

Parking it smart

by Marja Hughes

Now in its third year, the city of Ottawa's swipe 'n park service is catching on. "We have approximately 3,860 cards in circulation," says Kim Haldane, Municipal Parking Operations and Enforcement project officer.

Street parking has entered a new era with smart card technology. Eliminating the need for change, Ottawa offers its parking card in denominations of \$25 and \$50. After an initial administrative fee of \$10, the card is rechargeable – unlike many other prepaid cards. When inserted, the parking meter will debit 25 cents at increments of 7.5 minutes until the card is removed or the meter reaches its maximum. The meter also displays the balance remaining on the card.

It takes the hassle out of finding the right change – improving customer service, while the city will benefit from operating cost savings in the future, says Haldane.

Similar reasons prompted the Regional Municipality of Halifax to conduct a 12-month internal pilot project using smart cards for parking. "Smart cards provide convenience for the public and provide efficiencies to the municipality with reduced costs for coin collection and processing," says Halifax's Dave Cormier, team leader for General Revenue and Payment Processing.

The pilot project – involving city employees – is designed to catch and fix glitches with batteries and card contact points due to extreme temperature fluctuations between winter and summer. "We want to ensure there are no problems with the technology before providing it to the public," says Cormier.

Municipal smart cards are not only used for parking payment collection, but also for transit fare collection in cities such as Burlington, Ontario, where the "ComboCard" can replace bus passes, tickets and cash.

The Advanced Card Technology Association of Canada (ACT), a non-profit organization, expects to see more such use by municipalities as smart card infrastructure rolls out across Canada in the coming years.

They see an evolution of smart card use starting with parking and transit, moving to loyalty programs, utility readings and eventually secure voter registration.

The technology is available and would save the municipality time and money, says ACT CEO Catherine Johnston. For example, a card with voter information would eliminate the need for enumeration, she says. "The municipality would only have to deal with exceptions and not everyone all over again."

Some municipalities, like Burlington, have proceeded to multi-use applications of the smart card. The city's ComboCard can also be used for swimming pool admissions with a 20 percent discount if you also take the bus to the pool.

According to the US-based Smart Card Alliance, the total number of smart cards manufactured for use within the United States and Canada jumped 45 percent between 2000 and 2001 – from 28.4 to 41.3 million.

Though the fastest growing market segment may be the financial sector, according to the Smart Card Alliance, it is difficult to gauge use in the municipal sector. According to ACT, concentrated pockets exist throughout various sectors and banks are not the predominant users.

In Banff, Alberta, you can book campsites using a smart card. In Montreal, smart cards have been used to track employees' flextime.

The time that municipalities will use multi-application smart cards for secure physical and data access, and perhaps even electronic purses to pay taxes and fines, may not be far away. As smart card use becomes more complex, security becomes more of an issue. Tamper and counterfeit resistant cards are already available, as are additional safety measures.

"A PIN (personal identification number), a question only the valid card owner can answer and biometrics, such as a retina scan or a finger print, can be layered onto the card to have even more security," says Johnston.

Ottawa and Halifax seem poised to move forward. "We hope to expand smart card technology for other services," says Halifax's Dave Cormier, while Ottawa is exploring multi-use corporate cards.

Numerous smart card services, conveniences and savings are just around the corner, able to provide breakthroughs at work and at home as the personal computer did not too long ago. "It is like 'what am I going to do with that PC on my desk' a few decades ago," says Johnston. "The same will happen with the smart card. We are only beginning to think about its uses." ■■■

Prepared with files from Pauline Comeau. Marja Hughes is an Ottawa-based freelance editor and writer.

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