



Read our CEO **Jonny Wilkinson's** regular column in The Northern Advocate

"A Different Light"

A Different Light – 17th May 2025 – “Public toilets can be quite the challenge”

There was a column in the Listener last week by Jonathan Kronstdt that caught my attention. He is a freelance writer based in Washington. He wrote a piece about the scarcity of public toilets in the United States. Apparently there is only eight public toilets to every 100,000 people. Staggering! He wrote about how challenging this was for the large American population of homeless people. He described how they build their days around where and when they can use a bathroom and how they stay dehydrated to avoid having to go often. Now this I can relate to. Going to you the loo can be problematic for me while I'm on route on long distance travel. It's logistics, getting from the car to the toilet. The performance of getting my mobility travel scooter out of the boot just takes too long is the urgency of needing to go is compounded exponentially every 15 seconds. The option of having my wife holding my hand and leading me into the Gents just isn't appropriate. The optics of having a male friend doing the same is not that flash ether. I also used to have a vague phobia of using public toilets. This stemmed from a time when I went to the Auckland University Library toilets. I was mindlessly weeing when happened to look up to see a young man with his head over the top of the toilet wall staring down at me. I got such a fright I ricocheted off both sides of the cubical three times before hurriedly vacating.

Even when I was more mobile, toileting during driving long distance was an issue. I remember an incident when I drove from Whangarei to Auckland. I was approaching Auckland when a police car started following me for a period of time before pulling me over. I rolled down my window and the Police Officer said *“we have had a complaint from the public about your driving. I have been following you for a while and your driving seems ok to me.”* I replied fairly indignantly saying I have been driving quite normally and didn't see any reason for any complaint. After checking my license and breathalysing me he was placated and drove off. Quarter of an hour later the reason of the complaint dawned on me. When I was driving through Dairy Flat, a long stretch of rural road, I got the urge to go to the toilet. As the urge increased, I started jiggling. The jiggling soon turned into a frantic fandango with my legs like pistons on both the brake and accelerator until I got to a petrol station in Silverdale. No wonder there was a complaint. So these days I opt for a regime of dehydration. Three hours before the start of the foray I glug down two glasses of water. I figure three hours should give my body enough time to process the liquid whilst providing some re-hydration for a period of time. This seems to work although I do arrive at the destination with a mild headache, dry mouth and feeling rather thirsty. Dear Readers do not try this at home or on the road.

In Whangarei we have a good range of accessible toilets. The best of these by far are the toilets in the relatively new Whangarei District Council building, the Te Iwitahi Civic Centre. They have push button automatic doors, and are roomy to the point of being cavernous. There is a shower and a changing table. It is available for public use. If you have a need an accessible toilet and haven't seen this one, its worth a look. In Whangarei we don't go need to go thirsty for public toilets as they do in America or me on a road trip.

Jonny Wilkinson is the CEO of Tiaho Trust - Disability A Matter of Perception, a Whangarei based disability advocacy organisation.