

(DISCLAIMER: Though this paper and its authors are fictitious, it is based on a real project the Electric Co-ops sponsored in the 1970s. Thus, the dates and references used herein are meant to coincide with that project's timeline.)

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Rural Modernization and the “Snap-On” Bathroom:

A Pay It Forward Project Proposal

Team Members

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Introduction

In many ways, South Carolina is a great place to live and those of us on Team Maxcy have enjoyed our time here. However, we realize that quality of life is by no means equal across the state. In fact, thousands of people in South Carolina are severely disadvantaged because of where

they live. In rural counties especially, residents lack basic amenities that those of us living in urban centers too often take for granted. Despite major strides made in the past decade by politicians to modernize rural South Carolina, it still lags far behind its urban and suburban counterparts. Nowhere is this more evident than in rural housing, which far too often lacks one essential feature: indoor plumbing.

The Problem

Though we use indoor restrooms everyday without thinking twice, there are large swaths of people in rural South Carolina who have never experienced that luxury. In fact, according to the 1970 Census, there are still nearly 150,000 homes in our state without indoor plumbing (US Census Bureau). When you multiply that number of homes by the average number of people per household (3.14), that comes out to around 470,000, or approximately 18% of the state's population, who don't have a proper toilet in their homes (ibid.). Without toilets, these people are forced to settle for dirty outdoor privies (otherwise known as "outhouses") [See Photograph #1, "Privy In Rural South Carolina."]. Even under ideal conditions (e.g. the privies are structurally sound, only shared among members of a single household, etc.), privies are an inferior substitute for indoor plumbing; the unfortunate reality is that conditions are often far less than ideal. These outhouses are often shared between several neighbors — one on a street in Black Bottom is shared by thirty eight different families! — and are just as often in states of disrepair or are missing pieces — one neighborhood privy in the Rock Quarry section of Greenville is missing a toilet because it was removed for use as firewood [See Photograph #2, "Privy With Missing Seat."] (Hollings, p. 34). Unsurprisingly, these run down community privies are major hazards to public health. As Senator Ernest "Fritz" Hollings observed on his 1969 "hunger tours" through South Carolina's most disadvantaged communities, privies contribute to a myriad of terrible

diseases [See Photograph #3, “Sen. Hollings On ‘Hunger Tour’.”]. Since the waste from privies is not properly disposed of and rain spreads it into the surrounding muck where parasites grow freely (Nuwar). Many of those exposed to this sewage-laden muck — often unknowingly trampled upon by children playing barefoot or by adults who simply can’t afford shoes — contract terrible cases of worms [See Photograph #4, “Child At Makeshift Rural Clinic For Anti-Worm Shot.”]. In his 1970 book, *The Case Against Hunger: A Demand For National Policy*, Hollings describes in vivid, stomach-turning detail — in our opinion, too stomach-turning to reprint here — just how these parasites grow and spread through the body, debilitating their victims (Hollings, p. 96). Adults afflicted with the worms often experience exhaustion, mental fog, and lethargy; children who get worms are likely to be developmentally stunted and have lower IQs than their peers — these symptoms have contributed to many stereotypes of the South as lazy and stupid (Ettling, p. 78). And, of course, that’s just one of the many tortuous and even fatal illnesses and parasites to which those without sanitary indoor plumbing are susceptible. These diseases and deaths are completely avoidable through use of modern technology and infrastructure — which is why you don’t hear about these things happening in urban and suburban centers of the state — *but* those things are expensive. It would require the development of complex rural water and sewer systems as well as the construction of thousands of add-on bathrooms. This could cost millions (perhaps even billions) of dollars and take years of labor from thousands of workers. The state and federal government have little interest in making this investment, not only because of the price tag, but because of the demographics affected by the issue. It is no secret that a large percentage of the people suffering in rural poverty are black — a fact that representatives from the NAACP brought to Senator Hollings attention during his hunger tours — and are thus not a priority for governmental assistance (Hollings, p. 102). Many

officials (both state and federal) perceive these people through numerous stereotypes and are consequently much less likely to take their pleas for help seriously. Senator Strom Thurmond, for instance, even after hearing Senator Hollings testify to the Senate about the dire conditions in which many South Carolinians were living, still insisted that the poor and needy were simply lazy (Bass, p. 65). So despite the efforts of Senator Hollings as well as our progressive Democratic Governor, John West, it is clear that to a large extent, the rural poor are on their own and will have to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. But how?

The Solution

A conventional housing initiative targeted at this issue would require building new bathrooms onto existing homes which would require expensive materials and skilled labor; our idea requires neither. We call them “snap-on bathrooms” and they’re exactly what they sound like. These are pre-manufactured bathrooms that can be easily rolled up and snapped onto existing homes. Each unit would include a toilet, bathtub, sink, radiator, and water heater — all the amenities of a modern home. Based on our estimates, we expect that each unit will cost \$1000 to manufacture, which is about 25% less than building an add-on bathroom (The New York Times). As for the labor, the units can easily be attached by the residents themselves or with the help of their neighbors. The only thing they’ll need after that is their local co-ops to connect electricity and the city to connect water and sewer lines. And where water and sewer are not available, residents can opt to install their own well and septic tank, or simply use a snap-on bathroom model with a chemical toilet that doesn’t require running water or a sewer connection. When a fully engineered design is completed, these could be mass manufactured at a minimal cost and easily shipped anywhere in South Carolina. If these units became widely used, it would eliminate the

need for outdoor privies which would (hopefully) also eradicate all the diseases and parasites previously mentioned.

Potential Funding

Even though our plan is less expensive than conventional add-on bathroom initiatives, it will still require a significant amount of money. So, given that our state housing authority is broke and the federal government is indifferent to this issue, how do we get it? We'll try a few different strategies in tandem. First, we will use Farmers Home Administration Home Improvement Loans. These are low-interest loans from the federal government that individuals can apply for and put towards modifications and additions made on their homes. These loans are already being used to fund add-on bathrooms in rural South Carolina and elsewhere, so they could just as easily be used to fund our snap-on bathrooms, too. This'll allow us to use federal money without having to navigate the political hurdles that usually come with it. Another thing that makes these loans attractive is that the co-ops already have experience using them. In the past, the housing sub-committee of their Stand Tall Commission has identified qualified rural residents and helped walk them through the loan application process [See Photograph #5, "Stand Tall Commission Volunteer Helping Rural Resident."] (The Stand Tall Commission, p. 57). This sort of support will be invaluable when implementing this proposal. As for the application process itself, all we will need to do is mail out surveys (much like the one in the Stand Tall Commission's housing sub-committee handbook) in self-addressed stamped envelopes to co-op members asking if they are in need of indoor plumbing and if their household income is below the poverty line. If they check yes for both, we can help them file a request for Section 504 Home Improvement Loans. These are 10 years loans of up to \$2500 which charge only 1% interest — perfectly suited to pay for our snap-on bathrooms (The Stand Tall Commission, p. 78).

In the event that individuals are rejected for these Farmers Home Administration Home Improvement Loans, we would also pursue other avenues for funding. For instance, we would solicit private donations from co-op members to fund snap-on units not covered by loan money. In order to do this, we would first install a prototype on a rural home as a proof of concept and then publish a story about it through SC Living Magazine, making sure to include information at the end about where members can donate if they'd like to support the program. After doing that, we would also try to solicit corporate and state governmental support. Perhaps, through them, we could arrange a sort of sponsorship program; just like interstates, college buildings, and public park benches, our bathrooms could have signs to acknowledge their sponsor-donors. All of these funding ideas in tandem would surely be enough to get our idea off the ground.

Team Member Responsibilities and Plan

Each member of our team will play a unique role in bringing our idea to fruition. Eddie, given his public health background, will write our advertising copy and our article for SC Living Magazine highlighting the toll that outdoor privies take on public health as well as the benefits of upgrading to indoor plumbing. Ryan will design and construct a scale model of the snap-on bathroom that can be used to present the idea to potential partners. Todd will be the government liaison and get in touch with potential sponsors.

Our end goal is obviously to eliminate the need for the outdoor privy altogether, but we need to be realistic about our first steps. We believe it is realistic that we as a team could find a partner and secure funding to construct a single prototype and have a sort of demonstration to be attended by relevant government officials and written up by journalists. We'd do this as a proof of concept that could jumpstart this idea as a viable housing option.

Conclusion

Obviously, the problem we've outlined is a big one and we're under no illusions that our outlined solution will be the silver bullet to fix it. However, we do think that our snap-on bathrooms will be able to help many people and need, and potentially even revitalize rural housing projects here and across the country.

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