

Disabled British Columbians frustrated by able-bodied drivers who park in their spots

Greg Pyc, who has been in a wheelchair since a car accident rendered him a paraplegic 35 years ago, has a pet peeve.

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Greg Pyc, who has been in a wheelchair since a car accident rendered him a paraplegic 35 years ago, has a pet peeve.

It's the trouble he often experiences getting access to a parking spot designated for people with disabilities. That happened just the other day at his bank at Kingsway and Willingdon in Burnaby. An able-bodied driver had pulled into the spot reserved for handicapped drivers.

And at the Old Orchard Medical Centre in Burnaby, there is a driver of a high-end car who occupies the specially designated spot because he feels his car is safer there from damage.

"Some level of courtesy and decorum is all we're asking for," said the 54-year-old national operations manager for the Neil Squire Society, which helps people with disabilities integrate into the workforce.

Pyc's beef is felt by many with disabilities.

Complaints have been pouring in to a new hotline set up by a non-profit advocacy group over able-bodied drivers parking in spots reserved for people with disabilities.

"We're hearing a lot of challenges in general within the Lower Mainland," said Karen Williams, the manager of accessibility issues at the Social Planning and Research Council of B.C.

She is also finding there is unevenness in enforcement. "Some areas are patrolled quite well, while other areas aren't patrolled that well at all."

Because the hotline (at 604-718-7734) has only been in operation since June, Williams couldn't say whether the problem is growing or which areas are most problematic.

Although the council covers the entire province, she said most complaints come from areas of Metro Vancouver. "The reason for that is there is a lack of parking or limited parking at a lot of different businesses or malls or various other places people go."

One out of five people in B.C. has some sort of health or mobility limitation. The council is responsible for issuing parking permits to people with disabilities across B.C. With the aging population, Williams anticipates the problem will grow.

She said there may be a case for increasing fines, which tend to range from between \$50 to \$100 in B.C. communities. In Washington state, by comparison, the fine is \$450. "That's enough that it really makes people think hard before abusing the accessible parking spaces."

Pyc has encountered the problem all over the Lower Mainland, although it tends to be worse around quick entry and exit points, like liquor stores.

People loading and unloading passengers also tend to use the reserved spots a lot, he said. The system is also abused by drivers who borrow the allimportant placard, giving them access to a parking spot meant for people with disabilities.

Pyc needs wheelchair-accessible parking spots because they are wide enough for him to get into his vehicle on the passenger side and out on the driver's side.

Municipalities are responsible for policing parking on city streets and city-owned parking lots, but have no jurisdiction over parking in public malls or other private businesses within their boundaries.

Metrotown shopping mall in Burnaby, which has 100 parking spots for people with disabilities, has a team of bike patrollers and a parking-enforcement vehicle that comb through parking areas in the mall daily. When violators are discovered, they are first given information, then they are ticketed, and finally towed for repeat offences, said marketing director Judy Black. But she said drivers for the most part obey the rules. "We get good compliance."

The city of Burnaby has 10 parking bylaw enforcement officers. They issued 153 tickets last year for drivers parking illegally in spots reserved for the handicapped, compared with 100 the year before.

The fine for an infraction is \$80, which is reduced to \$64 if you pay within the first 15 days.

The City of Surrey's 12 parking patrollers issued 254 tickets for infractions last year, for fines of \$75.

In the City of Vancouver, the number of tickets issued for vehicles parking in restricted-access parking spots HAS been consistent over the past few years, with 214 last year, 203 in 2012, and 210 in 2011.

The fine is \$100, which is reduced to \$50 if it is paid within 14 days.

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