

Meter still running on stupidity

By RICK BELL

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Another root canal of a chinwag, another miserable marathon on the city council not-so-merry-go-round.

And nothing changes.

The little political hamsters pitter patter on their little wheels, fiddling with their little bits of paper, floating their little trial balloons and some of the sad critters actually think they're getting somewhere.

But nothing changes.

They're in a room yesterday and, after jawing over all sorts of mind-numbing material masquerading as substance, the big show is advertised to be about parking, more particularly hikes on the cost of parking tickets, the latest stupidity in the Land of Stupid.

What do we have here? The city budget, to be fought over starting Monday, has a tax hike of 4.8% and some folks are real proud they got the number that low.

Ah, but, in the words of the great Tom Waits' song, the large print giveth and the small print taketh away. Right here in the city budget, on Page 42 to be exact, the large print says the city is reducing rates for short-stay parking. If you park, run and come back to your car real quick, you get a break on how much you have to plug the fancy machine totalling enough to buy half a cup of bad coffee.

Now wait. Sadly, and without surprise, in a place where straight talk is a foreign language. The budget also confirms the Calgary Parking Authority is counting on a million bucks in increased parking fines. They also count on more enforcement, a higher fee at the impound lots and then the whammy, the slap in the face, the kick where it hurts.

On-street and off-street parking lot moolah will go up by \$1.8 million "through increase of hours and activity."

"Increase of hours and activity" is a paper-shuffler's way of saying they're looking at charging for parking six days a week after six at night and on Sundays.

Ladies and gents, you cannot make this stuff up.

Funny thing. At the front of the budget it says this year's tax grab features "reduced parking rates." Er ... it doesn't mention the fine print of parking gouging. Then again, that's why it's fine print.

Dale Fraser, the poobah of city parking, reveals little of his plans.

He has already said enough to stir up citizens, who hopefully can see this gang for what they are. He promises to talk coin when he asks council Monday to let him scoop up mucho dollars and tells aldermen yesterday, if he doesn't get what he wants, it will have a "significant impact on the budget."

That means city council will have to come up with the cash somewhere else. So much for the 4.8% tax hike.

Ald. Ric McIver asks for a freeze on all pricing changes until June of next year, when a review of the Calgary Parking Authority will be done. Oh, I didn't tell you. This group of aldermen recommends a consultant do a \$200,000 study of the parking outfit.

No matter. McIver's brainwave crashes with Ald. Bob Hawkesworth as one of those giving a thumbs-down because he doesn't like "paralyzing the Calgary Parking Authority" from charging us more.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, aka Big Red, is back in the fray.

"I think the Calgary Parking Authority can do with a little paralysis. These guys at times look to be a little bit out of control," she says. A little bit?

"Many of us are pretty grumpy."

How about vein-popping mad?

"What we have here is a complete mess."

Diane suggests to Fraser the parking authority could make money with their own Parking Wars reality show. Unfortunately, it wouldn't be believable. It would be like doing Celebrity Rehab where no one ever gets sober.

The day drags. The sky darkens. By now, a guide dog sleeping on the floor, wakes up and walks out. He's had enough.

We now have a game of Last Alderman Standing, with only four left. A couple on council want hikes to only a few parking fines but not the same fines. Ald. Dale Hodges finally suggests they just recommend to council killing all fine increases. It changes nothing but dulls the pain for the moment.

"This is where we get to the main event," he says to the other three aldermen, who, like him, are looking more than a little like punch-drunk boxers.

"Let the chips fall where they may."

And they fall. Right back in the budget.

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