

No more free rides for parkers at transit stations



The free transit parking incentives of yesteryear are coming to an end. In 2009, Toronto and Calgary started charging for parking at commuter transit stations, and this is part of a broader trend.

Originally introduced to encourage suburban commuters to park at transit nodes and then make their way to downtown cores using public transit, the economic reality is that cash-strapped municipalities can't afford to continue to provide these incentives.

"We were losing about \$4 million a year just on parking, and that's not acceptable," says Domenic Garisto, chief property development officer at the Toronto Transit Commission (TTC).

The trend towards paid transit parking has been happening for some time, and few jurisdictions offer free parking anymore, says John Lovell, president of Zeag Canada, a Mississauga-based provider of parking equipment. "We're seeing it all over the U.S., and it's now beginning to tip towards widespread control and paid parking in most suburbs."

Another major driver for change is the increase in property value in suburban border towns located near major cities, adds Lovell.

"As these cities become developed, land values go up, and there's less free space available for big, surface parking lots. Around Toronto, development in Mississauga, Brampton, Richmond Hill is stepping up, so there's less land available for this."

Lovell says another factor that comes into play is what he calls the "domino theory of parking". "If one area starts charging for parking in its jurisdiction, people will start spilling over and try to park for free in neighbouring areas. Once the first one starts charging, the others will soon have to follow suit to control parking as well."

Cities and parking authorities contemplating a move to paid transit parking need to consider a wide range of factors. Toronto and Calgary had different motivations and offer some illustrative lessons.

Toronto's switch

With the introduction of a \$4.00 parking fee last year, the TTC is now covering its true parking costs, and even made a small profit in 2010 that's being reinvested in new public transit initiatives, says Garisto.

The TTC had an extensive communications program in place to inform the public about the switch to paid parking, he says. "We started about a month in advance of the day it would go into effect, and then started blitzing the message again the week before to remind people."

But preparations for the move started long before, as the TTC had to upgrade its equipment. It opted for an integrated pay and display system, which is also used by the Toronto Parking Authority (TPA) in public parking lots throughout the city.

Other municipalities that are making a similar transition to paid parking need to consider what type of system is best for their purposes, says Garisto. "We don't tend to have a lot of people coming in and out frequently, so gated lots are best suited to our operation."

Although the TTC already had gates in place, it needed to upgrade them to accept

different payment methods. "We always had gates that were activated by a Metropass," he says. But this equipment was old and needed to be replaced in any case. "We implemented new equipment that accepts cash and credit cards."

Licence plate recognition is part of the same system, he says. Video cameras read licenses at each entry point, and provide the back-up tapes needed if authorities need to find the licence plate of a particular car if there's an incident.

These cameras at the entrances are set up with two-way communications lines to a control centre as a customer service feature that allows commuters to get help if there's a problem, as transit parking facilities don't have operators on-site. Although this equipment isn't currently set up to provide general video surveillance, it could be used for this purpose later on, adds Garisto.

The TTC decided against using video surveillance cameras for security in the actual lots. "We didn't do that because the cost would be prohibitive – we don't have the resources to monitor the cameras."

Instead, the TTC is relying on old-fashioned muscle provided by a private

security firm to enforce its parking rules. "We enhanced our security coverage by initiating a new contract with Intelliguard last year that started on the day our paid parking began. Their cars roam our lots to ensure there are no violations or incidents."

Parking organizations need to consider future technologies when selecting their equipment. "You need the capability to accept a variety of different payment methods to make it easy for parkers to enter and exit a lot quickly. We're working to introduce the Presto smart card in the Greater Toronto Area, but we have to iron a lot of differences between transit fares across the region. It will be a few years before it filters down to parking lots."

Zeag's Lovell says equipment providers are also testing other new payment systems. "We're working on a pilot with Visa and Mastercard on Paywave, a contactless credit card that allows people to wave in and out of TPA facilities. We're following what's going on in retail point-of-sales (POS) systems and adapting their new developments into our equipment."



Calgary's transition



Unlike Toronto, Calgary's transition from free to paid parking last year was largely driven by commuter demand for more safety, security and cleanliness throughout the transit system, and not to recoup the costs of parking lot operations, says Dale Fraser, general manager of the Calgary Parking Authority (CPA).

"Unfortunately, there had been some serious incidents committed on transit property or were related to transit trips: assaults, thefts, break-ins, prowling and so on. This is not uncommon in big city transit systems, but it was escalating, and there weren't enough resources to provide a response to these issues," says Fraser.

As the fastest-growing city in Canada, transit funding was already being directed to expansion of transit services and adding more vehicles to the system, and there wasn't enough to boost security too. "So it wasn't about generating more funds. City Council specified that the new parking fees collected were earmarked for security and cleanliness alone, and were not to go into general revenue for the Calgary transit system."

A great deal of preparation was needed to make the switch to paid parking and implement more security, as Calgary's transit parking lots were large, open lots without gates or attendants.

The CPA extended ParkPlus, the proprietary parking payment machine system it developed for the City of Calgary, into the transit lots. The system uses license plates as the basis for payment.

"The nice thing about this approach is that parkers don't need to display their receipts indicating payment on their dashboards. We know some of the lots are very big, and it would be inconvenient to make a payment and then have to walk back to the car to put the coupon in the dashboard."

Commuters also have the option of setting up an account online and paying via cell phone, he adds. "All the information from parking machines and cell phones is transmitted to us wirelessly, and validated by our roving photo enforcement vehicles that patrol the lots."

A collaborative approach was used to beef up security by pulling in police, bylaw, transit and CPA officers. "The CPA provided security officers to patrol the lots at various times daily. This was strictly for security, not parking enforcement, but their duties are limited to parking lots."

To further boost security in transit lots, bylaw officers were also added. "They travel in vehicles through the lots and can issue fines for loitering, littering and other infractions of bylaws."

In other parts of the transit system, more police patrols were also provided initially, but were later redirected, and transit officers also make more rounds.

Other initiatives were undertaken to increase public perception of security and boost its deterrent value. "All the officers rode the transit system at certain times of the day to create a higher level of visibility of security."

To make the transition to paid parking, a three-month phased approach was adopted, says Fraser.

"We have three main lines going downtown, so each line was handled over the course of a month. An enormous number of activities had to occur before, from installing new machines to new signage, to make the conversion. It would have put quite a strain on resources if we'd done it all at once instead of a managed approach over three months"

The CPA launched a public awareness campaign a few weeks prior to the transition. "On the day of the transition, we had staff on hand at pay machines to help people through the process and answer questions."

About 11,450 stalls were converted to paid parking last year, which generated \$3.14 million in revenue, says Fraser. "One thing we saw immediately after the transition was that many commuters were avoiding the transit lots and were instead parking offsite in nearby residential communities or in commercial parking areas like shopping centres. This became a problem for them."

A great deal of preparation was needed to make the switch to paid parking and implement more security, as Calgary's transit parking lots were large, open lots without gates or attendants.

These, in turn, had to step up their own levels of enforcement and patrols, and put in signage to inform the public that the parking areas were restricted to residents or shoppers.

"So the lesson learned is that parking authorities need to work in advance with all stakeholder groups that may be affected," says Fraser.

Today, utilization of Calgary's transit lots has almost moved back to previous levels. "People adjusted to the change. Transit lots are now about 75 to 85 percent full on a regular basis. But they're still not back to previous levels – they used to be full by 8:30 A.M. in the past." ■