

## Quebec company has potential solution for public washroom issue



[Tyler Clarke](#)

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1 / 3 A self-cleaning washroom by Quebec-based Urben Blu, which have been installed at various municipalities in recent years, including a handful in Ontario. | Image: Urben Blu

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Although Greater Sudbury city council [doesn't appear very interested](#) in pursuing the topic, a Quebec-based company has a potential solution to the city's shortage of public washrooms.

Several municipalities, including a handful in Ontario, have either installed or are in the process of installing Urben Blu self-cleaning washroom facilities.

"After every use the toilet bowl is cleaned, disinfected and dried, so it provides them with a clean environment," Urben Blu owner and VP of sales Alain Bolduc told Sudbury.com

Following every five, 10 or 15 uses, a sprinkler cleans and disinfects the washroom's entire interior. If a deep clean is required earlier, Bolduc said a phone number can be called for the facility to be shut down remotely for an additional deep clean.

As for concerns about people overdosing inside the facility, the door automatically opens 20 minutes after someone enters the washroom, and a five-minute warning sounds at 15 minutes.

Emergency responders are automatically notified to investigate the situation.

"They will find them right away and will be able to take care of them," Bolduc said.

A single unit starts at approximately \$200,000, while a double unit starts at \$300,000.

"It's a building coming with a concrete pad," Bolduc said. "It's been approved and protected against a tornado and a hurricane ... and it's good for 35 years."

The self-contained, prefabricated, accessible units consist of an all-genders toilet and sink, with optional add-ons such as changing tables.

"Homeless people are really tough with the goods of the city, but the product is anti-vandalism, so they can't damage it, but they can do some graffiti," Bolduc said. "It's pretty easy for the city to clean it by power-washing."

Municipal staff tend to visit self-cleaning washrooms a few times per week to check in on them, versus a few times daily for traditional washrooms.

Urban Blu products are under warranty for 10 years, and Bolduc said nothing in their facilities is proprietary, meaning municipalities can source parts locally.

The need for public washrooms was identified by the [Downtown Sudbury BIA](#) in a media release issued in early January.

“Downtowns everywhere are facing this same issue. Progressive cities are meeting the challenge head on with housing and bathroom facilities and have been seeing success,” former BIA chair Jeff MacIntyre said in the release. “Sudbury has been slower to respond to this and I’m really hopeful that our new council has the energy to take on these challenges.”

Last month, a group of [community advocates petitioned](#) outside of Tom Davies Square for the city to take action and install barrier free, 24/7 public washroom facilities downtown.

Although there are [publicly available washrooms](#) downtown, they’re not available 24/7, and all come with potential barriers, including people being banned from facilities.

Sudbury.com reached out to Greater Sudbury city council for [their response](#), but they did not appear too interested in the idea.

Only four of 13 members of city council responded.

Ward 6 Coun. René Lapierre said he needed to better understand what the expectations of the group are.

Ward 4 Coun. Pauline Fortin said she would not support a public washroom facility due to security, hygiene and biohazard reasons, arguing, “If 24/7 public bathrooms were a good idea they would already exist.”

Ward 5 Coun. Mike Parent said he did not intend on raising the issue.

Ward 7 Coun. Natalie Labbé was noncommittal in her response, but noted that staff are seeking recommended solutions from other communities.

City children and social services director Tyler Campbell told Sudbury.com that staff have not looked into self-cleaning washroom facilities.

“If we were to look into it, we’d put it out through some kind of public process,” he said.

Instances of downtown defecation and urination are responded to on a complaints basis, and Campbell said the city has received only one complaint in the last two months.

That said, Sudbury.com spoke with 20 people who are members of the city’s downtown homeless community about where people on the street are relieving themselves. They identified several not-so-out-of-the-way places in the downtown core that people are using for toileting purposes, indicating the issue is more widespread than the single complaint would suggest.

Although the city deployed portable toilets outside of the Sudbury Community Arena during the early parts of the pandemic, it was only because most existing facilities were closed at the time.

With a warming centre set up in the arena at the time, they were able to staff the site with security.

Sudbury.com reached out to several municipalities for insight on how their self-cleaning public washrooms have panned out. The following is the information we gathered, joined by some information gathered by other Ontario media outlets.

Urban Blu appears to have cornered the market, as it was the only company to show up in this search.

### **City of St. Catharines**

A city spokesperson noted [their automated self-cleaning toilet](#) (by Urban Blu) officially opened in May, and was approved by city council in 2021.

A public survey asked, "Do you support the idea of adding or installing a public washroom facility that is more readily accessible in the downtown core?", to which 89.4 per cent of people voted yes.

Of the 220 respondents, 97.5 per cent supported using municipal funds on cleaning and maintaining the public washroom facility.

A municipal report notes that the advantages of self-cleaning washroom facilities in general is that it "has the functionality to clean itself after every use and is not solely reliant on staffing for cleanliness and the hours of operation can be varied to meet the needs of the community via automated programming."

Disadvantages included a high initial capital cost, and the complexity of the automated component and their specialized nature runs the risk of greater repair costs.

Drawing experience from other municipalities, they note such units were "well received by the public for their consistent level of cleanliness. Municipalities also noted that staffing levels required to maintain the units were reduced due to the inherent automated cleaning process. Local business establishments were also pleased since the unit provided a reduction in non-patron requests to use their washroom facilities."

Municipalities also noted that equipment failures were "not uncommon and usually required skilled personnel to rectify the issues."

One municipality disabled the automatic cleaning functionality of their washroom after approximately 10 years and are now using staff to clean the space.

Through consultation with other municipalities, they determined a "highly visible public area" is the ideal location for the facility.

## **City of Moncton**

The downtown business community in Moncton, N.B., requested a public washroom facility, which was announced in 2021.

“There was a need for this type of infrastructure for visitors, residents and our vulnerable population,” a city spokesperson told Sudbury.com of their Urben Blu facility.

“There have been some instances of vandalism and incidents inside the washroom which have incurred additional costs to the city. However, it has taken the pressure off downtown businesses (coffee houses, restaurants and retail stores) who would get requests from individuals to use their washrooms.”

The washroom is monitored by municipal staff, who inspect the facility daily to make sure it’s in proper order for public use.

### City of Kenora

[City council approved](#) \$150,000 toward a self-cleaning washroom in 2021 as part of a broader \$408,000 beautification project for which they received \$150,000 in federal funding through Canada's Homelessness Strategy. City spokesperson Health Pihulak told Sudbury.com the Urben Blu facility has been ordered, but that it has not yet arrived.

### Township of Centre Wellington

In July 2022, [council voted 5-2](#) in favour of an autonomous washroom at a total cost of \$386,000, including a provincial government grant of \$208,600. The Urben Blu facility [opened](#) in May 2023.

### City of Waterloo

Uptown [Waterloo is getting](#) a self-cleaning public toilet as part of a broader revitalization project costing \$350,000, part of which covered by grants. It is expected to [open this autumn](#).

The need for a publicly available washroom in the uptown area, open to all visitors, became apparent during the pandemic, a city report notes.

Their self-cleaning toilet, by Urben Blu, will include

- Automated cleaning, drying and sanitization after each user

- Touchless soap and towel paper dispenser and in-built trash can
- Barrier free, with additional accessibility features (baby change table, accessible entrance ramp, automatic door)
- Drinking water fountain
- Anti-graffiti and anti-vandalism features
- Heating and cooling
- A panic button to summon assistance in an emergency
- Alarms that can be seen and heard in case of fire or other emergency

## Grand Bend

Grand Bend is [getting two](#) self-cleaning toilets by Urben Blu at a cost of \$320,000, and estimated their total all-in cost to be \$450,000.

Lambton Shores council approved the toilets to ease public demand on business owners' washrooms, according to a report by the CBC.

*Tyler Clarke covers city hall and political affairs for Sudbury.com.*

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**About the Author:** Tyler Clarke

Tyler Clarke covers city hall and political affairs for Sudbury.com.  
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