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Parking hypocrisy riles aldermen

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The insult isn't so much that millions are spent on cushy parking perks for city employees — the real slap in the face is the hypocrisy.

This is the same city that denies downtown parking privileges to its own citizenry, refusing to allow new parkades in a bid to cram more commuters onto overcrowded C-Train cars. Meanwhile, the elite at city hall enjoy plush downtown parking spaces worth roughly \$2.6 million a year — money that, you guessed it, comes straight out of the taxpayer's pocket.

Forgivable, maybe, if the municipal employees in question actually required their cars for work, but a new report by the City Auditor shows the stalls have little to do with jobs, and everything to do with avoiding public transit.

"We found that The City of Calgary is providing a significant amount of parking to employees on a discretionary basis," reads the audit, to be heard Monday at city council.

"The majority of these employees do not regularly use their vehicles for business."

The audit shows that of 634 city employees with reserved parking stalls, only 41 use their vehicles for business three or more days a week.

And a whopping 468 city staffers use their vehicles for business one day or less a week — the only reason they have stalls is so they can skip riding the C-Train.

Of some comfort is the very report that has exposed this parking pecksniffery may be its undoing.

Already, aldermen are lining up to dismantle the system that makes parking a perk for those on the public tab — and if the audit department recommendations are heeded, there'll be more municipal bums on bus seats.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart is one who says the city should be leading by example, and if reducing the number of downtown drivers is the goal, City employees should not be enjoying privileged parking.

"The city has a long way to go when it comes to employees reducing their use of cars and that's what this audit is saying," said Colley-Urquhart.

"It's this very type of spending where we need to shave off operating costs and lead by example."

The city's downtown parking policy has long been a source of frustration for private corporations, because new parkades are banned in the core.

That ban is the result of a city policy restricting the number of parking spaces, in an attempt to force the majority of commuters onto public transit.

With downtown acting as an employment centre for more than 120,000 people, and only so much room on the roads, there is logic to the anti-car mandate.

But it's a painful policy. Those forced to ride the trains will tell you it's an exercise in patience and lack of personal space, with commuters standing arm-pit-to-elbow.

But clearly, the goose and gander are two different things in Calgary, with the very officials who preach public transit being the least likely to carry a bus pass.

According to numbers in the audit report, the City of Calgary boasts 0.31 parking stalls for every municipal employee in the core, not counting police officers.

The ratio for other businesses downtown ranges from 0.05 to 0.15 stalls per employee.

Most audacious of all is the number of parking passes reserved for the city's top managers: Of the 52 highest-ranking public servants on the city payroll, 48 enjoy leased parking privileges.

If you've ever suspected City of Calgary management hasn't got a clue about the misery of a rush-hour C-Train ride, you were right — with great power comes great parking.

Now it's up to city council to dismantle the parking caste system at city hall, by taking passes away from those who don't really need them.

It'll save plenty — the audit suggests \$1.13 million might be recovered if non-essential parking passes were scrapped, leaving only essential stalls and the occasional parking voucher.

As a bonus, "reducing the number of stalls leased for City purposes will also return stalls to the Calgary Parking Authority for public use." So reads the Auditor's Report.

Whether city council does the right thing in ending unnecessary parking privileges, remains to be seen.

But as Ald. Ric McIver says, some serious questions have been raised.

"That's the beauty of an Auditor's Report — it raises important and legitimate questions," said McIver.

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