

## Money in the Meter

by Jeff Bowden

Municipal governments looking to streamline services or reduce capital costs might be surprised to find the parking meter holds one solution.

In January of this year, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities conducted a parking survey in conjunction with Automated Vending Audit Services Inc. (AVAS), the research division of Coinamatic Inc. of Mississauga, Ontario. The survey was distributed to 106 municipalities across the country, all of which had indicated that they operated parking meters in a previous telephone survey.

The Federation has received several calls asking for feedback, and we were reluctant to give it because the sample results are not complete enough to make accurate conclusions. But several issues were raised which may be of interest to any municipality currently involved in parking system operations or considering this as a new business area.

One of the most apparent difficulties facing parking meter operations (and data gathering) is the lack of coordination among municipal departments. Enforcement, collection, auditing, coin counting and maintenance is often conducted by several different departments. In many municipalities, this can lead to management difficulties, which ultimately prevent the municipality from improving or streamlining operations. The issue was highlighted in the AVAS survey, with many respondents unable even to report operating statistics or meter revenues.

Greg Peterson, president of ParkSmart, the parking division of

Coinamatic Inc., says that the AVAS survey provides a useful basis for discussing how services are delivered in municipalities, and where improvements can be made. He believes that coordinated management is the key. It means "bringing parking collection, auditing, counting and maintenance under one management umbrella." Peterson says that consolidation of those functions translates into "substantial cost savings for municipalities," while also meeting the needs of the public. He contends that parking is a prime candidate for a public-private partnership. A partnership allows municipalities "to develop parking policies and reap the rewards of efficient parking meter operations, without incurring the financial costs of operation, maintenance and capital investment."

Bob Taylor, vice president and general manager of ParkSmart's Western Region, and former general manager of the Calgary Parking Authority, says that a lot of improvements can be made simply by changing from mechanical to electronic meters. This allows greater revenue per meter as well as a reduction in maintenance costs. The AVAS survey indicated that 63 percent of the meters used across Canada are mechanical. However, that statistic changes from province to province. In Ontario, 59 percent of the meters in use are mechanical, while Manitoba and British Columbia use the highest percentage of mechanical meters (73 percent and 71 percent respectively).

Automation also appears to be related to the number of meters per full-time employee. Results indicated significant differences in ratios among similar sized municipalities. For example, in small/medium-sized municipalities with

a population between 25,000 and 35,000, one municipality reported 19 meters per employee. Another reported 342 meters per employee. Similar differences appeared in the numbers from larger municipalities. Interestingly, a majority of respondents with more electronic than mechanical meters had fewer full-time employees.

Vince Mauceri, vice president of operations for ParkSmart, and past director of transit, traffic and parking for the City of Burlington, Ontario, says that he believes many municipalities have "a really tough time balancing their parking enforcement with the views of local businesses and residents." The two greatest problems faced in parking operations, according to respondents of the AVAS survey, were parking space availability (20%) and by-law enforcement (18%).

Peterson claims that his company can help alleviate many of these problems and increase revenues at the same time. He notes that his company has expertise in utilizing new technologies like hand-held terminals for revenue auditing and/or enforcement as well as smart cards that eliminate the need for people to have the correct coins to pay the meter.

The advantages of these partnerships provide some serious food for thought for municipal managers and politicians alike. While parking is not often thought to be one of the more likely candidates for a public-private partnership, there is some strong evidence to show that partnerships can provide an avenue for revenue growth, improved service, and even better community relations.

*Jeff Bowden is president of Nexus Communications & Consulting. For more information on the AVAS survey, you can contact Greg Peterson of ParkSmart at 1-800-361-2646.*