

Back in time: The comfort station was a nice place to go

Some people don't like going in public. But sometimes when you're on the go, you've got to go.

And when you've got to go, you've got to go.

Now, might all this talk about going conjure up memories of the old comfort station in downtown Lebanon? Because, quite frankly, a lot of people went there.

The former comfort station in downtown Lebanon was a product of days gone by.

It was a time when the city's business district bustled. It was a time when people shopped downtown. It was a simpler time.

It may have even been a time when the good of the many outweighed the good of the few.

Now 94 and a resident of Myerstown, Evelyn Eisenhauer was the last city employee to ever work at the comfort station in downtown Lebanon.

"Somewhere there should be public restrooms," said Eisenhauer. "It was a shame they closed it. If you have to use the toilet today, I don't know what people do."

Located at on the northwest corner of Ninth and Cumberland Streets downtown - near the former Colonial Theater - the old comfort station was in operation for 22 years, opening in 1962 before closing in 1984. Operated by the city of Lebanon, the comfort station was designed to accommodate shoppers and visitors to the local business district, but it ended up serving a wider range of peoples.

"I was the last one to work there," said Eisenhauer. "It was an interesting job. I like people. You met a lot of different people. We had a lot of nice people coming in. School kids from the (Lebanon) junior high school would come in, and they would talk and enjoy themselves. I had no problems at all. I hated to see it close. But if that was open now, I think we'd have a problem. The world is different now.

"People used it," Eisenhauer continued. "People would come in after church. But you

never had to wait in line. It was a normal thing."

More than a couple of urinals and a few stalls, Lebanon's downtown comfort station was an oasis in the city, a place to go to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life and take a break from shopping. From the sidewalk, stairs led down to the underground rest rooms, and the comfort station was divided into a women's side and a men's side.

"You had to go down steps," said Eisenhauer. "When you went in the door, there was a large room, and you washed your hands there. There was a table there, a big mirror on the wall and to the left there was a phone booth. The toilets were on the right side when you walked in the door.

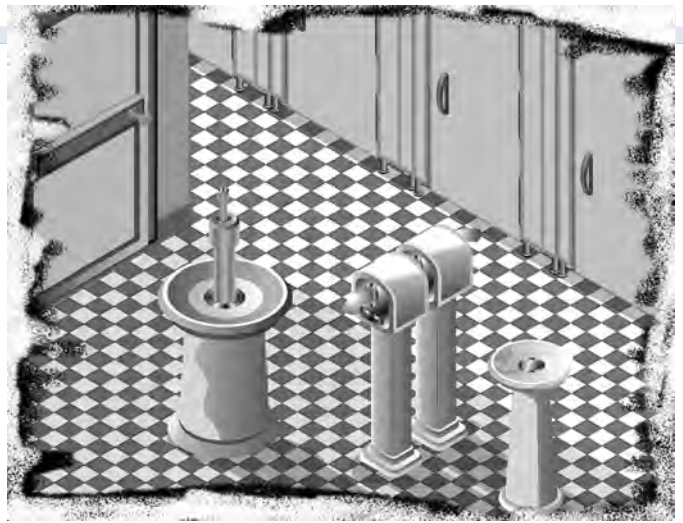
"No, you didn't have to pay to use the toilet," Eisenhauer added. "But there was another room where you had to pay a quarter to get into it. In there, there was a bed and a shower."

At one time, Lebanon's downtown comfort station was open every day, from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. At another time, the comfort station was open 39 hours a week, and closed on Sundays and Mondays.

At one point, the comfort station extended its hours to accommodate longer shopping hours downtown.

"They (the city) kept it very clean," said Eisenhauer. "If a toilet didn't flush or something went wrong, they were there to fix it. We cleaned floors. We cleaned all the tiles where it had drinking water. We cleaned the mirrors. We picked up trash off the pavements. We made it look nice. No, it wasn't hard work.

"The city paid you well," continued Eisenhauer. "There were usually four of us working there. We opened up in the morning and closed at night. We locked the gate before we left."



Almost from the day it opened on March 17, 1962, the downtown comfort station was a local point of contention pitting the need for public restrooms against the costs involved with operating it.

In 1971, the city closed the comfort station as a cost-saving measure. Then, the downtown comfort station underwent extensive renovations before re-opening on June 5, 1974.

At one point, Lebanon city council discussed the idea of requesting financial help from the downtown businesses to help maintain the comfort station.

"It was mostly shoppers who went there," said Eisenhauer. "There were chairs in there where you could sit and rest. The way I understand it, the downtown stores started closing when the malls came in, and it took shopping away from downtown Lebanon. There weren't that many people shopping downtown."

When the downtown comfort station was closed for good in 1984, the toilets, sinks, the stairway walls and the sidewalk-level entrances were removed. Then, concrete was poured over the entrances.

"I really liked the job," concluded Eisenhauer. "I hated to see it go when the downtown shopping slowed down. It was very comfortable to sit there and rest. You could stay there and relax a little bit, as long as you wanted. You could use the telephone."

Downtown Lebanon's old comfort station was a really nice place to go, but the world is different now.



Jeff Falk