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## Flushing Away Tax Dollars: The U.S. Dept. of Transportation Spent \$1.5 Million on a Bathroom in a Queens, NY Park

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# THE WASTE REPORT

October 30, 2017

## **FLUSHING AWAY TAX DOLLARS** **THE U.S. DEPT. OF TRANSPORTATION SPENT \$1.5 MILLION** **ON A BATHROOM IN A QUEENS, NY PARK**

You may have seen John Stossel's *Reason* story describing a \$2 million bathroom facility in Brooklyn, NY, that took seven-and-a-half years to complete.<sup>1</sup> One could be forgiven for thinking such a boondoggle received support from Uncle Sam in the form of tax dollars, particularly because there is another park bathroom construction project just as good... or, well, bad.

Just up the road from Stossel's discovery, this time in Queens, Uncle Sam found a way to flush away taxpayers' hard-earned money on a \$1.5 million park bathroom.<sup>2</sup>

### Federal Transportation Project?

One of the most interesting aspects of this boondoggle is that the bathroom was funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT). Aren't they supposed to build roads?

It appears the justification for USDOT's involvement was a concurrent expansion of a parking lot adjacent to the bathroom facility. The two projects were bundled together at a cost of \$6.7 million. While most people would not expect federal highway funds to be used for parking lots at city parks, at least cars drive on them.

But make no mistake, Uncle Sam paid for the bathroom. USDOT issued two grants on the same day for the project - one in the amount of \$1.6 million,<sup>3</sup> and the other for just over \$159,000.<sup>4</sup> That is more than enough to repave a mile of a four-lane highway.<sup>5</sup>

Both grants note the parking lot AND bathroom as part of the project descriptions on *USASPENDING.gov*. However, since one grant was for almost exactly the same amount as the bathroom cost, and ground wasn't

broken on that part of the project until shortly after federal money was awarded,<sup>6</sup> it is clear the central aim was not to fund the parking lot portion of the project.

### You Could Buy a House for This Price

Not only should the federal government, particularly USDOT, not be funding bathrooms at city owned parks, but the price is just ridiculous. The completed bathroom is just 800 square feet, meaning the price per sq. ft. is around \$1,875. Meanwhile, real estate website *Trulia.com* reports the average price per sq. ft. for an entire house in Queens is roughly \$481, about a quarter the price Uncle Sam paid.<sup>7</sup>

As Stossel noted in his report, Bryant Park, a privately owned park in Manhattan, renovated a similar bathroom for just \$271,000.<sup>8</sup>

### 12 Years from Start to First Flush

When the federal government decided to give funding to this project in 2012, it had already been in the works for eight years, and it would take another four years to complete.

When the ribbons were finally cut in 2016, State Senator Tony Avella, who pushed for the bathroom when he was city councilman, attributed part of the delay to the structure's custom design, saying, "Wouldn't it be better to have a standard design? I don't think my constituents care if this comfort station looks the same as a comfort station in Brooklyn."<sup>9</sup>

You are probably right, Senator Avella, but let's not forget the Brooklyn version cost \$2 million and still took over 7 years to complete.

<sup>1</sup> <https://reason.com/reasontv/2017/08/04/stossel-2-million-dollar-bathroom>

<sup>2</sup> USA Spending Award # 36X760183LY1030 & 36X760183HY1030

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usaspending.gov/Pages/AdvancedSearch.aspx?k=36X760183LY1030>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.usaspending.gov/Pages/AdvancedSearch.aspx?k=36X760183HY1030>

<sup>5</sup> Rate of \$1.25 million a mile from <http://www.artba.org/about/faq/>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.qchron.com/editions/north/little-bay-park-bathroom-is-done/article\\_18ab373c-bb8e-586a-b369-09927f1042a6.html](http://www.qchron.com/editions/north/little-bay-park-bathroom-is-done/article_18ab373c-bb8e-586a-b369-09927f1042a6.html)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.trulia.com/real\\_estate/Queens-New\\_York/market-trends/](https://www.trulia.com/real_estate/Queens-New_York/market-trends/)

<sup>8</sup> <https://reason.com/reasontv/2017/08/04/stossel-2-million-dollar-bathroom>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nydailynews.com/new-york/queens/bathrooms-finally-open-queens-park-12-year-delay-article-1.2520716>