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City cashing in on \$15M in parking fines

By BILL KAUFMANN, CALGARY SUN

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Parking in downtown Calgary is among the most expensive in Canada

Calgary motorists picked up nearly \$15 million in city-imposed parking fines last year — a record amount.

And the city's parking authority is near the top among major western Canadian metropolitan areas in the per capita number of tickets it issues and money it collects from them.

In 2010, the body handed out 281,000 parking tickets — enough to assess \$14.6 million in fines in this city of 1.1 million people.

By comparison, Edmonton, with a metropolitan population similar to Calgary's, issued 139,137 parking tickets in 2010 versus Calgary's 287,000.

The province's capital collected \$7.1 million last year — less than half the Calgary total.

Meanwhile, the City of Winnipeg issued 166,356 tickets in 2010.

In 2009, the Manitoba capital, with a population of 700,000, collected \$6.2 million in fines while their Calgary counterparts raked in \$13.1 million that year.

Among the cities canvassed, only Toronto, which in one recent year culled nearly \$80 million from parking infractions, generated per capita numbers far greater than Calgary's.

Moments after paying a parking fine at the CPA's downtown headquarters, Ron Doucett said he was surprised the amount raked in by the authority. "It's hard to believe for a city with not that big a population," said the construction worker, calling rates at all parking lots "ridiculous."

"They want to keep the traffic out of here but it's obviously not working."

Calgary Parking Authority (CPA) general manager Dale Fraser said the numbers shouldn't cast the image of a cash cow.

"Our business isn't about issuing tickets — we want to see people parking lawfully and ticket numbers come down," said Fraser.

And he used a city police traffic enforcement argument that it's up to the motorist to avoid being fined.

"We don't issue a ticket unless there's an infraction," said Fraser.

But he said there's an important difference between the two organizations.

"The police get to keep their red light ticket revenue — ours goes into general city revenues," he said.

Calgarians, he added, can be grateful that the ever-ballooning parking fine yield "helps bring the millrate down."

The ParkPlus system, which employs roving photo enforcement and cellphone payment, wasn't introduced in 2007 to increase revenue but to enhance convenience, said Fraser.

"Calgarians have embraced cellphone paying," he said.

CPA officials say the way Calgary's downtown streets were laid out in the 19th century guaranteed narrow roads — putting parking at a premium, thus requiring more enforcement.

Outside the core, C-Train stations are a magnet for ticket infractions from motorists driving to them, said CPA spokeswoman Shelley Trigg.

"With more stations, we have a large number of Residential Parking Permit Zones which generate resident complaints and parking violations," said Trigg.

Another reason for the higher ticket take, said Fraser, are two recent increases in fine levels crafted by city council — one in the fall of 2008 and the most recent in March of last year.

What were once \$40 or \$50 punishments, said Fraser, are now \$75. A big reason for those hikes was to encourage offenders to clear their parking tabs, he added.

"People were taking longer and longer to pay," he said.

The cost of parking, says the CPA, is greatly influenced by private firms that control at least 80% of downtown stalls.

Edmonton hasn't been nearly as zealous in pursuing technology in cracking down on offenders at the expense of municipal coffers, said Josh Puchailo with that city's parking enforcement.

"Our enforcement is more manpower and womenpower — every ticket we issue is written," said Puchailo.

"We don't take pictures or have those cars driving around — it would be significantly faster than officers writing the ticket.

"We could never compare with an automated system like that." He also said a greater abundance of private parking lots in Edmonton might reduce the take from fines.

Edmonton city officials have said they're more focused on education and issuing warning tickets than fining errant parkers.

But some critics in Edmonton say their city is missing out on fine revenue that would soften the property tax blow.

Winnipeg might collect fewer revenues due to different parking rules, said Colin Stewart, spokesman for that city's parking authority.

"Bylaws may be worded ... differently in cities and it be different in how it's enforced," he said. "Some things we have in common — if a meter's expired, it's pretty obvious."

For Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, there's no hesitation in calling the ticket-take a straight cash generator for the city. "It's a cash cow for the City of Calgary ... they're a front man for the city," she said of the CPA.

The CPA's escalating cash harvest is also a reflection, said Colley-Urquhart, of a city with limited revenue streams that'll milk any money teat available.

"It's symptomatic of a fiscal imbalance where the province takes almost half the money we collect every year, \$400 million," she said.

It's no accident the CPA has become increasingly effective in raising revenue through a number of sources, including through fines, said Colley-Urquhart.

But at the same time, the city is using the CPA and some of the highest parking rates in North America to deter people from driving downtown, said the alderman.

And she doesn't support the approach.

"It's a mentality ... but it's not always convenient to take the train or bus," she said.

"It's similar to us charging people at the LRT station for parking."

Last year, city council opted to eliminate the \$3-per-day parking fee at LRT stations, effective in April. Colley-Urquhart said the city should act far more boldly by divesting itself from the CPA, though it would need to find another source of revenue to replace the lost parking fines.

"I'm not sure we should be competing with the private sector in this area," she said.

That concept, said Colley-Urquhart, should be entertained part of an upcoming \$1-million review of the future of downtown.

In the meantime, the alderman said Calgarians can look forward to enriching city coffers even more through the CPA in the days ahead.

"We can expect it to do nothing but increase as technology improves," she said.

And one uniformed CPA enforcement officer on his way to nail more illicit downtown parkers said he'll likely continue to bear the brunt of the public's frustration.

"They don't like us ... we get threatened sometimes," said the man, with a shrug.

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