



## A Few Safety and Security Solutions for Restrooms

By Katie Navarra

**V**andals routinely target concession stands, storage sheds and bathrooms, damaging expensive fixtures, “decorating” with graffiti or helping themselves to supplies. Sometimes, the public restroom becomes an individual’s personal shower stall. Restrooms can be particularly difficult to monitor and secure. Privacy is the number one concern with safety a close second, when it comes to deciding how to discourage troublemakers.

Government officials in China were so exasperated by the volume of theft of a particular item from one public bathroom that they resorted to extreme measures. In 2017, as detailed in an article in *The Washington Post*, officials installed facial recognition software in the restrooms at the Temple of Heaven in Beijing to thwart toilet paper thieves. When individuals enter the facility, they are required to stare into the machine for three

seconds. The machine then dispenses a 2-foot-long sheet of toilet paper, and if the person needs more, they must wait nine minutes before being doled out a second ration.

These measures may seem extreme, but the fact remains that providing a well-stocked, safe and secure restroom at park and recreation facilities is a challenge. The good news is that there are innovative and cost-effective methods for achieving all these goals. Tra-

cy Novak, CPRP, parks and recreation director for El Paso Parks and Recreation, offers one solution that has worked well for securing his agency’s remote facilities.

### Flashcam

El Paso encompasses more than 250 parks and 16 recreation centers with varying restroom and storage facilities. At one remote sports complex, vandals repeatedly broke into the concession stand. With each attempt, the maintenance staff progressively became more and more elaborate with the deterrents used. “Eventually, they put a quarter-inch steel plate over the door, which covered the locking mechanism so that you had to reach in a contorted fashion to unlock it,” he says. “Despite that, vandals were still breaking in.”

When the situation was brought to Novak’s attention, he asked the staff if they had considered security cameras. They had but assumed it was too expensive since the infrastructure for live-feed video and the staff to run it is costly. Novak had another solution: a hardened, solar-powered, motion-activated security camera. Motion triggers a verbal announcement, which can be customized or pre-recorded, a photo flash pops and the pictures are downloaded, via a Bluetooth

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El Paso Parks and Recreation has seen a reduction in vandalism with the use of a hardened, solar-powered motion-activated security camera.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF EL PASO PARKS AND RECREATION

connection, for follow-up investigation. At the remote sports complex site in El Paso, the recording warns individuals that they are in a restricted area after hours. It instructs them to leave immediately and informs them their photo will be taken and forwarded to law enforcement, if necessary. "Since installation, we have not had one incident," Novak relates. "We have found it to be very effective for its type and limitations."

In Novak's opinion, the biggest advantage of the system is its portability. Because it doesn't require hardwire infrastructure, it can be moved from one location to another as needed. The city has also had three playgrounds burned by arsonists. After cameras were moved to those sites, the incidences stopped. "It cost about \$8,000 for one camera rather than the \$50,000 to \$100,000 of a sophisticated live-video feed," Novak explains. "It's not a one-size-fits-all solution, but the QStar Flashcam has its advantages."

### "Smart" Restrooms

For larger facilities, high-tech automated solutions may be the perfect fit. Take for example, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit (MARTA), which recently piloted a "smart" restroom at its Lindbergh Station. A "virtual room attendant" monitors activity from an outside mounted overhead camera. After 10 minutes of inactivity, the "virtual room attendant" contacts the patron to confirm all is well. The "virtual room attendant" feature makes the restroom loiter-resistant.

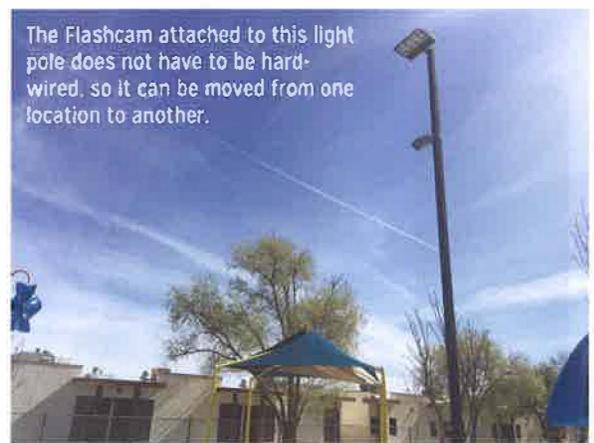
The fixtures inside the restroom are break- and chip-resistant, as well

as vandal- and graffiti-proof. The all-in-one sink basin includes a touch-free sensor that provides metered supplies and a hands-free, self-cleaning experience. The single unit dispenses soap, turns on the water and activates the hand dryer as the user moves from left to right.

While there is a significant investment in technology and equipment, the solution allows MARTA to more effectively use staff resources. "The station agents were spending a lot of time letting people into a bathroom. They would have to standby and wait for the person to finish," says Remy Saintil, MARTA's director of facilities maintenance. "We had to find a better way to administer and monitor the restroom so the station agent could focus on their job."

The "smart" restroom provides a safe and private experience and is a cost-effective way to provide restroom services to riders. The pilot, which included customer feedback, was so well received that MARTA plans on rolling out the concept at all its locations in a two-phase implementation process. "It's easy for any user. It's the press of a button and instructions are in Spanish and Braille," says Janyhl Howard, the project manager. "It gives us a centralized platform to monitor and track usage so that we're able to maintain it better."

The European-made automated, all-in-one fixtures were recommended through a consulting project with Public Facility Services. MARTA had hoped to subsidize the cost of implementation through Federal Transportation grant funds, but the grant required use of American-made products. MARTA's efforts to find a similar



product that met the qualifications were unsuccessful.

According to HG.org Legal Resources, in terms of camera placement, "Generally, cameras outside are almost always fair game. That is why many buildings, particularly in very urban areas, have a number of security cameras at every corner of the structure." However, where there is an expectation of privacy, like in a restroom, cameras typically are considered illegal and raise privacy concerns. It's probably a good idea to have signage notifying users that cameras are in use. With the Flashcam system, the pre-recorded message announces its use. In Atlanta, the camera and virtual assistant don't appear until a user presses a button. In both cases, it's obvious cameras are in use.

Establishing cost-effective solutions for deterring vandalism and maintaining public facilities can be a major challenge for park and recreation agencies. However, the availability of such structures will always be a necessity, so it is important to include maintenance and security costs in the overall budget and share best practices of innovative ideas. 🌿

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