neighborhoods with large homeless populations, like Old Town Chinatown, and more facilities in heavily touristed areas like downtown.

Unknown to most people, and unlike most cities, downtown Portland has underground restrooms dating back to 1913. The "comfort stations" were shut down in 1984, but they still retain their original intricate tile work, porcelain toilets, marble stall dividers, and bidets, says Relief Works' Kevin Bond. Not everyone thinks they have to be a thing of the past—Relief Works' Jon Swae imagines modernized versions of the bathrooms playing a role in the daily lives of those downtown, from the homeless to bicycle commuters to shoppers.

PHLUSH is pushing for the mayor's office to adopt its urgent recommendations in the

coming months. According to the group, a lack of bathrooms affects the most vulnerable: the elderly, children, the homeless, the disabled, and city-goers with medical conditions.

Downtown business leaders would like to see progress on public restrooms too. "Every year there are 6,000 calls for clean-up of human waste in downtown Portland," says Mike Kuykendall of the Portland Business Alliance. Each of those calls translates into time and money that could be otherwise spent improving downtown. Kuykendall says ideally the city would go "back to the future, and return to the clean and safe, attended restroom model of yesteryear." In other words, get the funding in order and fire up those underground comfort stations. Portland is not going to let its potty dreams get flushed. \square



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