

## Chico City Plaza 24-hour restrooms being trashed, vandalized, used for shelter

### 24-hour facilities also vandalized, used for shelter

*By Ashiah Scharaga, Enterprise-Record*

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Chico >> The City Plaza restrooms have been open all day and night for about 45 days, during which they have been extensively vandalized, trashed and used for shelter.

Vandalism includes graffiti as well as burn damage and scratching of the walls. City staff has found syringes and empty alcohol bottles, along with stockpiles of clothes and other personal items. People have been found sleeping inside at night and washing their clothes in the toilet.

In January, the city opened the plaza restrooms 24 hours as part of a 90-day [trial program](#) to address issues with public defecation and urination downtown. Once those 90 days are up, there will be public review of the project's successes and downfalls.

Erik Gustafson, public works operations and maintenance director, told the Internal Affairs Committee Wednesday morning that the recently renovated restrooms have really degraded since the [trial project started](#).

Public Works Facility Manager Jason Bougie said city staff and volunteers are spending almost three hours a day cleaning up the burden of nighttime impacts during the 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. window, when the restrooms were originally closed.

What the city has right now is essentially a 24-hour encampment shelter, said Katie Simmons, Chico Chamber of Commerce president and CEO. While 24-hour restrooms are needed and the pilot project is a good thing, the location and design of the City Plaza restrooms makes that an unfavorable spot, she said.

Models like the [Portland Loo](#) are much more effective, she said, because they cannot easily be used as shelters; however, they come with a hefty \$100,000 price tag.

On Feb. 24, Team Chico surveyed 97 downtown businesses to get an idea of the impact of the 24-hour restroom trial. More than half, about 55 percent, weren't even aware it was occurring.

Many businesses expressed uncertainty about the effectiveness, according to a Team Chico report. They understood 24-hour restrooms are necessary, but worried about misuse and abuse. There were businesses that reported a decrease of requests to use their public restrooms from people who were not customers, and others had less issues with defecation and people sleeping in their doorways.

Loitering and trashing and defecation of downtown business stoops and restrooms still remains a problem, however, said Melanie Bassett, Downtown Chico Business Association executive director.

Of note is the impact the restrooms have had on the Chico Police Department. In January, there were only four calls for service related to the City Plaza restrooms, according to Sgt. Cesar Sandoval. That increased to 11 in February, and there were already 10 calls by Sunday.

“These are all impacts we anticipated, honestly,” Bassett said. “It’s like, how do we provide this service?”

Simmons said the public service the city wants to offer is a restroom, and the trick is to make sure that’s what’s actually being provided and maintained.

“Twenty-four hour restrooms are necessary because of the needs of people, and (to take) pressure off downtown businesses ...” she said. “But for so many reasons, this is not the right place to offer that service.”

Councilor Andrew Coolidge, committee chair, said the only way to design a safe 24-hour restroom would be to take measures such as moving sinks and trash bins outside. He said he had “no faith” that a temporary solution will work.

“I think at this point in time we’re making an unsafe location,” he said. “Obviously if they’re washing clothes in the toilet we’re not providing the service we intended at all.”

Vice Mayor Reanette Fillmer said closing the restrooms could cause other issues to ramp up again for businesses, but in the meantime, city staff and volunteers are responding to increased maintenance and safety issues.

“It just seems crazy to have somebody man the bathrooms 24 hours,” she said.

Team Chico has recommended the installation of safety cameras and flood lighting in the plaza.

Because the update was a report, there is no action for the City Council to take just yet. There will be another update brought to the Internal Affairs Committee once the 90-day trial is complete.

Simmons said the plan is to stay really connected with businesses and continue to get feedback. Continuing the pilot program will help them come up with creative solutions to figure out how to keep downtown safe.

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