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## We always pay in city shell game

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Parking tickets, speeding tickets and Enmax profits don't appear to have very much in common.

At first glance, one unifying theme is we probably don't like being dinged with a ticket or paying our Enmax bill.

But on a whole other level, those three things unwittingly help bureaucrats and politicians avoid tough questions about how big the city apparatus should be, how much city hall should spend and how much you should be taxed.

Millions upon millions of dollars flow into the city's coffers from these sources, enough to knock a few percentage points off your property taxes annually.

As Calgary Parking Authority general manager Dale Fraser so aptly told the Sun's Bill Kaufmann this weekend, Calgarians should be grateful that the ever-ballooning stream of revenue from parking tickets — a record \$15 million in 2010 — is helping to offset spikes in our property tax rates.

There's more. Just a few weeks ago, the Calgary Police Commission voted to divert \$2 million to city coffers for the same reason.

And late last year, at budget time, it was decided to dip into Enmax profits, again to avoid having to raise your property taxes.

Although it seems like a good deal, it really isn't, because no matter where the money comes from, it's still ours.

Here's the thing about property taxes: If the city were ever to think about raising them, many of us would surely raise a stink.

Politicians are accountable to taxpayers when they try to jack mill-rates up.

Fines and fees, on the other hand, allow for revenues to be raised for the city out of sight and out of mind, with minimal public input and minimal backlash — but also minimal accountability.

It would be nice to believe police officers aren't being told to be more stringent with their speed enforcement to help improve city revenues.

It would be nice to believe parking authority agents aren't being asked to step up enforcement to milk a cash-cow, as Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart put it to us.

It would be nice to believe we're not being over-charged on our power bills to help fill Enmax coffers only to be raided by the city.

But we can't ever know this, which makes all this very worrisome. The money keeps rolling in and no one has a say about where it gets spent and whether it should be taken from taxpayers in the first place.

This isn't to say we need to do away with fines.

They're obviously a necessary tool to help with the enforcement of traffic and parking regulations.

What we need are ground rules so traffic tickets don't turn into tax bills.

The Enmax situation is even stranger, made complicated by a dispute with provincial officials last year over how (and how much) Calgarians are charged for their power.

In the end, everything was left alone for the sake of —you guessed it— artificially lowering your property tax bill.

But in the whole revenue shell game, we always pay in the end.

We must end Calgary's addiction to revenues from parking tickets, speeding tickets, Enmax profits and the like.

Instead, property taxes need to fully reflect the cost of running this city.

That way, bureaucrats and politicians at city hall would be compelled to justify the collection and spending of every penny of our hard-earned money.

No more hiding behind financial smoke-screens — only honest discussions about the true state of Calgary's public purse.

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