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City Plaza restrooms no longer open 24/7

By Ashiah Scharaga, Enterprise-Record

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Chico >> The City Plaza restrooms are no longer open 24 hours now, but when they were, downtown businesses noticed a reduction in urine and feces on their stoops.

In January, the city opened the restrooms 24/7 to address issues with public defecation and urination downtown.

Erik Gustafson, public works operations and maintenance director, said the 90-day trial actually ended a week early on April 17 because the city could not sustain the expenses necessary to account for the level of vandalism taking place. [In March](#), during a public update, city staff reported extensive vandalism, excessive trash and frequent use of the restrooms as a homeless shelter.

That doesn't mean the trial was a waste, however.

Melanie Bassett, Downtown Chico Business Association executive director, said at least half of downtown businesses did notice and report a reduction in urination and feces outside of their shops during a recent Team Chico business walk.

"The overriding comments we got from almost everyone was that it's a catch 22 – while they feel we need to provide public restrooms, their fear was exactly what happened," Bassett said.

Facilities Manager Jason Bougie said city staff learned there is a public need for 24-hour restrooms, but the city plaza is just not the right location. The restrooms are located in a park, which encourages people to congregate, and they are not ideally designed, he said.

"We now have the knowledge we need to create a bathroom in the right place with all those maintenance impacts considered," Bougie said.

Hours have been extended in the morning at the request of the DCBA. The restrooms will be open at 5 a.m. instead of 7 a.m. to alleviate pressure on businesses like Starbucks, which typically have a line outside the door for bathroom use before opening in the early morning. This came at no added expense to the city, which already had contracted workers available at that time.

The plaza restroom doors will still be secured open during hours of operation. Though Bougie anticipates there will always be issues with vandalism, this will serve as a deterrent while also providing some privacy. Since the restrooms have gone to the extended summer hours, 5 a.m. to 9 p.m., things have returned to normal. City staff, contractors and the DCBA Clean Up Brigade are no longer working three hours a day to clean up trash, graffiti and personal items.

"It's the camping, which caused vandalism, which caused trash, which caused a multiplier of issues," Bougie said. "We don't have that anymore, we just have the general vandalism that occurs in almost all bathrooms in the city."

In January, the city completed [renovations](#) on the restrooms, including stainless steel stalls, walls with graffiti-resistant coating and LED lighting.

Gustafson said the city is going to continue working with the DCBA, Chico Chamber of Commerce and homeless service providers to figure out possible solutions to recommend to the council. One that could be successful is the Portland Loo toilet-kiosk [style](#), but it isn't cheap: a one-toilet unit alone costs around \$100,000, while hooking up to utilities can range from a \$20,000-30,000 expense.

Gustafson said there aren't any other planned restroom changes for this year because "there is not funding for that type of thing at this point."

Staff will present a formal update at the next Internal Affairs Committee meeting.

"It's something we have not just shelved," Bassett added. "We know it's an issue and we continue to talk about what we can do about it."

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