



## COUNCIL REPORT

Report Date: October 6, 2023  
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Meeting Date: October 18, 2023  
[Submit comments to Council](#)

TO: Standing Committee on City Finance and Services  
FROM: General Manager, Arts, Culture and Community Services  
SUBJECT: Provincial Funding Request - Access to Washrooms and Water in Vancouver

### Recommendations

THAT Council approve a funding request of \$3.8 million to the Province to support ongoing and increased access to washrooms in the Downtown Eastside in response to persistent homelessness and a lack of available facilities.

### Purpose and Executive Summary

This report recommends Council request \$3.8M from the Province to sustain existing washroom and related programs for one year. In 2020, the City secured senior government funding to initiate a number of washroom and related programs, including extending hours in existing facilities, adding washroom attendants to improve safety and access, and installing washroom trailers supplemented with comprehensive peer and support programs. Absent additional senior government funding or a corresponding net new investment on the part of the City, these programs will cease operations between December 2023 and March 2024, impacting safe and reliable washroom access, particularly for equity denied groups<sup>1</sup>. These washrooms and related programs are critical to individual and community health and safety, and respond to the ongoing impacts of homelessness, mental health and substance use (drug overdoses).

This report also highlights actions taken in response to the Council motion on improving access to washrooms and water, including an update on the development of an equity-informed city-wide approach to increasing access to washrooms and water that will be reported to Council in 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> For the context of this report, equity-denied groups mainly refers to various intersections of the following: People experiencing homelessness and/or unsecure housing; People experiencing deep and persistent poverty; People with mental illness; People who use substances; Indigenous People; and Women and Gender diverse people (including sex workers). Accessibility for those with disabilities is *critical* for aforementioned sub-populations and in general.

## **Council Authority/Previous Decisions**

March 2020 - Council approved a motion directing staff to improve access to washrooms and water (See Appendix A for more details on this and other related policies).

## **City Manager's Comments**

The City Manager concurs with the foregoing recommendations.

## **Context and Background**

In March 2020, Council directed staff to improve access to washrooms and water. This resulted in two streams of activity: immediate response and deployment of washrooms and the development of an equity-informed approach to improving washroom and water access.

This section outlines the core issues related to washroom access and provides an overview of the City's current washroom programs. The emerging draft approach for an equity-informed washroom framework is outlined in the discussion section.

### Core Issues Related to Washroom Access

#### *Washrooms as a Basic Human Service*

Public toilets<sup>2</sup> are essential infrastructure that provide basic sanitation services. Safe and consistent access to these services leads to improved personal and collective health, social, and economic outcomes. All people living in, working in, and visiting Vancouver may need to find a washroom away from home to address basic bodily functions. Washrooms are in high demand across the city, especially Downtown.

While washrooms exist in private businesses, public facilities, and parks, there are many barriers that impact access for all. These barriers include closure (e.g., repairs, operating hours), cleanliness, availability (i.e., the absence/presence of a nearby washroom), restrictions for paying customers, sense of belonging or welcome, and real and/or perceived risks to safety. Poor washroom access affects basic health and sanitation and more broadly compounds both individual and community issues, including basic dignity, individual and public health, street cleanliness, community safety, and collective/personal well-being.

#### *Housing and Public Health*

It is critical to note that the lack of adequate housing exacerbates washroom access issues including creating increased demand on existing public and private systems. This requires a significant amount of administrative and operational effort from the City to manage across departments. Housing is primarily a senior government responsibility and research indicates that adequate housing best advances washroom access<sup>3</sup>. In the absence of housing and homelessness solutions, such as 24-hour emergency shelters, washroom infrastructure developed alongside wraparound services led by non-profits and staff with lived experience may have the largest impacts.

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<sup>2</sup> "Washrooms", "Restrooms", "Comfort Stations", "Bathrooms", "Water Closets" etc.

<sup>3</sup> Capone, D., Cumming, O., Nichols, D., & Brown, J. (2020). Water and Sanitation in Urban America, 2017-2019. American Journal of Public Health, 110(10), 1567–1572. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2020.305833>

In addition, poor access to public sanitation services and washrooms negatively influences public health. Poor sanitation contributes to the spread of infectious diseases, many of which can spread through fecal contamination. Further, there are fewer temporary handwashing and hand sanitizer stations post-pandemic leaving washrooms to serve a dual purpose.

### *Washroom Access Issues*

At first glance, access to water and sanitation services appears near universal. Most people can access washrooms at places of residence, private business, workplaces, and at publicly operated facilities (e.g., libraries and parks). However, despite existing City provisions, many people with housing across Vancouver face some degree of difficulty in accessing washrooms outside of their residence or workplace. Foremost, the presence of these services alone does not equate to safe, equitable, or inclusive access, particularly for equity-denied groups.

Some groups face disproportionate barriers to access while many rely on public and low barrier washrooms for daily basic sanitation, particularly those experiencing homelessness. Others who live in facilities with often substandard shared washrooms (i.e. SROs) also rely on public and low-barrier toilets.

### *Factors Affecting Washroom Access*

There is a multitude of factors affecting current washroom access in Vancouver:

1. Access to public washrooms across Vancouver is limited.
  - a. Most public washrooms exist in community centres, parks, and along the seawall (operated by Vancouver Park Board (VPB)). This inherently underserves park deficient neighbourhoods and the often-higher concentration of equity-denied populations within them.
    - i. Washrooms are in high demand, particularly Downtown and in the DTES.
  - b. There are limited public washrooms across the City (140 public toilets, ~1 per 5,000 residents - not accounting for visitors and workers). The number of public washrooms has not kept pace with growing housed and unhoused populations.
  - c. Many existing washrooms do not meet Accessibility Standards<sup>4</sup>.
  - d. Few washrooms are open late or overnight.
2. Many people face barriers to access at existing washrooms. People with disabilities face compounding access issues when infrastructure does not meet Accessibility Standards.
  - a. Without peer monitoring, there may be safety concerns and washroom access issues, particularly for aforementioned equity-denied groups.
  - b. Few washrooms provide safe and consistent access for those who rely on public and low barrier (i.e. non-profit) systems for basic sanitation (i.e., accessible, clean, gender safe, culturally relevant, reliably open, and welcoming spaces).

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<sup>4</sup> [https://free.bcpublishings.ca/civix/document/id/public/bcbc2018/bcbc\\_2018dbp3s38r2](https://free.bcpublishings.ca/civix/document/id/public/bcbc2018/bcbc_2018dbp3s38r2) (Section 3.8 - Design Standards)

- c. Women, gender diverse people, and sex workers face an array of safety issues to washroom access, particularly during late and overnight hours.

Access challenges were exacerbated by COVID-19 closures, which disproportionately affected sanitation access for people who mainly rely on public washrooms. While pandemic restrictions are now lifted, the housing, drug/overdose, and mental health crises persist, impacting access to washrooms.

#### *More than a Washroom*

People generally go to public facilities and private businesses to engage with their primary use – not solely to use a washroom. For example, someone accessing a community centre might take a class and then use a washroom while already in the facility. In contrast, equity-denied groups often use these facilities *primarily for washrooms*, as they may not be able to access a toilet or private space otherwise. In many cases, other groups, such as delivery drivers, outreach workers, families with small children, people who need frequent washroom trips and others, use facilities in this manner as well.

In the absence of adequate housing, public washrooms may serve as safe and comfortable personal private spaces for many people. Some use them for purposes other than toilet access (e.g. bathing, private respite space, weather protection, etc.). In both private and public facilities, staff and security may be taken away from their core roles and responsibilities to manage washrooms and washroom patronage. This requires additional staff time and can lead to conflict.

Washroom attendant and related programs improve access for equity-denied communities as there is demand for services beyond just washrooms.

#### City Actions since 2020: Washroom Attendant Programs and Extended Hours

Since 2020, City staff have deployed various temporary interventions to address washroom needs. The City installed portable toilets early in its pandemic response as an emergency stopgap. However, they were found to be inadequate and problematic, particularly for the safety of vulnerable individuals in the DTES and in other areas of the city. Other concerns included security, servicing, and vandalism.

The City rolled out washroom trailers in mid-2020 to better address the lack of safe access to washroom facilities. The trailers are powered (with lighting and heating), located outdoors, and include flushable toilets and sinks. Non-profit organizations operate the sites and hire staff with lived experience, often part of the communities they serve, to ensure people feel welcome to use the facilities. Wraparound services including monitoring, extreme weather respite, housing and health referrals, harm reduction, and community economic development (i.e. low barrier/peer-employment) were implemented alongside trailer infrastructure. These peer-led attendant programs address population needs and supplement sanitation services. This approach enables people excluded from existing systems to more reliably access sanitation services.

Placing washroom trailers adjacent to high need areas and working in partnership with non-profit operators have been key to mitigating public safety concerns for washroom clients and neighbours and ensuring dignity for people who need it most.

Staff also implemented various interventions during the Summer 2022 Emergency Encampment response. The City piloted a peer-led attendant program at the Pigeon Park Automated Public

Toilet (APT), extended hours at the Main and Hastings and Victory Square Comfort Stations, and have since worked with the Province to support a non-profit partner to activate a privately-owned retail unit on the 100 Block of E Hastings to provide washroom access.

These innovative initiatives addressed various compounding and immediate needs stemming from COVID-19 and housing-related emergencies. However, due to continued and increased usage, it is evident that need has persisted and that long-term permanent solutions are necessary. Many community members rely on these programs for safer washroom and sanitation access, but also as outreach points that connect people to each other, their community, and to other essential services.

### Discussion

#### Current Washroom Programs and Requested Funding

The washroom programs currently operating in the City fall into four broad service model types and are presently funded by provincial grants. The table below summarizes these service models, specific site locations, and the funding required to sustain services through 2024.

These initiatives support safer washroom access, have broader community benefits (e.g. cleaner streets), reduce burden on existing City resources, and benefit nearby businesses (see Appendix B). Loss of these programs would have a significant negative impact on the individuals who rely upon them, as well as the surrounding community.

<b>PROGRAM LOCATIONS &amp; SERVICE DESCRIPTIONS</b>	<b>2023 External Funding Allocation</b>	<b>Proposed 2024 External Funding Request</b>
<b>Trailers: Integrated service model. (2 locations)</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Astoria site (369 Hawks)</b> - community hub that provides peer-supported services and washrooms                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ This location saw around 4,000 service users in June 2023 (~150-200 per day).</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Murray site (1115 Hornby)</b> - serves the Downtown South and previously operated overnight.                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ This location currently averages between 20-40 washroom service users per day.</li> <li>○ <i>To be decommissioned in December 2023</i></li> </ul> </li> <li>• Both sites provide low barrier access to washrooms and related supports primarily serving equity-denied and intersectional populations.</li> </ul>	\$1.3M	\$1.55M
	\$0.5M	(Being decommissioned)
<b>Comfort Stations: 2 attended locations (1 operating 24 hours/day)</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comfort stations previously operated 16 hours/day between 8AM – 12AM.</li> <li>• Base operations (16h) are funded through the City’s operating budget.</li> </ul>		

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Main and Hastings</b> - the only City washroom location that provides 24 hour access to staff monitored washrooms (beginning in April 2023).</li> <li>• Uplifting Chinatown (Appendix A) and UBCM funded extended 24h operations at Main/Hastings.</li> <li>• <b>Victory Square</b> - currently operates 18 hours/day (6AM – 12AM) as of early 2023. This is only other site providing late/overnight access to staffed monitored washrooms.</li> <li>• Increased hours at Victory Square were funded through the UBCM grant.</li> <li>• Both sites help support gender safety, particularly late/overnight, through monitoring. There has been an increase in usage by women.</li> </ul>	\$.05 (both sites)	\$.04M (for continued 24h operations)  \$.04M (to start 24h operations)
<b>APTs: 11 locations in Downtown. (1 attended at Pigeon Park)</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The <b>Pigeon Park APT</b> was out of operation for 2 years prior to attendant program implementation.</li> <li>• Since program implementation, the APT has operated without closure and with fewer repairs/maintenance requests than other APTs.</li> <li>• Daily flushes have continually increased since reactivation and reached 3,000 in August 2023.</li> <li>• Program benefits include increased senses of safety, community, belonging and better relationships.</li> <li>• Proposed expansion of attendant program to 2 additional sites               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Main St. @ Terminal Ave. / Main St. @ Powell St. / or a Downtown APT*</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	\$.3M	\$.35M     \$.7M
<b>Adjacent Model: Indoor Attended Washroom</b>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>144 E Hastings</b> – offers peer supported, indoor, accessible washrooms, as well as water and clean clothing               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Averages 50 visits per day</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	\$.4M	\$.4M
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$2.85M</b>	<b>\$3.8M</b>

\* The two priority locations for future attendants are the Powell/Main and Main/Terminal APTs. Another Downtown APT is also under consideration.

Please refer to Appendix C for additional details on the listed sites.

Emerging Directions: Equity Informed City-wide Washroom and Water Framework

In 2024, staff will report to Council with an equity-informed washroom framework to address basic access to water and washrooms in a strategic and financially sustainable manner that delivers permanent solutions tailored to geographic areas and population needs.

Based on a current state analysis that included issue identification and an asset inventory, staff determined the following:

- the status-quo approach is not meeting the needs of various population groups;

- there are limited provisions of public washrooms across the City in general and this is especially acute in some neighbourhoods; and
- washroom infrastructure types (i.e., units/service models) exist that do not necessarily align with specific population needs.

(See Appendix D for maps of current locations).

The plan will take a ‘whole city’ approach that leverages existing facilities, partners, and providers, identifies effective and cost-effective solutions, and prioritizes actions to meet the most urgent needs.

Some early steps will include:

- Improvements planned as part of the renewal of the Street Furniture contract (procurement to commence in Q1 2024);
- Improving access to existing and future civic facilities (including working with Vancouver Parks Board, who have a washroom capital plan); and,
- Building partnerships (e.g. Translink, NPOs).

(See Appendix E for additional details on emerging directions.)

### Financial Implications

This report seeks Council direction on a \$3.8 million funding request to the Province to support ongoing and increased washroom access as a response to persistent homelessness and lack of available facilities.

Summary of Recommended Washroom Funding Request to Province for 2024		
<b>Trailers</b>	Astoria Hotel Trailer	\$1.55M
<b>Comfort Stations</b>	Main St. @ Hastings St.	\$0.4M
	Victory Square	\$0.4M
<b>Indoor Attendant Program</b>	144 East Hastings St.	\$0.4M
<b>APT Attendants</b>	Pigeon Park	\$0.35M
	2 New APT Attendant Programs	\$0.7M
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$3.8M</b>

The City received approximately \$3.7M from UBCM for washroom related initiatives with funding set to expire by December 31<sup>st</sup> 2023. Staff will be seeking UBCM approval to extend the use of existing funding to keep the programs operational until March 2024.

The \$3.8M requested from the Province would provide funding for one year beginning January 1<sup>st</sup> 2024 or April 1<sup>st</sup> 2024 depending on the UBCM decision. Access to washrooms and programs support the health and well-being of the individuals using them, as well as the broader community. The loss of these programs would increase costs associated with street cleaning/sanitation and negatively impact the community, individuals needing access to washrooms and supports, as well as the peers benefiting from the employment created through the program.

**Legal Implications**

Should the City secure funding, Legal Services would review any funding agreements.

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## APPENDIX A

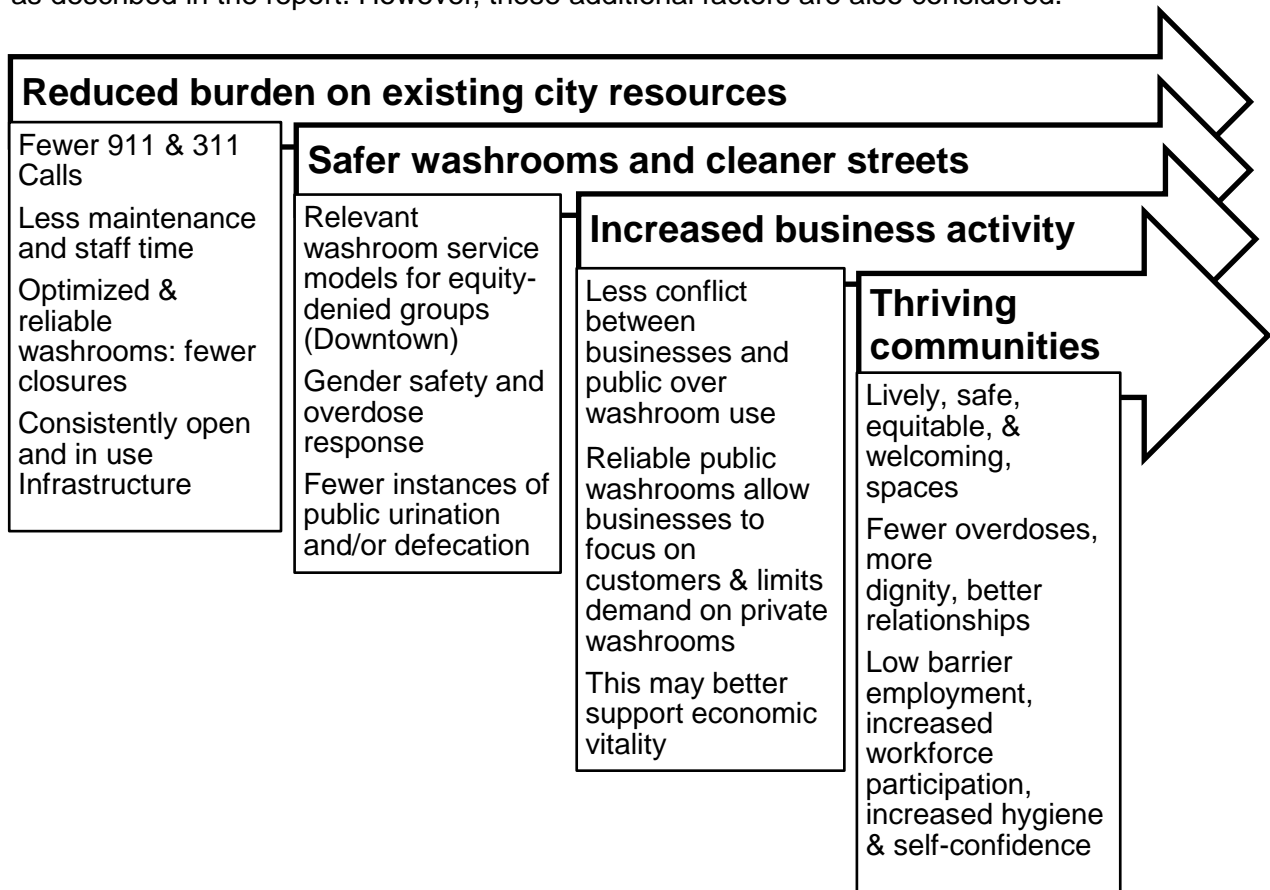
### Previous Council Decisions

- In March 2020 - Council Motion – “[Water and Washrooms as a Human Right](#)” - Council directed staff to develop a human-rights centric approach to water and sanitation services. To date, staff have been focusing on providing solutions to equity-denied populations mainly in downtown Vancouver as a priority.
- In November 2020, the [Parks Washroom Strategy](#) was adopted. The strategy guides the planning, building, and operation of parks washrooms in Vancouver.
- In July 2021, the Equity Framework ([RTS 14507](#)) was approved as the foundational document and commitment to embedding equity in the organization’s work.
- In November 2021, Council approved [Spaces to Thrive: Vancouver Social Infrastructure Strategy \(RTS 14727\)](#), Vancouver’s first 10-year social infrastructure policy and partnership framework.
- In July 2022, Council adopted the [MMIWG2S Response Report: Response to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Calls for Justice](#) and [Red Women Rising Report Recommendations](#) ([RTS 15198](#))
- In July 2022, Council adopted the [Accessibility Strategy \(RTS 14734\)](#) to support the full participation of persons with disabilities in the City of Vancouver.
- In July 2022, [Vancouver Plan](#), a long-range plan to guide growth and change, was adopted.
- In October 2022, Council adopted the [UNDRIP Strategy](#)
- In January 2023, Council approved the [Uplifting Chinatown Action Plan](#) increasing public washroom access in the DTES through 24/7 access to the Main/Hastings Comfort Station ([RTS 15432](#))
- In April 2019, Council approved the framework for the [Resilient Vancouver Strategy](#) ([RTS 13042](#)) to build resilience to major shocks, stresses and trends impacting our city and future generations.
- In October 2014, a long-term plan for social sustainability in Vancouver was approved - [Healthy City Strategy](#) ([RTS 10493](#))

**APPENDIX B**

**Downtown Standalone Washrooms: Attendant Programs Benefits**

Improved washroom access centred around equity-denied groups can both directly and indirectly influence the following elements. Attendant programs act on direct population needs as described in the report. However, these additional factors are also considered.



### APPENDIX C Staffed Washroom Locations & Hours – Current and Proposed

Washroom program locations with service level for 2023 and intended 2024.

Location	Address	Attended	Wheelchair Accessible	Service Level	
				Year 2023	Year 2024
Murray Hotel Washroom Trailer	1115 Hornby St	Yes	No	3:30pm to 12 am	Decommission
Astoria Hotel Washroom Trailer	369 Hawks Ave	Yes	No	Sun: 8am – 4pm Mon: 3pm – 11pm Tues – Sat: 8am – 11pm	Same (potential increase)
Comfort Station 1	Main St and Hastings St	Staffed: caretaker	No	24 hours	24 hours
Comfort Station 2	Victory Sq.	Staffed: caretaker	No	5 am to 1 am	24 hours
Drop-in	144 East Hastings St	Yes	Yes	9am - 9pm	Same
Pigeon Park APT	Hastings St and Carall St	Yes	No	9am to 9pm with attendant services	Same
Main at Terminal APT	Main St and Terminal St	No	Yes	6 am – 10pm, not attended	Attended
Powell at Main APT	Main St and Powell St	No	No	Currently out of service due to damage	Attended
Downtown APT	Specific location - TBD	No	Mixed*	Mixed^	1 APT Attended

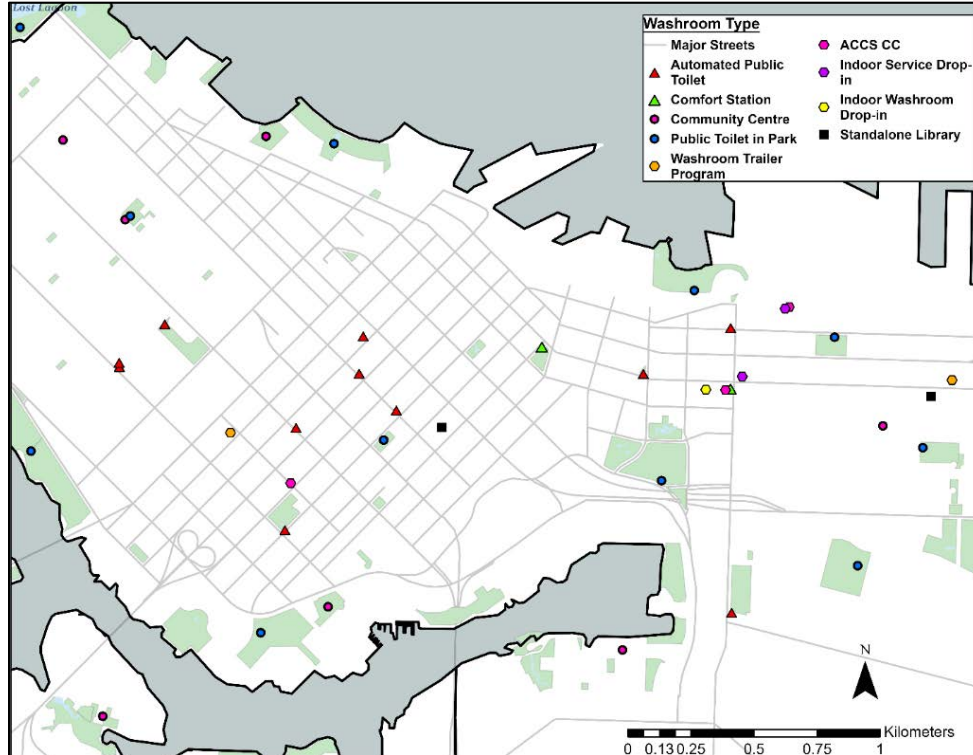
\* Certain APTs Downtown are Wheelchair Accessible

^ As this refers to multiple potential APTs, hours are 'mixed'

## APPENDIX D Washrooms in Downtown Vancouver

Maps below provide a visual overview of the limited availability of washrooms downtown.

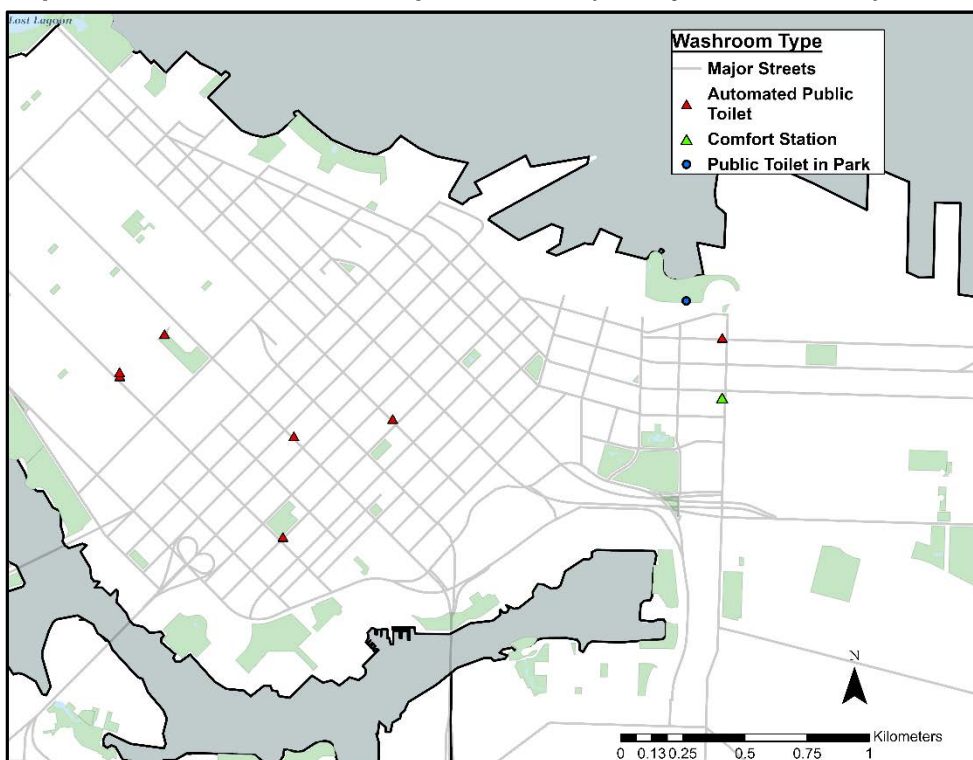
**Map 1: Downtown City-owned and City-supported Washrooms**



Downtown is a densely populated area with high foot traffic and a high concentration of equity-denied groups, with relatively few washrooms that support safe access.

Both public and private washrooms are in high demand.

**Map 2: Downtown Washrooms open 24 hours (all City or VPB owned)**



Automated Public Toilets may not be open 24h in practice. They are often closed for repairs and maintenance.

The Crab Park Portland Loo and Main/Hastings Comfort Station are the only reliable and fully functional 24h washrooms in Vancouver.

### APPENDIX E Emerging Directions

Emerging Directions for 2024 to improve access to washrooms and water as response to Council direction from March 2020.

Directions	Actions	Outcomes
<b>Upgrade existing standalone washrooms</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore APT alternatives: Portland Loos (success at VPB, other cities); innovations through Street Furniture Program; fully mobile trailer</li> <li>• Refurbishments of comfort stations for accessibility</li> </ul>	Resilient and reliable infrastructure that serves all populations with lower maintenance costs
<b>Explore targeted attendant model</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assess feasibility of a mobile attendant program in partnership with Parks and new Street Furniture provider (successful pilot community navigator program)</li> <li>• Maintain overnight attendant model at select locations</li> </ul>	More strategic use of resources while providing service models for equity-denied populations
<b>Leverage existing community services</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve access at outdoor facilities: VPB (parks, beaches, etc)</li> <li>• Work with partners and stakeholders (BIAs, NPOs, TransLink)</li> <li>• Better position Parks and ACCS Community Centre staff to respond to washroom user needs and focus on core programming.</li> </ul>	Find additional efficiencies in partnerships and share resources
<b>Phased Approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore deployment in specific areas while considering equity: DTES, Arbutus Greenway, South Vancouver</li> </ul>	Strategic use of limited resources through lessons learnt