



Curbs needed on parking fees

Written by Heather Douglas, President & CEO
As published in the *Calgary Sun*, Thursday, February 12, 2009

His buddies called him the "Jarome Iginla of downtown parking." For 22 years, Tom Smith, a petroleum services account manager, had repeatedly found awesome street parking in Calgary's core. He would drive from his office and immediately find that perfect spot in front of his client's building. Unbelievable.

Sadly, Smith saw that record slip away just before Christmas. "I circled and circled trying to find that great location," he says. "If only the city had raised the hourly parking rates in December, rather than January, I probably could have continued my winning streak for another 22 years."

According to his buddies, Smith's record of parallel-parking attempts -- without hitting a bumper -- stands at 12.

Calgarians resent holding the record as one of the most-expensive parking places in North America. They want convenient and affordable parking and loathe parking stalls that are difficult to find, inadequate in size, unsafely lit and pricey.

Spare a moment of pity for the city's urban planners. Their job is to figure out how to accommodate a large number of vehicles (delivery trucks, emergency responders, buses, taxis, cars and trucks) into a small geographical area. Long ago, they decided parking spaces and stalls were a commodity worth a fixed hourly rate, which always seemed to increase in value. In 2008, this commodity provided a surplus of \$22 million to the city's coffers.

City hall seems to have forgotten the golden rule of commodity prices: What goes up must come down and these fluctuations always occur in cycles.

Last fall, Calgary's boom stalled as land values, construction costs and interest rates abruptly started to decline. The price of oil and gas plunged. Small businesses had trouble getting loans. Quietly, companies began shedding their non-core assets. Sadly, many employees no longer had jobs.

As the demand for new office towers and condos slowed in the downtown core, Beltline and surrounding areas, parking rates should have begun to decrease.

Instead, in early January, the Calgary Parking Authority raised the hourly rate for street parking by a loonie (from \$4 to \$5) and hourly spots in downtown parkades to \$6.50 (up from \$6). Then, in February, it doubled the rates surrounding the city's core to \$2.25 an hour to park in Kensington, Uptown 17 and Mission. Parking stalls now average about \$400 to \$450 a month. That's more than a modest car payment coupled with insurance fees.

Not surprising, even richer surpluses are expected to pour into the city's bank account.

The Calgary Chamber of Commerce's several thousand members are opposed to the hike in parking rates and offer the following reasonable recommendations to city council:



- Introduce two-hour, low-cost street parking, after which citizens could pay a higher rate for their spaces via their cellphones.
- Change the Calgary Parking Authority's mandate from operating on a profit-and-surplus basis to a strictly cost-recovery directive.
- Convert more traffic lanes to parking lanes during regular business hours -- excluding rush hour -- making parking more convenient and visible.
- Direct the monies from any transit fee increases to improve the efficiency and safety of the trains and buses so citizens have transportation options.
- Build more bicycle parking areas, as each bike lot needs 10 to 30 times less space and saves on land and construction costs.

The business community understands the fluctuations of the commodity markets. The question is how soon will city hall figure them out?