

# Portland markets its solar-powered public toilet

By BY STEVEN DUBOIS, Associated Press 1:19 p.m. April 14, 2012

PORTLAND, Ore. — The Portland Loo might be the most loved public toilet - not that there's much competition.

A lack of adequate public restrooms is an old complaint in cities across America. The bathrooms, when you can find one, are often filthy and smelly, and a magnet for drug users and vandals. Businesses such as McDonald's and Starbucks often serve as the restroom of last resort.

Big cities from New York to San Francisco have bought high-tech, self-cleaning automatic toilets, with mixed results. In one high-profile failure, Seattle installed five such toilets in 2004 - at a cost of \$5 million - only to sell them on eBay four years later because of problems with drug use and prostitution.

Meanwhile, the much cheaper Portland Loo maintains a Facebook page and has 202 followers on Twitter. The five downtown toilets average about 200 flushes each per day. And, unlike toilets in other cities, have not drawn a torrent of criticism about foul smells and rampant crime.

Now Portland is trying to sell its patented loo to other cities. The city has sold one to Victoria, British Columbia, and now hopes contracting with agents who make a commission will generate more sales.

"We can ship them to somebody for \$99,000 and all they have to do is bolt them on to their sidewalk and hook them up to sewer and water," said City Commissioner Randy Leonard, who originated the idea for the loo after Portland had its own publicized failure with public bathrooms.

The solar-powered Portland Loo costs about \$60,000 to manufacture and the annual maintenance has run \$12,000 apiece. The drab, durable structures stand 10-feet tall and have open slots that expose a standing person's head and feet, allowing police to check for lawbreakers. The metallic-gray finish is resistant to graffiti. The toilet itself is prison-grade and there is no sink to break. A tiny faucet for hand-washing is outside and a worker cleans the loos twice a day.

The toilets were designed with the assumption that people would try to ruin them. Vandals have busted the locks and the flush button, but even the first loo installed in 2008 remains in pretty good shape.

"The whole idea behind it was to design it not as this beautiful, aesthetic piece of work and then be aghast if somebody did something bad to it," Leonard said. "We designed it anticipating all of that."

The cities of San Diego and Anchorage, Alaska, have expressed interest in buying the loo. Lori Schanche, who works for the city of Anchorage, said the loo's resistance to vandalism is what piqued her interest. She said Anchorage needs public restrooms because of a large street population, and durability is important because youths sometimes throw rocks down the toilet.

To help generate sales that would defray maintenance costs, the Portland council voted this week to allow three contractors to market the toilet: Curtis Banger, who provided design services for the loo; Madden Fabrication, which manufactures the loo; and Carol McCreary, founder of the Portland advocacy group PHLUSH - Public Hygiene Lets Us Stay Human.

All are eligible to receive 10 percent of the sales price as a commission.

"Without having toilets integrated into the streetscape, health and livability are impossible for the good percentage of people we call restroom challenged," McCreary said.

Portland has traditional bricks-and-mortar public bathrooms, but they have the same problems as those in other cities and are kept locked at night. The city tried a unique approach in 2007, when then-Mayor Tom Potter - in response to demands from the homeless for a 24-hour restroom - opened City Hall as an all-night bathroom.

The controversial plan failed because the homeless congregate away from City Hall.

Leonard said it was around that time that he took a trip to Italy and got the idea for the unisex and utilitarian Portland Loo.

"There were these public restrooms that were shocking by American standards because they weren't so private; they were pretty revealing," Leonard said. "Really, the only reason we build the restrooms we do in the United States is because of our puritan roots. We don't want anybody to see us or certainly hear us."

*The Associated Press*

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