

Public Toilets and the City

For a can-do city, New York has an awful lot of trouble getting certain things done. For more than two decades, city officials have been struggling to install public pay toilets in the busiest parts of town. But aside from the rare pilot program, no comfort stations have arrived. Other American cities like San Francisco, Boston and Chicago have managed to provide their citizens and visitors with this basic amenity, while one New York mayor after another has thrown up his hands and retreated.

The Bloomberg administration is doing the right thing by trying to change that sorry record, but at a cost to some of the city's smallest businesses: newsstands. And the newsstand owners' resistance could once again torpedo the public toilets.

The problem stems from the agreement by Mayor Bloomberg and the City Council last year to lump together the installation of some 20 toilets city-wide with an overhaul of thousands of city bus shelters and hundreds of privately owned newsstands — all aimed at achieving a tidier look for so-called street furniture. One private contractor would build and install all the structures, giving some uniformity to the streetscape. The exteriors would be used as billboards for paid advertising. That would help pay for building and maintaining the expensive self-cleaning toilets — at locations still undetermined — while generating profits the builder and city would share. New York could reap hundreds of millions of

dollars over the course of a 20-year contract, and the contractor's take would be even larger.

Newsstand owners — some of whom have operated at the same spot for generations — would not share in the ad revenue and would not be compensated for their investment in building the stands, which are to be torn down and replaced, turning owners into tenants. The owners also claim that dozens of stands will be eliminated as the city's Department of Transportation takes the opportunity to claim more of the crowded sidewalks for pedestrians. The city says only a few stands will have to be moved, but its estimates have varied. The owners aren't reassured, and they're suing.

The Times and other publications obviously have an interest in seeing that the newsstands, which have dwindled from some 1,500 in the 40's and 50's to about 300 today, do not become relics. Their value involves more than just their wares. The newsstands are an important part of the city's street life, and their presence helps define New York as the unique place it is.

Considering that the city would be drawing revenue from some 3,500 bus shelters, the newsstands seem a very small part of the grand street furniture redesign. Detaching them from the street furniture program should save some stands, and it would ensure that the battle over their future did not further stall the long-delayed arrival of public toilets.