



Does This Smell Funny?

The city's \$1.5 million purchase of five automated public toilets raises a few questions.

ONE OF THE HANDIER things about being a woman is that eventually you become an expert on toilets. I don't remember the fanciest loo I ever used, but the sketchier ones stand out: a hole in the ground (Italy); a bowl and flush bucket (Morocco); the crew quarters of a Russian Antonov cargo plane (somewhere over Iceland); a raw-plank outhouse on a frigid mountain (North Carolina); the ladies' room of a bombed-out hotel (western Bosnia); a frat house men's room at the end of a three-day party (Ole Miss).

Thank God we never have to worry about any of that around here. In case you missed it, Atlanta owns five new high-tech automated public toilets strategically strung out from City Hall to Piedmont

Park to Buckhead. This toilet is called the Exeloo. It looks like a big silver cube with an elevator door. It serves one at a time. It talks, it sings. Its command sensors blink green, red, and blue; they get you in and seated and wiped and washed and dried and serenaded and exited without your ever having to touch anything except what the good Lord gave you. The only thing the Exeloo doesn't do is hand you a latte, and that may be next.

The first time I visited one, it was just after noon on a Wednesday, and the Exeloo had been bathing. The Exeloo cleans itself—I forgot to mention that. High-powered jets wash the place down after a certain number of uses (the retractable seat gets cleaned every time). This

particular Exeloo, in Woodruff Park, Downtown, was playing "What the World Needs Now Is Love (Sweet Love)," a less-than-subtle message intended, apparently, to justify the Exeloo's existence here and to soothe its target beneficiary.

The city bought the Exeloo's largely for the homeless, to afford a bit of dignity to those who have nowhere to go. To some people, public toilet means the restroom at Nordstrom. To the homeless, it may mean a doorway, a sidewalk, or a city park, which is especially true Downtown, where business restrooms are for paying customers and the sad signature scent has always been Eau de Poo. The Exeloo will admit you no matter who you are; it may be the most democratic piece of machinery in Atlanta. Scores of Exeloo "occupations" take place each day not just by the homeless but also by tourists, Georgia State students, and suits. The Piedmont Park unit gets the Frisbee-and-footballers. Edgewood gets pilgrims to Sweet Auburn and the MLK district.

Yet already the city has started giving the Exeloo the night off. Some units close as early as 9 p.m. and don't reopen until 7 a.m. "There was too much stuff going down," says Sean Fletcher, a GSU English major who works on the Exeloo maintenance crew and keeps a mental inventory of the colostomy bags, crack pipes, beer cans, and fecal finger-painting that he and his coworkers find.

As it happens, the Exeloo is built to thwart crap artists *and* graffiti, plus lingerers. Stay past the programmed time limit and instead of love, sweet love, you get a verbal warning, then a shrieking alarm. Ready or not, the door slides open. Which raises a question. What if you aren't in there cracking out or parlaying certain oral talents into a quick twenty? What if the pulled pork isn't agreeing with you and you're having . . . issues, and suddenly *whoosh*—Hello, Edgewood! Hello, MARTA bus! Hello, cute lawyer you can never (now) date! I showed my brother Mike an

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Exeloo and he said what the world needs now is the voice of Mr. T: “Get out, fool! Do your business and get out!”

Other cities that are buying into automated public toilets (APTs) charge a small fee to pee—a quarter, usually—but your Atlanta Exeloo experience is on the house. Which is fair enough considering you’re already paying \$1.5 million for it.

These toilets cost about \$165,000 each; installation and the two-year maintenance contract complete the \$1.5 million. While other cities fund their APTs through, say, sewer bills or get them gratis by allowing donor companies to advertise on “street furniture” (bus shelters, kiosks), Atlanta used a grant from the \$22 million Homeless Opportunity Fund, an arm of the Atlanta Development Authority. I’d be the last to deny *anybody* a decent, private place to drain the lizard or take the Browns to the Super Bowl, or whatever you enjoy calling your relationship to personal waste elimination, but is this weird? The city is \$70 million in the hole, homeless people need jobs, food, rehab, and, like, *homes*, and we’re spending \$1.5 million on commodes?

I met up with the guy who landed the Exeloo contract. He’s Louis Herrera, president of Public Facilities & Services Inc., in Roswell. Twisted me, I pictured a toilet maven as some schlub with plumber’s crack. But Louis, he looks like a frat boy, lives in Roswell, has an MBA from Georgia Tech, used to work in marketing and sales at Coke. And brother does he love his Exeloo. Herrera can give you about 8 million convincing reasons why the Exeloo is excellent and the expenditure makes sense. The day we met, he’d just sold some to Calgary. He’s so sure Exeloo beats other-brand APTs he’s planning to start manufacturing them here. He’d be the first: At this point, autopotties are all made in other countries. The Exeloo is manufactured prefab in New Zealand and can be found in the U.S. in metro Washington, D.C., and here. In addition to the five freestanding units, we have older Exeloo at the H.E. Holmes MARTA station and at the Cobb County Transit stations near Cumberland Mall and in Marietta.

At Atlanta’s City Hall unit, Herrera intro-

duced me to Gary Washington, fifty-eight, a skilled carpenter who was living on the streets when the Exeloo came to town. Washington fell in love with the Exeloo and started cleaning whatever the Exeloo couldn’t clean for itself. Herrera not only hired Washington but also got him into the Atlanta Union Mission; now he’s helping him move out on his own. So the Exeloo has succeeded in getting at least one person off the street. “This my baby!” Washington said, patting the Exeloo. “This my girl!”

Guess who else loves Exeloo. State Senator Doug Stoner of Cobb County. He’s the man behind the man behind Exeloo. The Smyrna Democrat, who’s running for a third term, owns Exeloo import rights for the Western hemisphere through his company, Exeloo East. He pitches Exeloo coast to coast and has one U.S. distributor: PFS. Stoner sells to Herrera after Herrera has won bids from clients such as city and county governments.

Stoner and Herrera met two decades ago, when Herrera was Coke’s rep for the Stoners’ family Dairy Queen business. When Stoner got the idea to bring Exeloo to America, Herrera’s the one he went to with the distributorship concept. They’ve been in business together for five years, through LD Squared, the Exeloo East holding company. Together or separately they’ve pitched Exeloo in cities including Fort Lauderdale, Portland, Seattle, and Chicago. Around here, though, Herrera is the face of Exeloo; Stoner—who legally can do business with anyone and who reports Exeloo in his state financial disclosure forms and is listed prominently as company president at exelooeast.com—says he wanted to avoid creating a perception of undue influence. “I realized that if I’m selling in Georgia, I needed to step away from that,” he says.

Yet he hasn’t stepped away. When Cobb County Transit bought Exeloo, Stoner did business with the same folks he had known as former chair of the Cobb Transit Board. And last December, during an Exeloo pitch to city commissioners in Portland, Oregon, he surprised at least one commissioner by presenting his Georgia Senate business card, a pretty clear overlap of public office and private business. “It was amazing,” the *Willemette Week* quoted Commissioner Randy Leonard as saying. “He walks in, gives me his State Senate card . . . then he hands me a bro-

chure. I was thinking, ‘Oh no you didn’t.’”

Stoner says being a senator “doesn’t mean diddly-squat” to potential clients in Portland or London or even in Atlanta because he’s got no influence whatsoever over who wins contracts, which are awarded to the low bidder. “At the end of the day there’s a process [in place] to make sure taxpayers are getting the best price they can get,” he told me. He said he used his Senate card in Portland because commissioners had been told he was a senator (wonder why). Stoner concedes the point that even being introduced as a senator could give him an advantage over some no-name potty peddler, but he said he’s simply using the career knowledge he’s gained over time, “just like anybody”—as if holding a high elected office with power to oversee billions of dollars and to create and change laws is the same as gunning for a corner office at Wachovia.

But hang on, it gets even more interesting. Stoner serves on the Senate’s ethics and transportation committees. He also serves on the joint Senate-House Transportation Funding Study Committee and chairs the Cobb Chamber of Commerce’s transportation committee. Before the Senate he served in the House, where he joined a delegation to the aforementioned Portland, to check out its streetcars. Which brings us to another stinker of an issue. Atlanta’s biggest problem is transportation. Stoner chairs the new Intermodal Rail and Transit Subcommittee. On February 11, the Senate Transportation Committee unanimously approved Senate Bill 410, which Stoner sponsored and which allows community improvement districts to borrow state money for transportation projects—say, streetcars?

Streetcars and light rail would be expensive but fabulously ideal, and Atlanta leaders are trying to get them, a fact not lost on anyone who’s paying attention. Three days after SB 410 passed, Herrera, branching out beyond Exeloo, reserved the corporate name “Modern Urban Streetcar Technologies Inc.” with the secretary of state. A month later he incorporated the company. His partner? You guessed it. Stoner told me he’s negotiated the exclusive rights to a British company’s streetcar technology, which he now hopes to market stateside. Nice work if you can win it. ■

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