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The Case of the Parking Pains



Obtaining a parking permit for a solo driver in a jam-packed federal garage is like getting season tickets to the Redskins.

Pssst. Got a government mystery for Kogan Undercover to solve? Pass along the facts, and just the facts, to kogan@planetgov.com.

Oct. 10, 2000--A senior federal employee from Rockville spent years parking in a spacious, reserved spot close to her office building's entrance while the lower ranks plummeted to the depths of sub-P levels to find empty nooks to cram into. She knew that her parking paradise days were over when her boss told her that the office was being reorganized.

"The parking office said, 'You need to come down to get a parking reassignment,'" she recalls. "I thought, 'Is there no mercy in this world?' The first thing my colleagues wanted to know was, 'Do you get to keep the parking spot?' Nobody cared about anything else! People in the federal government kill for parking spots."

Obtaining a parking permit for a solo driver in a jam-packed federal garage is like getting season tickets to the Redskins. In an effort to reduce traffic congestion and overcrowding in parking lots, government agencies have instituted policies giving parking preferences to carpooling employees. NASA's parking policy, for instance, is based on a point system that tallies up the riders' GS level ratings along with length of federal service.

Priority is given to the cars with the most points. A mid-level government veteran applying for a spot isn't worth many points, says

government veteran applying for a spot isn't worth many points, says Vera Edmunds, headquarters parking coordinator at NASA. His score, in fact, is so low that he is more likely to get a seat on the space shuttle than a spot in the lot. Meanwhile, a vanpool of 12 new clerk typists who signed up after him may waltz out with a permit right away.

Food and Drug Administration employees get a spot if they win a lottery. "Nobody believes the lottery works," says an employee. "The rotations are just too bizarre."

That's the Ticket!

So what's a solo driver who refuses to be in a carpool to do? Pretend he is in a carpool, of course.

"A friend and I would put in for a two-man car pool and rent one spot at a paid place around the corner," says the FDA employee. "We split the price of the rental place." The FDA cops, though, finally caught on and started checking nearby parking lots to see whether some of its federal carpoolers were also customers there. "One woman got caught," says this employee, "and I don't know what ever happened to her. Can you redeem yourself or do you get put in purgatory for the rest of your Parklawn career?"

But employees who finally get spots aren't that happy either--especially if they have to park too far away. "It's irritating to drive by and see reserved, reserved, reserved, and you are thinking, 'It's not for me, it's not for me,'" says Harry Ray from the Veterans Affairs Department, referring to the slots set aside for officials he affectionately calls "the brass"--the chief of medicine and other director heads who get to park "as close to the building as you can get without being in the building."

Recent changes revolutionized the parking policy. The VA hospital told everyone to get off the lot so patients could park there. Employees were told to park a quarter-mile away and shuttle in. That drove the brass berserk. "Everyone complained," Ray said. "You'd think they killed their first-born. But what could they say--'I'm not in favor of the patients?'"

"Other people (non-brass) kind of liked this system because it was egalitarian. It was good to see the brass take the shuttle. They got to meet the troops. They were cold and miserable too; somehow that made everyone feel better."

Some agencies have gone from encouraging drivers to carpool to practically paying people to keep their cars at home. The government's Metro fare subsidy works for Jeanette Hite, from FDA's Freedom of Information Office, who had to turn in her parking permit

Freedom of Information Office, who had to turn in her parking permit to qualify for the program. "I'm loving every minute of the commute," she says. "When you come out of the darkness (from inside stations), the bright sunshine hits you."

But many hardcore solo drivers glow in the dark. After a long, lousy day, they dash to their cars, sit behind the wheel, start their engines and take control of their lives. For some, a parking permit is just as valuable--if not more--than a marriage license. "When we broke up," says Bob Ashby, a regulatory analyst at the Transportation Department, "my former wife got custody of the car pool."

Next time on Kogan Undercover: The Case of the Government Ghouls. What is your office doing for Halloween? Are your agency's halls haunted? Are you wearing a costume to work on Oct. 31? Send the ghouly details to kogan@planetgov.com.