

Finding fixes for fines to fund

City weighs best uses for parking revenues

By: Murray McNeill

How would you feel if that parking fine you grudgingly paid last week was used to help attract a new commercial development to downtown Winnipeg? Or to help pay for free bus passes for anyone who works downtown, or to repair a crumbling sidewalk?

Those are some of the creative ways that fines and other parking revenues are being used to stimulate downtown development and fund green transportation initiatives in other North American cities.

And they're options the Winnipeg Parking Authority (WPA) is keen to explore as it strives over the next few years to develop a new downtown parking strategy for Winnipeg.

WPA chief operating officer David Hill said the first order of business is to get people talking about parking and the role it could play in downtown development.

"Parking is the part... that gets left out (of the discussion) a lot of the time because it's not glamorous," Hill said.

So to get the ball rolling, the WPA and a number of other downtown agencies, including the Downtown Winnipeg Business Improvement Zone, CentreVenture Development Corp. and North Portage Development Corp., are bringing in a U.S. parking specialist this week to discuss various options with city officials and give a public lecture at noon Wednesday at the Globe Cinema in Portage Place.

Dennis Burns, a senior executive with Michigan-based consulting firm Carl Walker Inc., said he expects to address a variety of parking-related issues during his 90-minute presentation. They include how parking revenues can be used to stimulate downtown development, the role of parking in transit-oriented developments, how to trigger more private-sector development of public parking facilities, and how to convert surface parking lots into multi-level parkades.

"There's a lot of potential out there to do things differently, and that's what I'm going to be talking about," he said.

His visit should spark interest because downtown parking remains a hot-button issue for Winnipeggers. The abundance of surface parking lots, for example, has long been the subject of bitter debate. Some consider them a blight and an obstacle to downtown development. Others say they're a necessary evil.

And how many times have you heard Winnipeggers say they don't go downtown because they refuse to pay for parking?

Then there's that mini controversy last month about downtown parking-rate increases. Colliers International issued a report saying Winnipeg had the biggest increase in downtown parking rates in the country this year, at a whopping 72 per cent. And the city's largest private-sector parking operator, Imperial Parking Corp. (Impark), immediately disputed the figure, saying it was more like 10 or 15 per cent.

Hill said Winnipeg is also seeing a spurt of new parkade developments in and around the downtown, which also makes this a good time to be discussing parking issues.

There's the plan to replace a historic Exchange District building, the Ryan Building, with a new mixed-use parkade/commercial development, the construction of a huge new parkade on the Health Sciences Centre campus and the proposed construction of a new parkade at The Forks.

New commercial and residential developments are also springing up around the downtown, said Downtown Winnipeg BIZ executive director Stefano Grande, which also boosts demand for parking.

He and Hill said the tendency has been to let economic development spark parking development. But they argue it should be the other way around.

For example, Hill said a number of other Canadian cities have implemented a cash-in-lieu-of-parking program, which allows developers who don't have room for parking stalls in their developments to contribute money to a city fund. The fund is then used to build communal parkades that can be used by a number of other smaller developments in an area.

Hill said that kind of arrangement could work well in areas like the Exchange District.

"We don't have anything like that here. But there are lots of opportunities like that we can explore."

"The sky is the limit in terms of looking at parking as an economic development generator," Grande said.

Jino Distasio, director of the University of Winnipeg's Institute of Urban Studies, agreed parking revenues could be a valuable tool in sparking new development.

He said the WPA gets a lot of revenue each year -- Hill said about \$15 million -- from street parking meters, parking fines and city-owned parking lots and parkades.

"There's no reason why parking lot revenues couldn't be used to fund special projects," Distasio said. "Maybe we just need to start thinking more creatively."

Know of any newsworthy or interesting trends or developments in the local office, retail or industrial real estate sectors? Let real estate reporter Murray McNeill know at the email address below, or at 697-7254.

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Where to park the car

HERE are a few parking facts and figures, courtesy of the Winnipeg Parking Authority, the arm's-length city agency that manages on-street parking meters and city-owned parking lots and parkades in Winnipeg:

There are an estimated 35,000 parking stalls in the downtown, with more than 80 per cent of them privately owned and managed.

There are approximately 2,800 street parking meters in the city.

The WPA collects an estimated \$15 million a year in revenues from parking fines, parking meters and city-owned parking lots and parkades.

The city owns and operates three downtown parkades -- Winnipeg Square, the Millennium Library and the Civic Centre -- as well as surface parking lots on Fort Street, Garry Street, Paulin Street, Stradbrook Avenue, at the foot of the Provencher Bridge and at the Alexander Docks.

There are at least 100 other surface parking lots scattered throughout the city.

Imperial Parking Corp. (Impark) is the largest private parking lot operator in the city, with about 200 parking lots under its control.

It costs an estimated \$2,000, plus the cost of the land, per stall to build a surface parking lot in Winnipeg; about \$26,000, plus the land cost, per stall to build an above-ground parkade; and an estimated \$50,000, plus land cost, per stall to build an underground parkade.