

Reserved parking at LRT lots proving to be unpopular

BY RICHARD CUTHBERTSON, CALGARY HERALD SEPTEMBER 12, 2011



Motorists appear unwilling to shell out \$70 a month to secure a spot at LRT lots.

Photograph by: Gavin Young, Calgary Herald

It was touted as an alternative to the much maligned \$3 park-and-ride fee, but interest so far in the city's reserve parking system at LRT lots has been poor.

Just 16 per cent of all possible reserve places are being scooped up by commuters, leaving transit with far less revenue now than they had under the old system where everyone paid to park.

Despite the morning rush to park at some of the prized LRT lots, it appears many motorists are still willing to leave their morning commute to luck, rather than shell out the \$70 a month to secure a spot.

"They don't want to make a commitment because there's a chance that they can get there and find a free spot," said Neil McKendrick, the city's transit planning manager.

Introduced in 2009, the \$3 fee proved a tough sell to many commuters, while some neighbouring communities complained their streets were being overrun by drivers trying to avoid the fee.

Last year, council voted to can the charge, and the fee was pulled at the end of March. In its place, a reserve system was set up, which set aside up to 50 per cent of all spaces.

But in scraping the fee, council also took away a source of money that transit was using to pay for upkeep and security of the lots, an effort that costs \$4 million a year.

The new reserve system is expected to bring in just \$1 million next year, compared to five times that when the park and ride fee was in place.

It leaves a financial hole that some worry will have to be filled with cuts from other parts of the service.

“At the end of the day, what I’m afraid of is it will manifest itself in sharply reduced numbers of transit service hours, which is really what the game is about,” Ald. Gord Lowe said.

He said that many of the spaces at the Brentwood and Dalhousie lots are being taken up by university students, while Crowfoot LRT, in his ward, is prime territory for commuters from Cochrane to leave their cars.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said the problem with the new reserve system is that people simply won’t pay if they don’t have to.

She was another supporter of the \$3 fee to fund better security at the park-and-rides.

“We can’t have it both ways,” she said. “We can’t have all of these additional security features and not have a way to pay for it.”

McKendrick said he does expect the reserve system to pick up in popularity. But he also adds that an earlier survey on park-and-ride fees suggested users liked the certainty of getting a spot, but that hasn’t borne itself out with the new system.

This comes as council today will examine transit’s fare structure and deliberate possible changes to who should pay and how much it should cost to ride the bus and LRT.

Last year, transit’s operating costs totalled \$227.5 million. Property taxes are supposed to pay for 45 per cent of that, while fares and other revenue, like advertising, take up the bulk.

The problem is that right now transit is not able to support that ratio.rcuthbertson@calgaryherald.com

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