

DOUBLE TROUBLE — Council seeks to lower double-parking fines

By Stephen Janis, *Investigative Voice*, October 3, 2010

At a time when metered parking rates in Baltimore City are approaching sky-high limits, the cost to citizens for limited parking in residential neighborhoods is about to receive some much-needed relief.

Not from parking meters but from tickets — tickets for double-parking.

The stories of frustration and rage have become common in parking-space-starved neighborhoods such as Fells Point, Canton, and Federal Hill.

Frequently, residents unable to find a space near their homes temporarily double-park their cars to unload groceries or offload a child.

But often within minutes a Baltimore City parking agent slaps a \$250 ticket on the window for double-parking, adding further aggravation for city residents who already face challenges in neighborhoods where resident vehicles outnumber available spaces nearly two-to-one.

Now a councilman from one of the areas hardest hit by double-parking tickets is trying to alleviate some of the pain.

A bill to be introduced at Monday's City Council meeting will reduce the penalty for double-parking in Baltimore from \$250 to \$100, a reduction that Councilman William H. Cole 4th (D-11th), one of the bill's sponsors, said will give residents in the parking-challenged neighborhoods a much-needed break.

'BLOCKING THE BOX'

"\$250 for unloading groceries or waiting for a space in your neighborhood is outrageous," said Cole in an email to *Investigative Voice*.

"We need to create a separate offense for blocking the free flow of traffic or "blocking the box" which do deserve a hefty fine," Cole said. "Double-parking temporarily — as long as emergency vehicles can pass — clearly does not merit the same penalty."

"Blocking the box" is a term that originated in New York and refers to blocking traffic in an intersection, thereby causing gridlock.

Community leaders say double-parking tickets unfairly target residents who are simply trying to deal with a scarcity of legal spaces.

“We have people who pull up in front of their homes and before they can get back to the car they get a ticket,” said Cynthia Griffith, head of Area 30 parking, one of the city’s designated parking zones that stretches across Cross and Light Streets .

Griffith said she supports the measure because the double-parking fines hit city residents the hardest, and have even been disruptive for area business.

“When the [upscale] Blue Grass Restaurant [in Federal Hill] opened, people were pulling up and double-parking and waiting for the valet,” she said.

“And they were getting tickets also.”

CITY HAS RAISED FINES AND RATES

Still, it is unclear whether the bill will garner support of the administration of Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake.

The cash-strapped city has both raised parking fines and on-street parking rates in the throes of one of the worst recessions in U.S. history, doubling the rate for downtown on-street parking and raising the basic parking ticket fees as well.

Meanwhile the current administration rebuffed efforts by City Councilman Bill Henry (D-4th) to pass a bill that would allow the city to immediately offer amnesty to tens of thousands of scofflaws who owe the city millions of dollars in penalties for unpaid tickets. The city has been hoping to collect the unpaid penalties, money added onto tickets that can increase a single \$23 citation to a debt of thousands of dollars.

Critics say the penalties for an unpaid ticket, which accumulate indefinitely, are usury. But both the administration of former Mayor Sheila Dixon and current Mayor Rawlings-Blake have been reluctant to change a system that nets the city millions in parking fines.

Last year *Investigative Voice* uncovered an internal report prepared by the Dixon Administration which showed that judges were throwing out a majority of the penalties when scofflaws requested a trial.

The report recommended that the administration seek state legislation to decriminalize parking tickets, converting them to civil citations that could be adjudicated outside the already overburdened District Court system.

However, the Dixon Administration did not attempt to have legislation introduced to that effect.