

## **TOW TIMING** — Alleged towing scam targeting Ravens fans leads to criminal probe

By Stephen Janis, *Investigative Voice*, Monday, 11 January 2010

When Ravens fans attending the Chicago Bears game in December were lured into a private lot behind the Holiday Inn off Russell St. in Baltimore, they were told by a man who collected a \$25 parking fee that their cars would be safe for the duration of the team's final home game.

But when the roughly 20 motorists returned, they discovered their cars had been towed by Auto Barn, a city-sanctioned towing company that has a contract to remove unauthorized cars off the private lot.

The violation cost the bewildered Ravens fans more than \$260 each, who thought they had paid for a legitimate right to park on the lot. Making matters worse, one of the towed motorists spotted the same man who collected the money at the lot earlier in the day on Auto Barn's premises while retrieving his car, raising suspicions that something was amiss.

The towed motorist contacted the Baltimore Police Department, prompting an investigation that led to the eventual suspension of Auto Barn's towing license for the maximum of two weeks by Police Commissioner Frederick Bealefeld. Police have launched a criminal investigation as well into what appears to be a scam targeted at unsuspecting Ravens fans.

Police said they could not comment on the specifics of the ongoing investigation, but confirmed that the company could lose its license or "medallion" to tow from accident scenes and faces possible fraud charges.

"There could be some arrests that will result from this case... but there are some serious issues of fraud here," police spokesman Anthony Guglielmi told Fox 45 News and *Investigative Voice*.

"The investigation is still open and this isn't the last word," Guglielmi said. "You will be hearing from the police department; we have more to say."

The news that a city-sanctioned towing company is subject to a criminal investigation was met with anger by City Councilman Robert Curran (D-3rd), who has introduced several legislative initiatives to crack down on what he calls a near-epidemic of unwarranted towing.

"There are somewhere between 50,000 and 60,000 non-consensual tows in the city of Baltimore; it is big business in this town," he said.

“I’m outraged.”

Curran is spearheading legislation efforts to reduce charges levied by so-called “trespass” tow-ers who take cars off private lots. Currently private towing companies can charge in excess of \$400 for a single tow in Baltimore city.

Meanwhile, City Councilman William H. Cole, 4th, whose 11th district includes the Ravens' M&T Bank Stadium and adjacent parking lots, said he was not surprised by the allegations.

“This would not be the first time I’ve heard of this type of situation,” Cole said.

While Cole said predatory towing was a constant complaint, many of the private lots surrounding Ravens Stadium also have failed to pay parking taxes.

“We have at least 25 to 30 lots that are currently not paying the city parking tax,” Cole said. “This is another problem we need to address.”

The lost revenue – roughly 16 percent per space – is costing the city \$100,000 annually for Ravens game days alone.

“We need better compliance,” Cole said. “It’s not fair to the lots who do pay.”

Officials for Auto Barn declined to comment on the allegations, stating it was company policy not to speak publicly about an ongoing investigation. City officials said Auto Barn would face a hearing before the city’s tow board; however, a hearing date has not yet been set.