

In praise of stores with public restrooms

Kathy Hedberg/Lewiston Tribune

On behalf of all of the middle-aged women living in this part of the country, I just want to thank the Nez Perce Tribe and the Idaho Transportation Department for putting in that public bathroom at the top of Winchester hill.

That little potty/convenience store stop has saved many a woman, me included, from risking public embarrassment and possible criminal prosecution for stopping in the middle of the highway to do our business. It's happened before. It's a long trip between Grangeville and Lewiston, and until the new Nez Perce Express was remodeled and opened a couple of months ago there were times I was so desperate I careened off the highway at top speed and squatted in the bushes.

Not a very dignified thing for a grown person to admit to, but a woman's gotta do what a woman's gotta do. And there aren't many of us past childbearing years who still have the marathon bladders we had 20 years ago.

The new potty stop at the top of Winchester hill is a blessing, and I don't believe I'm overstating that.

What people sometimes fail to recognize is that those of us in this stage of our lives often base our shopping or socializing decisions on how accessible the bathrooms are in the place we're going to.

I have a bit of a phobia about big-box stores or crowded rooms in the first place, but if I can't locate an emergency exit and the restrooms sign within a few seconds of entering a building, I'm back out the door, never to return.

Restrooms are usually placed in the back of an establishment, which is OK since I know the reason they want you in their store is to buy something, not just to use free toilet paper. And the guilt factor generally works on me - if I take advantage of a complimentary service, especially one as critically important as a bathroom, I will try to unload at least a couple of dollars in the place. After all, a person can never have too many bottles of Dr Pepper and Twix bars stashed in their glove compartments.

But there are businesses that seem to want to punish you for needing to use their public bathroom, if it's public at all. The restrooms are in the back of the store, which you can locate by walking a half mile through a maze of aisles and climbing over stacks of lumber and cases of soda pop only to discover once you've finally made it that you have to trek all the way back up to the front to ask the clerk for the key.

Businesses like that don't really want my business, and I try to oblige.

On the other hand, I've been to places where you walk into a public bathroom and there is a cordial, welcoming woman to greet you, show you the way to the facilities and afterward offer you all kinds of amenities, including soap, lotion, breath mints, curling iron and a neck massage. A tip is expected, of course, but the restrooms in those places certainly earn their names and are so comfortable it kind of makes you want to stay there the whole night.

Just for the record, the public restrooms at the top of Winchester hill are not like that. They have none of the amenities of a fancy restroom, but they're clean, they're functional and just by being there they give travelers a respite and a chance to get a new lease on life.

That's compensation enough. Whoever the genius was who planned it that way has a heart - and probably a middle-aged mother.

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