



THE CORPORATION OF THE CITY OF COURTENAY

STAFF REPORT

To: Council

File No.: 6280-20

From: Director of Recreation, Culture, and Community Services

Date: May 31, 2023

Subject: Downtown Public Washroom – Urbaloo 24 Hour Pilot Update

PURPOSE: To provide a summary report on the pilot 24-hour operation of the Urbaloo Downtown public washroom and to request Council's direction on its future operation.

BACKGROUND:

A new standalone public washroom, referred to as an Urbaloo, was installed in December 2021 at the corner of 6th street and England in Downtown Courtenay.

Prior to its installation, at the November 15th, 2021 Council meeting, it was resolved:

THAT Council direct staff to prepare a report outlining options for providing 24 hour access a day to a washroom facility in Downtown Courtenay.

On February 28, 2022, staff presented a [report](#) that highlighted the challenges, opportunities, costs and options for providing 24 hour access to the downtown washroom facility. Based on that report, it was resolved:

THAT Council direct staff to implement a pilot program until December 31, 2022 to extend the Urbaloo downtown public washroom to 24 hours, subject to an increase to 3 daily cleanings and 4 additional nightly Security Checks.

The 24-hour pilot program was initiated on March 7, 2022. To ensure optimum data collection on usage and operations of the facility and its extended hours, Systems Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) technology was installed to track operational usage and closure times. This data was also useful in assessing service call frequency, vandalism, and service issues. Overall the 24-hour operation of the Urbaloo resulted in significant operational challenges and safety risks, including extended closures due to required maintenance, and or repairs due to vandalism, during the pilot program.

Since March 22, 2023, upon reopening after an extended closure, the Urbaloo has been operating in accordance with other public washroom operating hours (typically dawn to dusk) and continues to operate on this schedule at this time. During this period of regular operations staff have observed and data has confirmed that there have been minimal service disruptions and significantly reduced safety considerations.

DISCUSSION:

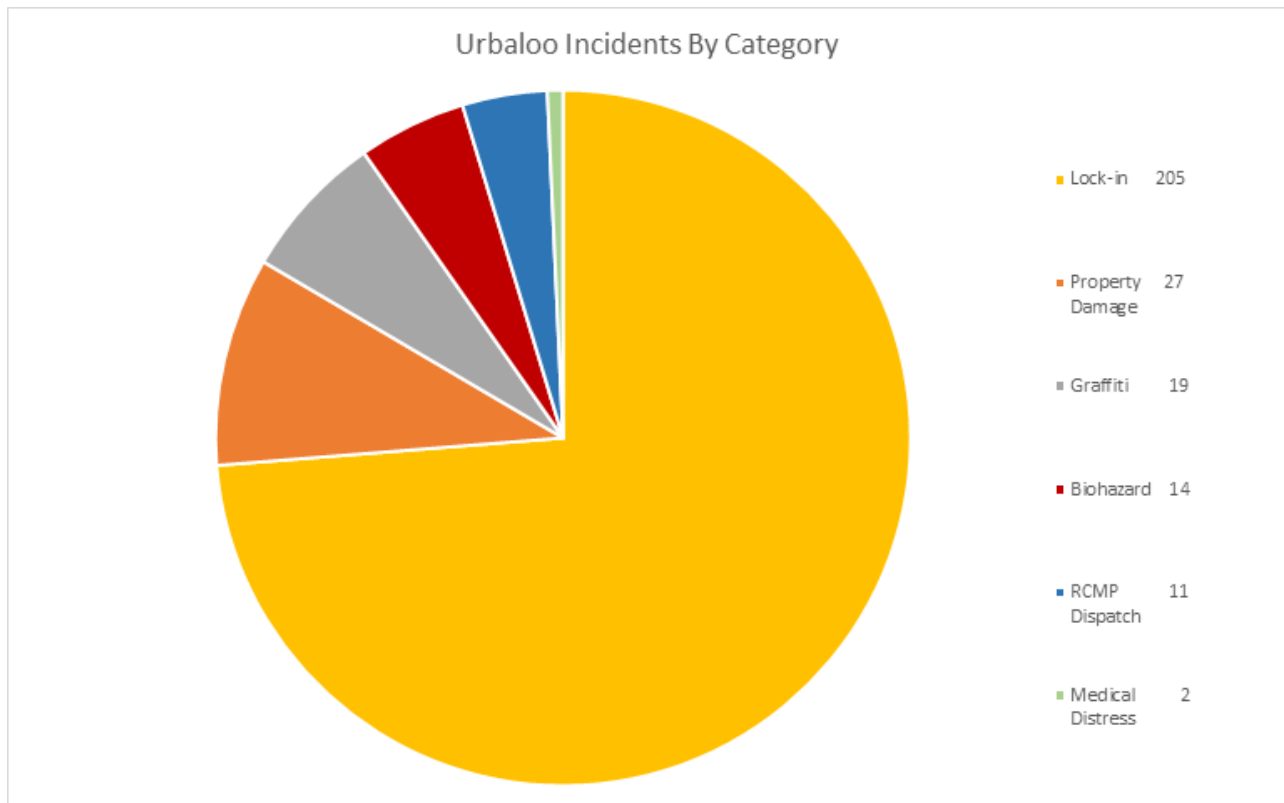
24 Hour Pilot Program

During the 24 hour pilot program, in anticipation of increased usage and other operational risks associated with overnight service, facility cleaning was increased to three daily cleanings (up from one at other public washrooms) and four security checks were completed each night between the hours of approximately 8:00pm and 4:30am. Peer support dedicated to the Urbaloo was not in place during the pilot due to security and safety concerns of peers in the overnight hours, as well as distance from local nonprofit partners. Despite these additional measures the Urbaloo experienced significant vandalism and damage, extended “lock-ins” (whereby individuals locked themselves within the facility for an hour or more), and significant safety risks to the public and staff.

Due to the volume and frequency of damage to the public washroom, the Urbaloo was closed for approximately 112 days during the pilot program, including an extended closure of 67 days from January 13, 2023 to March 21, 2023. As such, the public washroom was unavailable to the public for significant portions of the pilot period.

Chart 1 show the volume and type of incidents experienced at the Urbaloo during the pilot program.

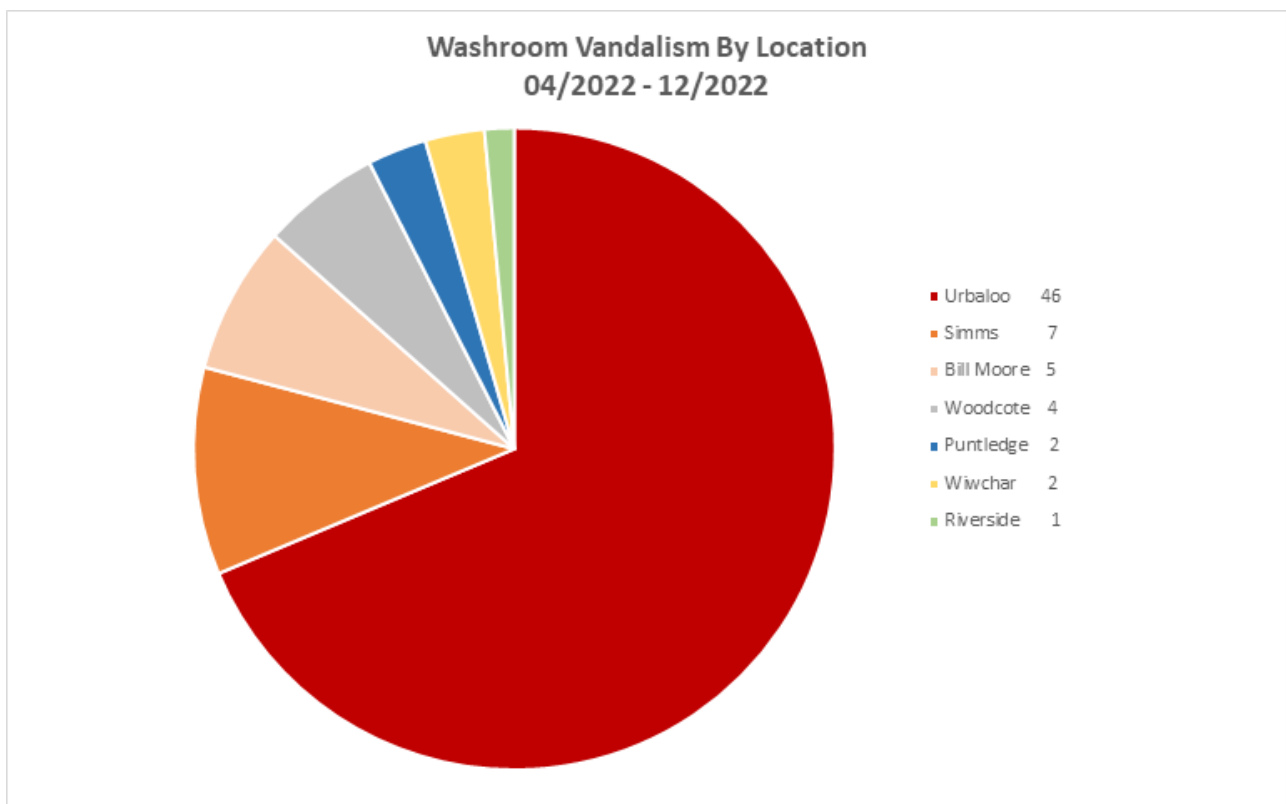
Chart 1: Urbaloo Incidents by Category



The financial impacts of vandalism and damage to the Urbaloo totaled approximately \$16,000 for the period April 2022 to December 2022 which is in addition to the increased operating costs resulting from increased security and custodial support. The vandalism costs included over \$8000 in materials (toilet, change table, mirror, etc.) and over \$8000 in staff wages and admin support. The vast majority of vandalism and damage reports occurred overnight as reported by security patrols and from custodial staff upon entering the facility for its early morning cleaning.

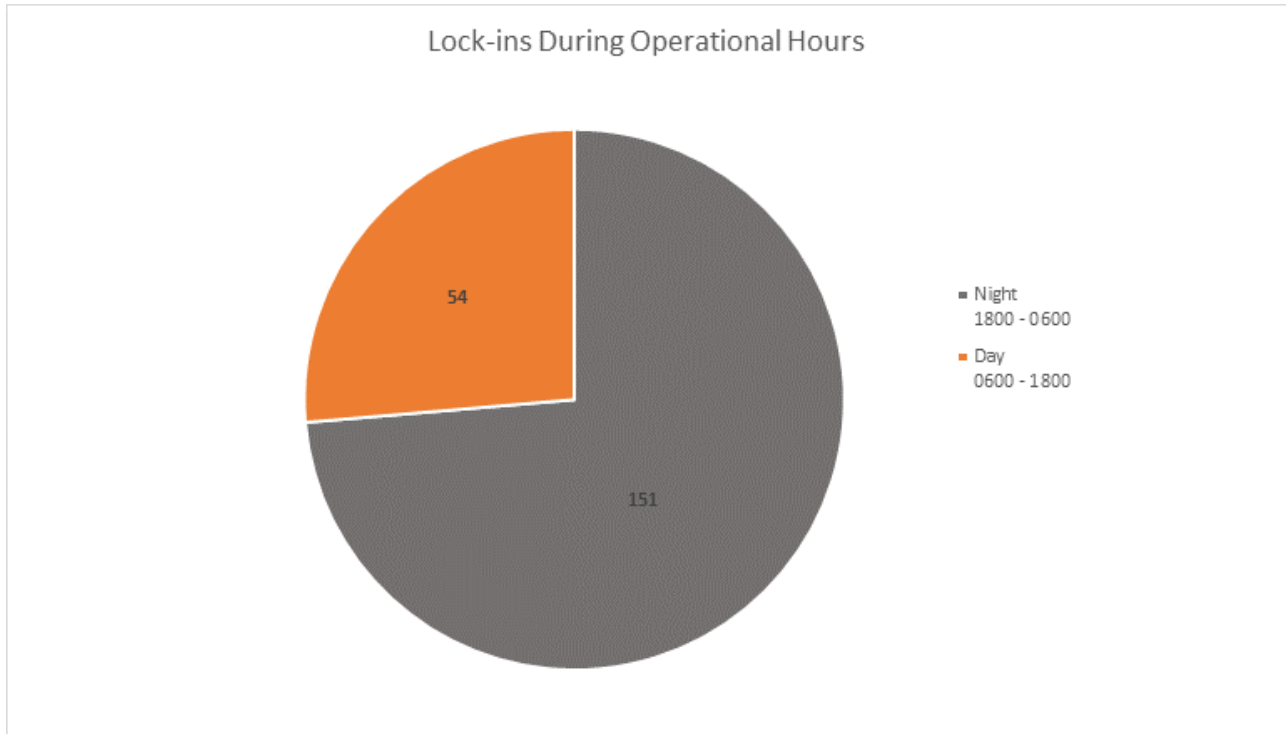
As compared to the City’s other public washrooms which are open typically dawn to dusk, the Urbaloo experienced significantly more vandalism and damage as shown in Chart 2.

Chart 2: Washroom Vandalism by Location



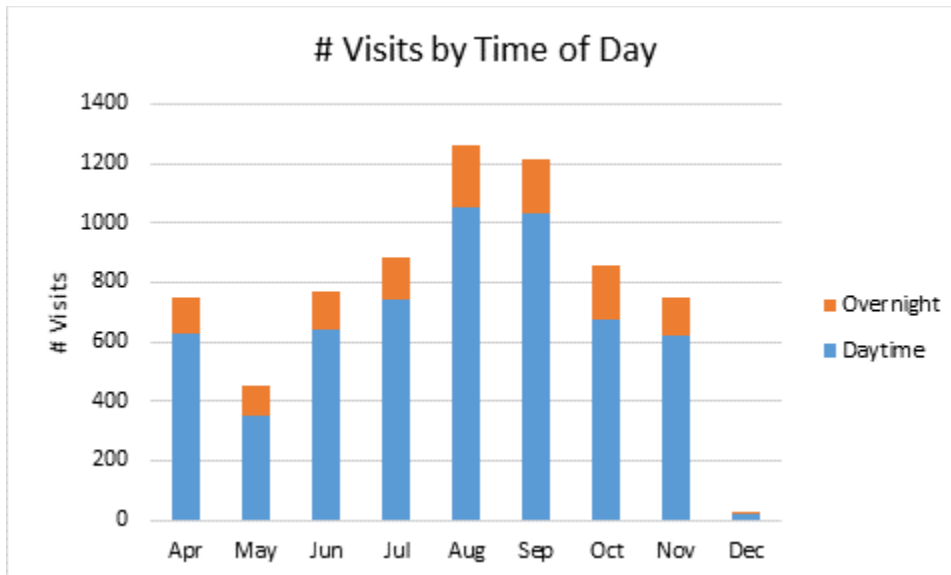
The Urbaloo also experienced a high level of lock-ins whereby an individual locked themselves within the unit for an hour or more, thereby preventing access by other members of the public to use the facility. The majority of these lock-in incidents occurred in the overnight hours (3 overnight lock-ins to 1 daytime lock-in) as shown in Chart 3.

Chart 3: Lock-ins During Operational Hours



Due to the lock-ins it is difficult to discern if there is a greater overnight demand for public washroom access than currently shown through the usage data, however the data shows the vast majority of use was during daytime hours as shown in Chart 4, with significantly less use during overnight hours.

Chart 4: Total number of visits by Time of Day



From March through December 2022 there were a total of 6,969 visits. There was an average of 712 visits per month or 27 visits per day when accounting for closure days.

The addition of a public washroom in the downtown core has demonstrated to be a benefit to residents, visitors, and the public in general, as demonstrated by its usage data. The pilot however demonstrated that 24-hour access led to significant damage, vandalism, facility inaccessibility due to lock-ins, and other safety concerns specifically as a result of the overnight access. These concerns could not be adequately mitigated despite regular security check ins and additional cleaning. Unfortunately, the pilot has demonstrated that the overnight access resulted in reduced overall access to the public washroom through service disruptions and operational closures. Day time usage was significantly higher than nighttime usage and day time usage did not result in significant service disruptions.

Public Washroom Regular Operations

The Urbaloo reopened on March 22, 2023, following an extended closure due to damage and subsequent maintenance requirements, and has been operating in accordance with regular public washroom hours, typically dawn to dusk. Current operation hours are approximately 8:00am to 8:00pm.

During this period, up until May 18, 2023, the following has occurred at the Urbaloo:

- 1 incident of vandalism
- 89 lock-ins of more than 1 hour, 2 of those requiring RCMP assistance at closing time
- 1188 total uses, for an average of 21 uses per day

The Urbaloo has remained operational without any major service disruptions since its reopening on March 22, 2023 and since the adjustment of operating hours to align with other public washrooms. Additionally, staff have reported a substantial decrease in incidents related to occupational health and safety resulting from damage, vandalism and or other uses of the Urbaloo. The washroom is still experiencing plugged toilets due to significant amounts of excrement and or other items being flushed down the toilet.

Additional considerations

The results of the 24-hour washroom access pilot are not unique to Courtenay despite the mitigation efforts of increased security and cleaning. Many municipalities are experiencing similar challenges with extended access to standalone washrooms including but limited to increased rates of vandalism and damage, violence and sexual assault, death due to lack of harm reduction or overdose response available, arson, and lock-ins and use of washrooms for shelter. In addition to the significant human harm resulting from some of these situations, the additional consequence is that the public washroom becomes unavailable more often and in effect there is less availability of this critical service than if it only operated in daytime hours.

Staff consulted with the City of Vancouver on its public washroom provision related to hours of service and standalone washrooms, including its experience with extended hours and multiple operating models in an effort to increase public washroom access during and coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Vancouver staff shared their experience and recommendations, while also indicating they are currently reviewing the enhanced public washroom access pilots that arose out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The City of Vancouver's provision of 24-hour washroom access at standalone washrooms is limited to a small number of Automated Public Toilets (APTs), many of which have reduced hours and or are combined with staff and peer monitoring to support continuous operation and mitigate service disruption due to vandalism and damage, and other safety concerns for users.

For public washrooms, especially those with extended hours, and where the target audience is individuals experiencing homelessness, living with a mental health illness, and or who use substances, public washroom access must consider enhanced safety considerations to ensure these individuals are free from harm, violence, and death as a result of washrooms being isolated, standalone facilities. Investment in safety and mitigation strategies is required to ensure service continuity of this essential function and to reduce vandalism and damage. Strategies shared by City of Vancouver staff include:

- Installation of washroom trailers nearby a local nonprofit who is then contracted to manage the trailer. This includes staffing, security, and peers, as well as harm reduction and referral services. These washrooms typically do not operate 24 hours a day, but rather 10-12 hours per day.
- Consistent staff or peer monitoring of washrooms throughout hours of operation and not done on a "check in" basis. This is required to effectively prevent service disruption and harm.
- Standalone washrooms (similar to the Urbaloo) require additional infrastructure (i.e. a securable kiosk) to create a safe work space for security, staff, and or peers for service monitoring and user support.

Staff and peer costs to engage two peers or staff for a 12 hour per day operation, assuming paying a living wage to peers, would range from \$15,000 to \$20,000 per month or \$185,000 to \$240,000 per year.

Infrastructure costs for washroom trailers are estimated in the range of \$15,000 to \$20,000 per month including rental, cleaning, servicing and maintenance costs. Costs for the construction and installation of a kiosk collated with a standalone public washroom would need to be determined.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

Aligning the Urbaloo hours of operation with the rest of our public washroom portfolio has minimal financial impact assuming staff continues to see decreased levels of damage and

vandalism as compared to the 24-hour pilot. Costs for cleaning and staffing of \$24,000 were approved in the 2023 Operating Budget.

If Council were to direct staff to pursue extending the hours of operation at the Urbaloo, additional costs would be incurred that are currently not budgeted for. As described above, overnight operation would require staff and or peer monitoring and would require an operating budget adjustment of approximately \$185,000 to \$240,000 per annum. Capital budget adjustments would also be required for the construction and installation of a kiosk in order to ensure a safe working environment and location is provided.

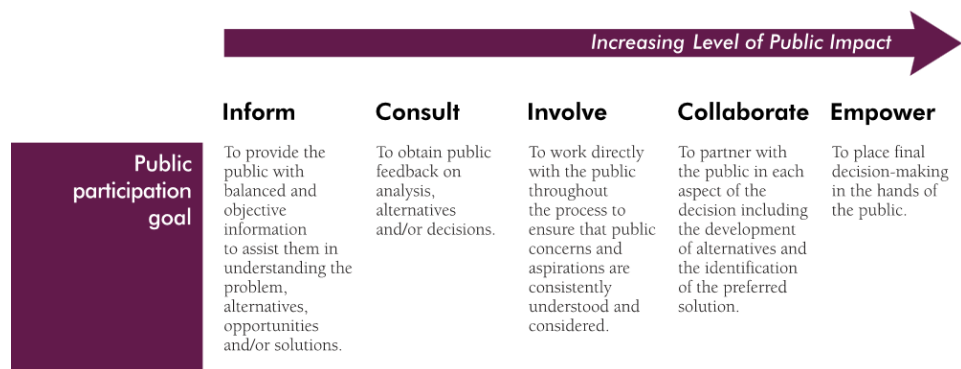
ADMINISTRATIVE IMPLICATIONS:

The addition of the Urbaloo to the City’s public washroom inventory does not have significant administrative impacts when it is aligned with the operating hours of the rest of the portfolio. However, the 24-hour pilot program did result in significant administrative impacts including but not limited to: staff and management incident response, OH&S concerns and risk mitigation, and facility maintenance and repair.

Pursuing a staff or peer monitored service expansion would require significant administrative oversight, including but not limited to, contract negotiation and administration with third parties. Additionally, it would require increased support to address OH&S concerns and respond to facility maintenance and repair.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

Staff would inform the public based on the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation:



OPTIONS:

1. THAT Council direct staff to maintain the Urbaloo’s current service hours which align with other City standalone public washroom facilities typically operating daily from dawn to dusk.
2. THAT Council provide alternative direction to staff.

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