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We can thank the ParkPlus system for not being weighed down by coins since downtown on-street parking rates went up

By MICHAEL PLATT

You can thank technology for not having to carry 150 grams of change in your pocket -- that's roughly the weight of a week-old kitten, minus the squirm.

Twenty toonies is the new minimum when it comes to coins required to park for a full day downtown -- that's after the priciest city in Canada raised on-street parking an entire dollar, to \$5 an hour.

Pay the new fee with a mixed bag of loonies, quarters and dimes, and you'll find your pants hanging lower than a teenage gangsta, or feel your purse weighing your arm like a 10-pin bowling bag.

Thank technology and the new ParkPlus system for the ability to pay by credit card or cellphone -- you can curse the higher cost with a simple swipe, rather than loading the meter like a slot machine.

Calgary Parking Authority boss Dale Fraser knows motorists aren't going to be happy to pay more, but he says demand is pushing prices skyward, despite the slumping economy.

"We held off as long as possible -- our last increase was in 2007," said Fraser, general manager of the CPA.

The CPA has a mandate, enforced by city council, to keep prices on par with those at private lots, to keep the system balanced.

If you want the real culprit, Fraser points to a privately owned lot at 3 St. and 6 Ave. S.W., which raised its hourly rate to \$12.60 an hour, forcing the CPA's hand.

"We became aware of sizeable hourly rates being charged in the downtown," he said.

Only Toronto has higher hourly parking (\$15.75 at last count) but Calgary remains Canada's champion when it comes to overall cost.

When on-street parking goes up, so do parkades -- the new rate of \$465 a month at the James Short Parkade, up from \$430 a month, means Calgary is now the 14th most-expensive city in the world.



That places Calgary between downtown New York and Zurich, Switzerland on the parking scale -- and at least one alderman says it's a reprehensible achievement.

"If ever there was a cash cow, it is the Calgary Parking Authority -- forget Multanova cameras used by the police," said Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, who's long fought for more parking downtown.

"Not only do we penalize people by limiting parking downtown, we gouge them once they do find a stall."

Parking authority revenues put \$13.5 million into city coffers last year -- and while we're on the subject of dubious news, the CPA is currently installing 400 paid stalls in the inner city, in places where parking used to be free.

The bright side to all this is the ParkPlus system, which recently registered its two millionth customer.

For those who have yet to use it, ParkPlus is a single box which replaces multiple stand-alone metres, and it accepts payment using coins, credit cards and cellphones.

Because there are no longer meters dividing spaces, downtown now has room for 2,100 vehicles, up from 1,800 under the old system -- best of all, small cars and motorcycles can register for a discount.

You enter your licence number, and wardens monitor your car and the amount you've paid via computer -- if you run out of time, a ticket is sent in the mail.

Here's the good news: Parking tickets are down 15% since 2007, in part because the CPA now has the ability to tell exactly when your time expired.

"If you're only out a few minutes, we're not going to send you a ticket -- in the past, there was no way to tell when it expired, now we have a time stamp, and we have the ability to pull that ticket," said Fraser.

"It's cut down on the number of tags, and the frustration for motorists -- those who are rushing back to their cars, only a few minutes late."

A kinder, gentler parking authority? It doesn't stop there.

In the old days, a driver would cruise the block, hoping for a meter with free time.

That doesn't happen anymore, but the excess money isn't all staying in the coffers of the CPA.

If a motorist has registered by cellphone, as 30% of parkers already have, the CPA refunds any extra cash after the vehicle leaves.

So far, \$78,000 have been returned to motorists who've overpaid for parking.

Now that's change we can use.

