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City aldermen are calling for a review and rollback on fees after an insider tip said ParkPlus was supposed to save \$1.2M

By [MICHAEL PLATT](#)

When nobody likes you, nobody misses you either -- it has to explain why the mystery of the vanishing parking patrol officer is only now the hot case for the fiscal sleuths at city hall.

Of all the questions raised by the recent increase to downtown parking rates, the top puzzler of all is what happened to the platoon of ticket-writers who once ruled downtown's streets with such surly efficiency -- and why no one noticed they were gone.

According to a memo sent to an alderman from a city-hall insider last week, the new automated ParkPlus system has made the jobs of 30 meter-readers obsolete, yet there have been no savings in the form of staff reductions.

"The new machines do not require the 30 staff to manually go out and write tickets.

"There are two vehicles which now patrol. If the 30 staff were laid off, which they were not, it would save \$1.2 million," reads the insider tip sent to the alderman.

ParkPlus relies on patrol vans with onboard computers to scan licence plates, with fines sent out by mail.

The old image of the grumpy parking officer stuffing a ticket under your windshield wiper is all but obsolete.

And yet, Calgary parking officers, so long the target of mass public loathing, still have jobs -- this nearly two years after the ParkPlus system began replacing them.

That delayed revelation has compounded concern over the decision to hike downtown parking to \$5 an hour from \$4, a price the Calgary Parking Authority says is in line with the fee charged by private lots, as mandated by city council.



At a city council meeting today, some aldermen will ask for ParkPlus rates in the core to be reduced to \$4 an hour, after prices were quietly hiked to \$5 an hour earlier this month. (Jim Wells, Sun Media)



Despite the parking rates being approved by city council in November, some aldermen now say it's too much of a price hike during a recession.

At least one city councillor wants the increase scrapped, and the question of where the savings are in ParkPlus is now on the agenda as well.

The issue is expected to be raised at today's meeting of city council, and Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart says it's time to order an audit of the Calgary Parking Authority, to ensure taxpayers are getting the best value for their money.

"We need a thorough review of this whole thing, and if council won't do this, if it doesn't have the guts, then we have to rely on the city auditor," said Colley-Urquhart.

"I'm going to ask when the last operational audit of the Calgary Parking Authority took place, because in my mind, it's long overdue."

City hall's auditor, Tracy McTaggart, might want to hire some of those surplus parking patrol officers to help her man the calculators in the coming year.

The watchdog will be busy.

With taxpayer fatigue turning to taxpayer fury as Calgary's economy withers, those rare aldermen with an eye on the public mood are starting to question every penny taken from the public pocket.

Yesterday, Sun columnist Rick Bell revealed the city's auditor would be conducting a probe into the controversial \$25-million Bow River footbridge, and why the \$3.3-million design contract never went to open tender.

McTaggart might soon be adding the Calgary Parking Authority to that list, depending upon the answers given to aldermen today.

There were no parking officials available for comment yesterday, so the mystery of the parking officers remains.

Dale Fraser, general manager of the CPA, told the Sun last week that parking officers were still writing old-fashioned tickets in downtown areas not covered by ParkPlus, including alleys. Others are needed in the Beltline, where the computerized system is still being installed.

But those areas have always been subject to parking fines -- and whether that adequately explains why the entire platoon of parking cops is still employed remains to be seen.

Ald. Ric McIver, another alderman wanting to protect the public pocketbook, will ask if the parking increase can be rolled back to \$4 an hour at today's council meeting.

He also wants to know why the parking authority still needs so many officers.

"It's a hell of a good question, the question of how much staff has been reduced, now that there's fewer meters, and less coin collection," said McIver.

