



Council curbed the facts on park-and-ride fees

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More nonsense at silly hall this week. Council took a nonsensical turn on park-and-ride fees, and still finds itself buried in the basement-suite debate, despite an overwhelming body of evidence on both issues that spells out the right course of action.

Aldermen seem more preoccupied with public perception -and getting re-elected -than in getting it right. Their task is to make critical decisions about the city's future, based upon the facts. This isn't a popularity contest.

I've written much about **secondary suites** and the many studies that prove the bogeyman does not live in the basement.

External reports coming to council for years, show **secondary suites** in other cities have not exacerbated parking problems, increased crime, lowered property values, or lead to a rise in behaviour that could apply to any bad neighbour, including homeowners.

Regardless of the facts, people like Ald. Ray Jones continue to perpetuate the myths that this type of housing, and the people who live in them, are scary: "Personally, I don't want suites next door to me. God, I have enough trouble finding parking on the street as it is," said Jones.

Speaking of parking, council's behaviour on park-and-ride fees has been dizzying. Aldermen approved a scheme Monday to recoup lost money from the cancelled daily parking fee at LRT lots by selling reserved parking spots for \$70 a month.

Up to 50 per cent of the lots will be set aside for long-term, paid parking, begging the question why did they get rid of the \$3-daily fee in the first place?

Now, most of the parking in the popular lots will still be up for sale. Free parking for the remaining 50 per cent of the lot will fill up just as quickly as it did in the past, leaving most drivers without a parking spot, or tempted to park illegally in reserved spots that will surely sometimes be empty.

For people who can't afford the daily fee, \$70 a month is still no bargain. "It's not really in my budget to do that," says Will Stach, a 20-year-old University of Calgary student. He used to park at the Southland LRT Station, but stopped when the fee was introduced in 2009. "I'm used to taking the bus now to the train. It's a habit."

That's a good habit all Calgarians should be encouraged to form; if only council would get out of the way.

Council's backward thinking on this issue is shocking. Calgary Transit's research on the effectiveness of charging for parkand-ride, landed before aldermen Monday -well after they decided to scrap the fee in December. It's worth the

read, even though council doesn't appear to be backtracking on the decision it made before having all of the facts.

It turns out park-and-ride is working well. After an initial public hue and cry over having to pay for something that was once free, transit users adapted and came to appreciate the new system, especially because it means they can usually find a parking spot, regardless of the time of day.

Some even hung up their keys altogether and are finding other ways to the station. Ridership went down initially in 2009, but was back up in 2010.

Calgary Transit conducted a survey earlier this year, between Jan. 10 and Jan. 21, and found that riders who had stopped using park-and-ride after the fee was introduced, haven't stopped using public transit. They just access it by bus, walking, cycling or passenger drop off. Park-and-ride users were also happy with the system, placing "considerable value on being able to get a parking space, having a clean and well maintained lot" and "improved safety and security in the lots."

Of the 2,301 customers who participated in the survey, only one per cent were former park-and-ride users who stopped using transit altogether.

The "majority" of all customers indicated "transit convenience and their ability to use transit had either remained the same or improved," according to the report.

So why eliminate something that was working?

The report warns removing the fee will lead to the same situation that existed before it was introduced: Lots will fill up early, frustrated drivers will park illegally in the lots, or in adjacent communities, or abandon their transit ride outright.

Moreover, now Transit needs a new revenue source to pay for the maintenance and increased security at parking lots, which the report says must now be subsidized by taxpayers and transit riders.

The city is also still left with the problem of illegal parkers in residential neighbourhoods near LRT lots.

Yet, that's an easy fix. Simply bring in permit parking for those streets, effective from midnight until 10 a.m., after everyone has gone to work.

Mayor Naheed Nenshi promised to eliminate park-and-ride fees, and he pushed that agenda through council before he had the facts. He also promised a better way of leading this city. That starts by paying attention to the research.

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