



Wednesday » January
21 » 2009

Give Calgary Transit a break Statistics don't justify aldermanic lambasting

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The number of traffic tickets sent to transit drivers went up last year by roughly 25 per cent: Photo radar nabbed transit drivers 172 times for speeding, and traffic light cameras caught them 37 times for failing to stop on red.

Aldermen should put the brakes on their criticism, though, considering the grand total is still quite low--just 209 tickets for a fleet of more than 1,000 vehicles.

True, as professional drivers, transit workers must be held to a higher standard. They are entrusted with the job of keeping the travelling public safe.

But, let's not call an imperfect performance disgraceful. Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, for instance, went so far as to suggest public safety is at risk, calling for "recourse within the organization for this. Calgary Transit has to take this very seriously." Ald. Bob Hawkesworth was also critical.

Well, hold on. Looked at as infractions per kilometres driven, the numbers are actually extremely low considering the amount of driving done by Calgary Transit bus drivers. They are also probably better than almost all non-professional drivers.

Consider: Calgary Transit employs 1,700 bus drivers, who logged 49.8 million kilometres in 2008, up two million from the year before when they employed 360 fewer bus drivers.

In that light, it's amazing they only got 209 tickets, or one infraction for every 238,277 kilometres.

The average Calgary driver doing 20,000 kilometres a year would have to drive nearly 12 years without getting a ticket to beat the collective performance of the city's bus drivers. How many of us do?

Then there's the matter of photo radar. It's an easy way to nab drivers who break the law, but it has no discretionary capability to determine the circumstances. One can't stop a bus like a car: Quite apart from the dilemmas posed by slippery conditions, how many times, one wonders, have bus drivers had to decide whether to keep rolling or exercise the full braking capacities of the bus to avoid running a red light, knowing that if they chose the latter, there was the risk of discomfort or even injury to passengers unrestrained by seatbelts?

It's telling that those who ride city buses regularly report they don't feel unsafe.

Good driving involves a complex set of mental, social, emotional and physical skills and requires responsible drivers to make quick judgments and sound decisions.

Good drivers keep their eyes moving. They look far ahead and take in the big picture. It's time aldermen did the same, and were slower to judge transit drivers' performance based on the number of photo radar tickets.

We would never counsel any-thing but the utmost attention to the safest of driving standards for transit drivers.

Still, these statistics don't suggest they've done anything but an excellent job living up to that expectation.

Suggesting otherwise is simply untrue, and a disservice to the department and the morale of its employees.

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