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Transit drivers rack up tickets

Red light, speed violations spark outcry

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Calgary Transit drivers got 25 per cent more tickets for speeding and running red lights last year than the year before, prompting scathing criticism from aldermen who charge the public is being put at risk.

Bus drivers got 209 traffic tickets last year, according to city documents, compared with the 167 tickets handed out in 2007.

"To me, this is absolutely, 100-per-cent unacceptable," said Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart. "We're entrusting public safety to their judgment and they're putting citizens at risk.

"There's got to be recourse within the organization for this. Calgary Transit has to take this very seriously."

Calgary Transit spokesman Ron Collins said safety is a top priority for the organization, and added the ticket increase was a concern.

The vast majority of the tickets last year came from speeding.

Drivers were dinged 172 times by photo radar compared with 135 times in 2007, a 27-per-cent climb.

"There's absolutely no excuse for any of our drivers to be speeding," Collins said. "We want them to be operating in as safe a manner as possible.

"Having said that, you've got to keep it in perspective. The numbers are pretty low. It's 209 tickets for a fleet of over 1,000 vehicles and 1,700 drivers."

Drivers also got tagged with 37 red-light tickets, a 15 per cent rise from the previous year.

Collins noted more drivers and buses were on the road last year than ever before, meaning the chances of getting a ticket also rose.

The 25 per cent increase in tickets was noticeably higher than the three per cent increase in the distance drivers travelled last year.

Ald. Bob Hawkesworth said the City of Calgary needs to lead by example when it comes to reversing what he said was Calgary's speeding culture.

"We've got too many speeders in Calgary and we don't need professional drivers contributing to that," he said.

Collins said drivers who get tickets are reminded about safety by their supervisors and the organization monitors those few who get caught multiple times.

Calgary Transit drivers were also nabbed less frequently for speeding than all Calgary drivers, though not by much. Bus drivers had around 16 violations for every 100 vehicles last year, while Calgary drivers incurred around 17.

Mike Mahar, president of Amalgamated Transit Union Local 583, which represents drivers, said those at the wheel are sometimes trained to cautiously go through yellow or red lights if it's safer than a sudden stop.

He pointed out drivers have to pay every cent of their own tickets.

"It's not a profitable day for the operator," he said of those who get tickets.

Passengers who regularly ride buses said they rarely feel unsafe because of a driver's habits.

"I've seldom come across a driver who's speeding," said Carolyn Brown, who takes four buses every weekday.

"I usually find them pretty safe," said Greg Hagen, who takes two.

"There are exceptions once in a while. I've seen them go through a few red lights."

Bus drivers' infractions made up more than half the tickets given to city vehicles last year.

Those who drove the other 2,200 vehicles in the city's fleet last year racked up 204 tickets, a four per cent decrease compared to 2007. The distance they travelled, meanwhile, climbed by 13 per cent.

Bernie Trahan, director of fleet services, said he was happy with the drop but not completely satisfied.

"We're still not where we need to be. We need to go lower," he said.

"We need to set an example. It's an issue of safety for me."

Trahan said he'll be in meetings near the end of the month to look at reviewing training and safety programs, but hoped the safety message he's already been pushing has been sinking in.

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