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Corporate sneakiness. Government waste. Technology run amok. Outright scams. The Red Tape Chronicles is MSNBC.com's effort to unmask these 21st Century headaches and offer real solutions that save you time and money.

Bob Sullivan covers Internet scams and consumer fraud for MSNBC.com. He is the winner of multiple journalism awards for his coverage of online crime and author of *Gotcha Capitalism: How Hidden Fees Rip You Off Every Day and What You Can Do About It*. and *Your Evil Twin: Behind the Identity Theft Epidemic*.

Got some red tape you want Bob to untangle? Write BobSullivan@feedback.msnbc.com.

CASH-STRAPPED CITIES PILE ON THE PARKING FINES

Posted: Monday, September 14 2009 at 06:00 am CT by Bob Sullivan

It's the very definition of a bad day. No quarters in your pocket, the line at the post office is longer than expected or you need to grab lunch and don't have time to circle the block and find parking. You run back out and get to your car just in time to see a parking officer pulling away after leaving a ticket on your windshield.

For want of a quarter, you now owe \$50 to some government agency.

There was a time that such calculated risk-taking might have paid off. Odds were against a meter maid spotting your car at just the wrong time. Or perhaps you were good at talking your way out of tickets. No more.

Parking meters and meter maids have become less forgiving. Around the country, cash-strapped municipalities are turning to what's sometimes called a "curb tax" to shore up weak balance sheets. Cities are raising ticket prices, hiring more citation officers, turning to gimmicky technologies, even selling their parking systems and enforcement to the highest bidder, all in a desperate effort to shrink budget gaps.

"There's no doubt about it. Virtually every city has hired more ticket agents," said Glen Bolofsky, founder of ticket-beating site parkingticket.com.

Bolofsky said governments' philosophy about parking tickets has radically changed. Where once local officials held onto a pretense that parking tickets were chiefly a deterrent aimed at safety or public convenience, police departments and elected officials now openly discuss citations as revenue stream.

That's obvious by looking at marketing materials from companies that sell parking and ticket collection services to local governments.

"For nearly 30 years, we've been helping cities and towns make money," croons Municipal Management Association Inc., which helps cities collect parking fines. At the bottom of each page is the company slogan: "Municipal Management Associates ... Turning Parking Tickets Into Cash."

And right now, cities are doing more of that than ever:

In **New York City**, the undisputed king of parking tickets, the municipal coffers are stuffed with nearly \$600 million in parking ticket revenue annually – about 50 percent more than in 2002. The financial opportunity is so large that New York hired more than 200 new agents this year, at a time when most city agencies were being cut.

In **Chicago**, the city leased its entire parking operation to a private company earlier this year. In exchange for the next 75 years of parking revenue, the city received an up-front payment of \$1 billion from a group lead by investment bank Morgan Stanley. The deal is being challenged in court.

Atlanta announced it was outsourcing its parking enforcement to a Milwaukee-based firm named Duncan Solutions Inc. The city had been collecting \$2 million in fines each year; now, Duncan has promised to send it a yearly check for \$5.5 million. Meanwhile, in St. Louis, all 73 meter maids in the city were laid off this spring when the parking duties were outsourced to Duncan.

In **Louisville, Ky.**, as in many other towns, the city has lowered its threshold for "booting," or immobilizing, cars. Now, only two outstanding parking tickets are enough to put the dreaded boot on a tire. And, in a major policy shift, cars may be booted even if they are legally parked when spotted by enforcement officials.

Normally, the boot devices are locked and can only be removed by law

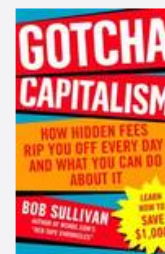
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enforcement officials, which can require hours of waiting. But in **Montgomery County, Md.**, just outside Washington D.C., local officials recently instituted a new system that allows alleged violators to unlock the devices using their cell phones. The cost : \$115, plus payment of outstanding fines. The system, provided by New Jersey-based PayLock Systems, is also being used in New Orleans, Baltimore and about a dozen other cities. In some locations, it's married with a camera-equipped car that lets citation officers cruise the city at normal driving speeds, looking for license plates tied to outstanding parking tickets.

In **Washington D.C.**, city officials announced earlier this year that they were stepping up parking enforcement to raise millions in new revenue for the city. The most bizarre tactic: equipping street sweepers with cameras that automatically take pictures of cars parked in their path. The camera-generated parking tickets are expected to generate \$2 million in annual revenue. Parking-crunched D.C. residents also complain that overaggressive ticket agents are suddenly enforcing laws that have been ignored for years, such as no parking within 5 feet of an alley or driveway.

"I recently got a ticket for parking in a space on the street that I have been parking in for three years at least and never had a problem," one resident wrote recently in an Internet group devoted to parking frustrations. Said another: "We've received the unwanted attention of an overzealous meter maid. (She) recently began ticketing residents' cars for being too closely parked to our own driveways. Our 3 tickets state we have to park at least 5 feet away from a driveway ... our own driveway."

In **Boston**, ticket prices have soared. The price for being caught parked in a crosswalk recently rose from \$40 to \$85. Parking more than one foot from the curb jumped from \$20 to \$35.

And changes are hardly limited to huge cities. **Sacramento, Calif.** recently added an \$8 fee to every parking ticket, hoping to net \$1.5 million to help close a \$50 million budget gap.

No mercy

Driver's advocates say the higher fines and new technologies are not the worst part of the new world order in parking. At a time when many drivers can least afford big surprise bills, parking citation officials are showing little mercy -- and in some cases, handing out unfair summons by the bushel, all in the name of making money.

"It's an outrage when cities depend on parking summons for revenue. When they do, they are opening the doors for very serious abuses," said a New York-based citizens' advocate who calls himself Jimmy Justice. He films illegally parked New York City officials and embarrasses them by posting the short films on YouTube. "When someone gets a bogus ticket, everybody knows this is just part of a giant racket. It's sanctioned mugging."

Angry drivers are filling his inbox him with woeful tales of unfair tickets or overzealous agents, he said.

"Getting a ticket while backing into a parking space. Getting a ticket while sitting there for three seconds before backing into space. The list is endless. Parking enforcement agents in are trigger happy," he said.

The New York Times [did a data-driven analysis of city parking agents recently](#), and found that one had managed to write 227 tickets during one 5-hour stretch. A typical shift sees agents write about 40 tickets. Meanwhile, letter-of-the-law enforcement ruled the day. The city wrote 276,000 tickets during the year for drivers who were illegally parked for five minutes or less, the paper found.

Frustrations in New York are running so high that City Councilman Peter Vallone Jr. recently said complaints about traffic tickets outnumber all other complaints to his office -- and he's considering legislation that would institute a grace period for drivers.

"The way traffic agents are enforcing the law is absolutely out of control," he told the New York Post.

How aggressive is enforcement? Bolofsky said he's seen New York drivers get tickets for double-parking merely because they are waiting for someone to pull out of a spot on the street - a time-honored practice in the competitive world of city parking.

"They sneak up behind people. They are waiting in the wings, in the shadows," he said. "Then they knock on the window and hand the driver a summons."

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The good old days

Things weren't always this way, Jimmy Justice says. Police and traffic enforcement officials used to implement a long-standing policy called "warn and admonish." Illegally parked drivers were given a chance to move their vehicles before summonses were issued. But when cities began treating parking tickets as a revenue source instead of a public policy tool, that changed, he said.

"Fifteen years ago if someone was stopped in a no-parking zone for a moment, parking agents would wave and say 'you have to move,' and any normal person would move. There would be no problem," he said. "Today they write tickets now and ask questions later. Because today parking violations is big business."

If the system feels cold and unforgiving, that's partly because many cities are using new technology that cuts out human interaction -- and the criminal justice system -- from the process. In Seattle, a pair of lawsuits are contesting the use of cameras to detect and cite speeders. Twenty area municipalities are named in the suit. In the city of Seattle, a new camera system wrote 58,000 tickets valued at \$5 million in its first three months of operation.

Because the contracts promise a minimum payment to the cities, and the manufacturer agreed to split citation collections after that, one of the lawsuits contends the system gives "the cities and the vendors an illegal incentive to issue improper tickets and to err on the side of issuing a ticket versus declining to issue the ticket."

Meanwhile, handheld electronic ticket issuing machines are sweeping municipalities, allowing meter maids to write more tickets -- and more important, reduce errors that lead to dismissals. One manufacturer, DXY Solutions Inc., says switching to handhelds increases a single officer's ticket-writing productivity by 30 percent.

Other new technology seems downright mean-spirited. Parking meters invented and sold by the French firm Technolia send texts messages to local police the very instant that a meter clicks down to zero.

While stories of parking citation budget bonanzas through increased enforcement aren't hard to find -- Denver's collections soared from \$16 million to \$20 million in the past year, for example -- the long-term impact of increased enforcement might not be so positive, said Jimmy Justice.

"This really creates a rift between the police department and the average citizen," he said, noting that most people make no distinction between citation officers and armed police. "There used to be more communal respect with police officers. ... Now when people see a police officer, they think they're going to mug them, find a reason to write a violation. It's not fair to paint all police with the same brush, but that's what happens. It's not good for anyone."

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