

Montreal parking meters go high-tech

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That mad dash back to the car to feed the parking meter could soon be unnecessary in downtown Montreal. The city is installing a network of electronic meters -- a system that promises to make paying for a spot so painless people will even be able to do it far from where they left their vehicle.

"Nobody likes to pay for parking," says Isabelle Bettez, president and chief executive officer of **8D Technologies Inc.**, the Quebec company behind the city's new automated parking management system. "But since you have to pay, you might as well make it easy as possible."

Here's how it works: Drivers use cash or a credit card at a kiosk or "smart meter" located on each street to pay for the numbered spot where their vehicle is parked. They don't have to put a receipt on the dashboard, because paid parking spots are tracked electronically.

When drivers want to renew a spot, they simply pay again for that numbered space at any of the new kiosks anywhere in the city.

The only evidence parking enforcement officers need when it comes to ticketing is in the palm of their hands. A wireless personal digital assistant (PDA) tells the officers which spots are paid for and which ones aren't. White-coloured spots on the handheld screen are those in good standing, while red ones may need a ticket.

"It's very practical, it's more productive and it's easy," says Jean-Claude Dubreuil, the executive vice-president of Stationnement de Montréal, the city's parking authority. "This system is going to change drastically the way people here pay for parking on the street."

After a successful summer trial of 50 wireless pay stations serving 600 spaces, the city now plans to replace 6,000 coin-operated sidewalk meters with at least 500 of the new high-tech kiosks this winter.

One of the new pay stations costs about \$11,500 and replaces up to 15 of the traditional coin-operating, single-space meters.

Stationnement de Montréal can't say precisely how much cheaper it will be to operate and maintain the new units, but says it expects substantial savings as a result of the smart meters.

It adds that officers will also be able to cover more territory and be more productive -- especially in the winter.

Mr. Dubreuil says the city's parking police usually patrol the streets by car. With the new system, they don't have to check meters or the time stamped on tickets placed on dashboards, so they won't have to leave their cars and hike over snow banks unless there's a reason to write a ticket.

For Ms. Bettez, putting her company's innovation on the street is the ultimate test of 8D's technology.

"It's the worst -- weather-wise, people-wise, you get everything," she says of designing kiosks that can stand up to daily wear and tear. "It has to work whether it's minus-40 or raining."

To ensure the point-of-sale smart meters would process transactions securely, 8D chose to develop them with Java, the same programming language from **Sun Microsystems Inc.** that the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration uses to operate the Mars Rover.

In 8D's case, Java helps link the meters to a wireless broadband network.

Sun was so impressed by 8D's work, it calls the parking system "revolutionary" and ranks it among the "best-of-the-best" in the world of Java technology. It bestowed its Duke's Choice Award on the Montreal company earlier this year, putting it alongside programming leaders such as eBay.

"They're using some neat technology that makes the 8D solution quite unique," Sun Canada president Stéphane Boisvert says. "I think it's a key innovation that you're going to find throughout many cities in North America in the years ahead."

Sun helped 8D show its parking meter system to San Francisco's mayor, for example. He was apparently keen enough on it that the city is considering a pilot project of its own.

In Montreal, the technology is being well received by drivers, according to city officials.

"Being a former Montrealer, I know that finding a parking spot and then paying for it is a pain," Mr. Boisvert says. "Now, the city will save money and parking will become more accessible for Montrealers. That's great."

Local driver Rolf Strom-Olsen agrees.

"I have used those new downtown meters, the ones on Ste. Catherine Street among other places, and they work very well," he says.

"Eliminating the need to carry change around in your car is a welcome improvement. And it's also nice that you don't have to bother with a dashboard display.

"Especially when you are freezing cold and don't want to have to go back to your car to put some stupid piece of paper on your dash to ward off the 'green onions,'" he says, referring to the nickname some Montrealers have given the local parking police.

The smart meter system hasn't won over everyone, though. The city agency says that while surveys so far have found as many as 90 per cent of drivers like the new method of paying for parking, some are confused by the new kiosks.

That's one of the reasons why the full capabilities of the wireless parking system aren't being offered yet.

Right now, the city's drivers have to walk to the nearest wireless pay station even though the 8D system has the capability to take payments through a cellphone, handheld device or any computer connected to the Internet.

While that sounds like the ultimate in parking payment ease, Stationnement de Montréal has decided not to offer those options just yet. It says it wants to give drivers time to understand and adjust to the smart meters before offering new wireless payment features.