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Certification program promotes safe parking lots

\$5 million upgrade to Gastown lot tops renovation list as improvements generate higher revenue for lot owners

Glenn Korstrom

A new Vancouver Police Department program is making it easier for drivers to determine which parking lots are safest to park in.

This in a city that, according to the BC Progress Board's annual report released last December, has one of the highest property crime rates among major North American cities.

A newly released Statistics Canada report on metropolitan areas also found Vancouver residents to be the most critical of graffiti, public drunkenness, drug dealing and other examples of social incivility in their neighbourhoods.

VPD chief Jim Chu estimates that his team deals with approximately 1,600 vehicle break-ins each month and that three-quarters of all vehicle break-ins go unreported.

The Safer Parking Initiative recognizes that parking lot owners and managers have recently pumped millions of dollars into their facilities to make them brighter, cleaner and safer for customers.

A similar U.K.-based program started in the early 1990s and helped generate higher parking lot revenue and profits, said VPD constable Jeff Campbell, who has been inspecting parking lots and determining which ones merit being awarded Safer Parking Initiative certification.

Here's how the program works: once a parking lot owner applies for certification, Campbell visits the lot and awards points for:

- bright lighting and white painted ceilings and walls that reflect light;
- a clean, tidy and graffiti-free appearance;
- clean-smelling stairwells;
- clearly marked and numbered parking bays; and
- appropriate signs to get to exits.

Campbell will not certify any lot that has an incident rate higher than one for each 5,000 parking purchases.

The program launched last fall when Campbell certified five lots. On July 3, he announced 20 additional lots in the downtown core and on Vancouver's west side that had earned certification.

Doug Hume, Polaris Realty's vice-president and general manager, said his company pumped nearly \$6 million into its three downtown parking lots in the past few years.

More than \$5 million of that investment went into the company's 600-stall lot at 450 West Cordova Street at the entrance to Gastown.

"Like a lot of older parking lots in the city, we hadn't been paying a lot of attention to it in the past," Hume said. "It needed some work."

Invisible structural upgrades ate more than \$3 million of the project's capital; the rest of the money paid for cosmetic upgrades such as painting, lighting and new security cameras.

But the most innovative of the upgrades is technology that Hume calls code blue boxes, which are also in Polaris' lots under Harbour Centre and 999 West Hastings.

Parking lot customers who fear being mugged or who have other security concerns can approach a phone box and press a button that direct-dials to a nearby security centre.

Blue strobe lights start flashing to draw attention while a security camera zooms in on the person at the phone box.

"It's an innovation that we researched and we found gave confidence and comfort to the parkers, particularly female parkers," Hume said.

The upgrades are already starting to pay off.

Hume estimated that revenue at Polaris' 450 West Cordova Street lot increased more than 30% between 2003, before the renovations started, and 2007, which was the first full year after renovations were complete.

EasyPark general manager Mel McKinney said his company has likewise invested more than \$1 million in painting, lighting and boosted security patrols at the four EasyPark lots that earned certification.

But Mike Poirier, who is Diamond Parking Services' regional vice-president of operations, said his company earned certification for some of its lots for the bargain basement upgrade cost of \$400. The most Diamond Parking had to pay to upgrade a lot to certification requirements was \$10,000.

Eleven of the 21 downtown and west side lots that Diamond Parking manages for various owners qualified for certification. Poirier expects the remaining 10 lots that his company manages to earn qualification soon.

He said none require more than a \$10,000 investment to meet Campbell's standards.

"The hope is that as more people choose to park at these certified locations, there will be an economic stimulus that convinces more property owners and managers to get involved." •

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