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Feature Article - October 2015

Safe Stops

For Restroom Structures, Security Is Crucial

By Rick Dandes

It's not often talked about in public outreach events or pre-design meetings, but environmentalists, architects and park administrators know that locating safe and secure public restrooms in either a remote park or downtown urban setting is a key factor in patrons' use of the park. Safety always comes first and is a top priority for any park administrator. But selecting the right location for a restroom must also be cost-effective, while providing maximum function in minimum space, along with accessibility, attractive aesthetics, and ease of maintenance.

"In general and above all, the first thing our clients are looking for is security when trying to decide where to situate a public restroom in their recreational space," said Moffette Tharpe, managing director of a Midland, Va.-based manufacturer of precast concrete buildings, including restroom structures. "You don't want to be in a dark area where people might be lurking to attack somebody that is using the restroom, particularly in a park setting."



PHOTO COURTESY OF CXT, INC.

Locating safe and secure public restrooms in either a remote park or downtown urban setting is a key factor in patrons' use of the park.

There are, however, additional drivers that factor into picking a site, Tharpe noted. Aesthetics, often glossed over when talking about restrooms, are important, he said. "You also are looking at where it is set, because generally you don't want to feature it, but rather you want to blend the restroom into the surroundings so that it looks like it fits rather than being out of place."

You'll also want the restroom to be visible because if someone is in need of a restroom, they should be able to locate it fairly easily. Then, of course, it also needs to be accessible because you have people with disabilities who also will use the restroom. It needs to comply inside and out with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990.

"The main thing," Tharpe said, "as a park administrator, is that you don't really want the restroom to be a feature in the park. You want it to be compatible, unless it is part of a large restroom complex, which might also have vending machines and other amenities ... that's different. But I'm talking more about single or double, unisex restrooms, and a park surrounding it. Usually restrooms are set off to the side and not in the center."

Accessibility to the site is a game-changing factor, added Gary Burger, a national sales manager for a manufacturer of precast concrete restroom structures and other buildings. "You want to make it accessible to wheelchair-bound individuals. So the closer to a parking lot, the closer to the area where there are activities, the better—a playground, for example, in the case of a park. You need to make the area around it accessible, and you need accessibility to the building."



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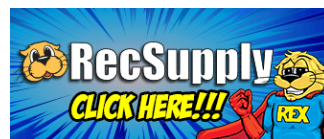
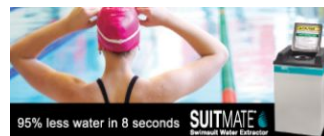
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Where you place your restroom involves a lot of common sense, said Kyle Earlywine, co-owner, of a restroom company based in Vancouver, Wash. "The location has to be particular to the situation. The first thought that comes to my mind in terms of placement is a parking lot. You have to think about where the restroom placement makes the most sense for your visitors and oftentimes that will be at the parking lot, at the visitor's center or at the trail head—wherever you think that people are intuitively going to search out that restroom, where they are most able to find it, where people will most conveniently be able to get to that restroom."

But there are factors in play that may not allow you to go with the first choice of what is most convenient for the visitor. If you are thinking about installing a flush restroom, for example, you may not have easy access to utilities. It's all part of the planning process. In some locations there are utilities you can hook into, but if the utilities are in a particular spot, in order to access them you might need to put the restroom there or you need to trench and get the utilities to the restroom. Sometimes that trenching is going to cost thousands of dollars to do. If putting the restroom at a parking lot is going to cost you an extra \$30,000, then it's probably not where you are going to end up putting the restroom.

Look at your possible sites, Earlywine said. "Where there is limestone or sandstone it's going to be a very difficult construction process to actually put a restroom in this location because the area is just not conducive to construction."

Is there direct access to sunlight if you want to set up



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solar panels? "We recently placed a restroom in an Ohio state park," Earlywine said, "and during the install, if the restroom could have been placed 50 feet in another direction, then we could have made use of our solar panel and kept it on the roof. But because the placement was in the shade we had to make a directional line underground, underneath the walkway and hook it on to a stand where the solar panel was positioned. The solar panel will still serve the restroom, but the panel will be 50 feet away. It's little things like that, if only it had been planned a bit better it would have saved the park money. Little details like that escape people sometimes when they are figuring out where to place the restroom."



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