

***Testimony at DC Water & Sewer Authority Hearing  
Submitted by Marcia Bernbaum, mentor and advisor to the People for Fairness Coalition  
Downtown Washington DC Public Restroom Committee  
February 25, 2016***

Good afternoon Council Member Cheh, DC Water Authority Director Mr. Hawkins, and other members of the Committee on Transportation & Environment,

My name is Marcia Bernbaum. My testimony follows that of Janet Sharp and John McDermott. I serve as mentor and advisor to the People for Fairness Coalition Downtown Washington DC Public Restroom Initiative

I would like address the following in my testimony:

1. Why clean, safe, available restrooms are needed.
2. What we learned, through an inventory that we carried out last year, about the availability of clean, safe restrooms in five areas of downtown DC.
3. What we learned that is applicable to Washington DC from successful experiences in other cities in the US that have recently installed public restrooms that are clean, safe, and available 24/7.
4. What we have accomplished thus far and our plans for the rest of the year.
5. Options for clean, safe, available restrooms open to the public.

In July of 2014 a member of PFC brought to our attention that downtown DC lacked public restrooms. We decided to look into this issue. It isn't housing, which is central to our mission, but it affects everyone including our target group: individuals who lack housing.

We decided to start by establishing whether or not there is a problem in downtown DC; thus the restroom inventory mentioned above. We also did an extensive internet search complemented by numerous interviews, to find out if other cities also have a problem and, if so, what they are doing to address it. Based on what we learned, we developed a strategy. We are now finalizing our fourth work plan and about to start our fifth.

We have learned a great deal from the restroom inventory and the feasibility study:

Restroom Inventory Outcomes

From our restroom inventory we learned that if you are in downtown DC and urgently have to go you will indeed have a problem:

- Over half of the 85 private establishments that we visited in 5 areas of downtown DC restrict restroom use to patrons only. As we found when we visited establishments that let us use their restrooms one year later, eating establishments are increasingly putting locks and combinations on their restrooms doors in order to limit access to patrons.
- Outside of the Mall there are very few public restrooms available during the day and their hours are limited.

- There are very few restrooms open 24/7 that are clean and safe. In 4 of the 5 areas we visited, if you have to go in the wee hours, you will have to walk between a half mile to a mile to find a clean, safe restroom.
- There is no signage so if there is an available restroom nearby, and you don't know the neighborhood, you won't know it exists.

### Lessons learned from feasibility study

We also learned a great deal from the feasibility study that we carried out:

- The United Nations has declared that access to adequate water and sanitation is a universal human right
- As Janet Sharp pointed out in her testimony, there many of individuals who are restroom challenged. When they have to go they need to find a restroom urgently.
- In Washington DC, urinating or defecating in public is a misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$500 and 90 days in Jail. John McDermott in his testimony addressed the implications for individuals lacking housing.
- If you are in a European and many Asian capitals and you urgently have to go you can usually find a safe, clean public restroom nearby.
- In the US, after a dramatic decline in the availability of public restrooms during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, several cities have recently been successful in installing clean, safe public restrooms available 24/7. They include:

Portland, Oregon	Cambridge, Massachusetts
Monterey, California	Cincinnati, Ohio
San Diego, California	Salt Lake City, Utah
Arcadia, California	Seattle, Washington
Greeley, Colorado	Victoria, British Columbia

- Siting is critical regardless of the restroom option used: the site where the restroom should be installed needs to be in an open visible area. There should be ample pedestrian traffic. The site should be near water and sewer lines. And there should be lighting at night in and around the restroom.
- Buy in from the nearby community is essential: from businesses, community groups and individuals living nearby, churches, the police who periodically drive by especially at night.

### Our accomplishments/next steps

In developing our strategy we decided to apply best practices and lessons learned from other cities in the U.S. and Canada that have been successful in installing clean, safe, available restrooms.

- To date we have: (1) obtained nearly 600 signatures to a petition requesting that the Mayor and DC City Council install clean, safe public restrooms in needed areas of Downtown DC (our target is 5,000 signatures); (2) prepared a postcard and a brochure; (3) given several presentations; (4) participated in the Foggy Bottom annual street fair; (5) obtained the

support of the Foggy Bottom ANC. In addition Street Sense, The DC Currents, and the Washington Post have published articles describing our initiative.

- Over the medium term we plan to continue: (1) educating the public on the need for clean, safe public restrooms available 24/7; (2) obtaining signatures to our petition; (3) securing the support of ANCs in Ward 2 and nearby wards; (4) seeking opportunities to appear in local and national media. We are also preparing to meet with businesses, churches, other community and national organizations that have DC chapters to obtain their buy-in and support.

#### Options for clean, safe, available public restrooms

In our search to learn from other experiences in the US and elsewhere in installing clean, safe, available restrooms we identified several options.

- Self-cleaning restrooms which are used widely in Europe and which are in use in several US Cities
- The Portland Loo which is increasingly being adopted in cities in the US and Canada.
- Persuading businesses to open their restrooms to the public by providing a financial incentive, currently being done in London.

The experience in the US with self-cleaning restrooms has been mixed. While clean, and open 24/7 there have been problems with safety; some cities have found that because they are entirely closed they are being used for illicit purposes. The Portland Loo, which was designed to take this into consideration, provides tilted levers at the foot and head level that make it possible to see from the outside how many people are in the restroom and for how long. Cities that have installed the Portland Loo, with one exception (and this was due to inappropriate siting) have not had problems with illicit activity.

The ultimate decision on which option or options to adopt rests with the DC Government, with the input and support of businesses, community organizations, police and others residing in the area where public restrooms facilities will be installed. We understand, Council Member Cheh that you have asked your Senior Legal Advisor to explore options.

We would be happy to meet with you and your staff to share what we have learned regarding siting requirements, how to obtain buy-in from the local community, along with available options and their costs.

Attached are photos of the Self-Cleaning Restroom and the Portland Loo.

Thank you.