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Dignity by Design: Public Restrooms as Essential Transportation Infrastructure

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Issue

Public restroom infrastructure has steadily declined across Greater Los Angeles, including within the LA Metro system and other public spaces managed by the city of Los Angeles. Over the past several decades, restroom closures, restricted access policies, and the removal of facilities have often been justified by concerns about maintenance costs, public safety, and use by people experiencing homelessness. Rather than solving these challenges, these measures have transferred the burden onto transit riders with disabilities, older adults, children, pregnant people, outdoor workers and women. As a result, Los Angeles has one of the lowest rates of public restroom availability among major U.S. cities, forcing many people to rely on private businesses or forgo trips altogether.

The shortage of public restrooms is a critical consideration for the Los Angeles Department of Transportation's Integrated Mobility Hubs initiative. Mobility hubs are intended to improve connectivity between transportation modes and create safe, accessible and welcoming environments for transit riders, pedestrians, cyclists and other users. Providing basic amenities — including public restrooms — is essential to achieving those goals.

Study Approach

In the absence of an established mobility hub audit framework, this study developed a prospective audit methodology to evaluate prospective hub locations. Structured site visits documented multimodal transportation connections, amenities, accessibility features, and user-supportive infrastructure, including shade, seating, drinking water, public restrooms, lighting and wayfinding. Observational analysis of movement patterns, modal transfers

and site activity supplemented the inventory, providing a comprehensive assessment of each location's functionality, user experience and readiness to serve as a mobility hub. Audits were used to identify opportunities to improve accessibility, safety, comfort, and multimodal integration.

Key Findings

- » Public restroom access is a transportation equity issue. The availability of safe, accessible, and reliable restroom facilities disproportionately affects women, older adults, people with disabilities, caregivers with young children, and transit-reliant riders. Restrooms should therefore be treated as a core component of transit station and mobility hub planning rather than as optional amenities.
- » Mobility hub investments should prioritize equity-enhancing amenities, including public restrooms, shade, seating, drinking water, and accessible wayfinding. These features should be treated as essential infrastructure that improve safety, accessibility, and mobility for all users.
- » Technology-enabled public restroom systems, such as those developed by Throne Labs, may help address longstanding concerns about cleanliness, safety and maintenance that often discourage public agencies from providing facilities. Their automated maintenance alerts support more reliable and scalable restroom management in high-demand public environments.
- » While Throne Labs' systems may expand public restroom access in transit environments, their smartphone-based entry systems can create barriers for users without smartphones or consistent digital access. Agencies should incorporate alternative access methods, such as with TAP cards, to ensure restroom access remains equitable.

