



# Corporate Report

NO: R131

COUNCIL DATE: May 30, 2005

## REGULAR COUNCIL

TO: Mayor & Council                      DATE: May 26, 2005  
 FROM: General Manager,  
 Engineering                                  FILE: 6280-01  
 SUBJECT: Newspaper Boxes on City Road Allowances

## RECOMMENDATIONS

That Council:

1. Direct staff to not institute permit system for newspaper boxes and vending machines from the City's road allowances; and
2. Direct staff not to renew any permits and phase out existing boxes as current permits and contracts expire.

## BACKGROUND

The current by-laws require a City permit to place any private fixture including newspaper boxes within City road allowances.

A number of coin box newspapers have been permitted for specific locations for a number of years through their business license. They are The Vancouver Sun, The Province, National Post and Globe & Mail. There is a \$20 per year charge for each newspaper box.

Recently, a large number of free newspaper boxes were placed on the road allowances without permits. This issue was highlighted in an information memo to Council on April 8, 2005. All of the publishers have now removed the unauthorized newspaper boxes as directed by the Engineering Department. These publishers have requested that the City review the issue and consider allowing the free newspaper boxes on City road allowances.

There are a number of concerns with these newspaper boxes in the road allowance. They can be briefly summarized as:

- safety and liability: boxes can be moved relatively easily, thus could become an obstruction for pedestrian and wheelchair passage along the sidewalk or a roadway hazard for motorists and cyclists;
- vandalism: the potential for arson and damage to the boxes due to the accessibility by anyone without payment;
- appearance/cleanup: with free access, the potential for the newspapers to be strewn over the sidewalk and road would be high, resulting in considerable litter and City cleanup costs;
- proliferation: approximately 400 newspaper boxes were added to the streets recently with plans for many more by these companies. There are likely to be other new newspapers in the future wanting to be placed along the streets. All these boxes add to visual clutter and lower the street appeal;
- administration: cost and manpower associated with review of locations, permitting and on-going monitoring.

## DISCUSSION

## **Approach by Other Municipalities**

With the arrival of the new free daily newspapers, most of the neighbouring municipalities are currently reviewing their position on newspaper boxes. Two approaches worth highlighting are Coquitlam and Vancouver.

Coquitlam has a by-law that specifically prohibits newspaper boxes and vending machines on road allowance. This forces vendors or distributors to make arrangements with private businesses to locate the boxes on their property.

The City of Vancouver in 1998 approved a recommendation to allow placement of free newspaper boxes. Since that time, there has been a significant growth in the number of boxes placed on City sidewalks: from 12 to 31 publications and from 1600 to 4700 newspaper boxes.

While they undertake a more comprehensive review, the City of Vancouver is proposing an interim policy limiting newspaper box placement based on a minimum weight and criteria for the number/location of boxes. In order to deal with the administrative burden the City has hired two staff on a temporary basis to enforce the City's guidelines and one to manage the newspaper box program. In spite of having a permit system, Vancouver has found that they still get boxes installed in numerous unauthorized locations in some cases, impeding pedestrian movement and causing visibility problems.

## **Options for City of Surrey**

There are three possible approaches to this issue:

1. Prohibit all newspaper boxes and vending machines from City road allowances;
2. Permit the existing newspaper boxes to remain, but do not allow any new boxes;
3. Permit all newspapers to have boxes, but within a set criteria and limits to numbers and locations.

### Option 1 – Prohibit all newspaper boxes from City Roads

To accomplish this, a by-law amendment should be enacted to clarify and strengthen the City's position. Such a by-law change could grandfather existing permit holders and would not be put into full effect until the Pacific Press license is up for renewal (approx. April 2006).

The advantage of this approach is simplicity, perceived fairness to all publishers and elimination of all the City's concerns with respect to newspaper boxes. The newspapers could still work with malls, corner stores, gas stations, colleges and other commercial / institutional sites to locate boxes on private property. Having a multiplicity of possible commercial/institutional sites for boxes on private property would allow easy accessibility to the public for these newspapers. These locations would have better surveillance than boxes located on roadways, which would minimize the safety, vandalism, litter, streetscape and staffing concerns. Business owners would also be better at judging what papers offer a bonafide service to their customers or business.

### Option 2 – Allow existing boxes to remain but prohibit any new newspaper boxes

The existing pay newspaper boxes have been permitted in Surrey for many years and have not resulted in many concerns from the public or City. A by-law amendment would be required for this option.

The advantage of this option is that it addresses the concerns that have arisen with the new free newspaper boxes without penalizing the pay newspaper boxes that have not created problems. It also permanently limits the total number of boxes on City streets to 230 (approx).

The disadvantage is that it could be perceived by the free newspaper publishers as an unfair obstacle to their success.

### Option 3 – Allow newspaper boxes subject to specific criteria

Criteria could be established to limit, and set locations for, the number and type of newspaper boxes permitted within the road allowance. Most of the concerns could be eliminated with higher quality and heavier newspaper boxes. Litter concerns may be addressed by requiring publishers to remove litter from around the boxes. If a location has a chronic problem, the City could have the right to remove the box. However, vandalism could still be an issue. Of

note is that one of the free newspaper boxes in an adjacent municipality was recently lit on fire and required the Fire Department to respond.

The advantage of this option is that it would be fair to all publisher and newspaper types. It could also have the greatest potential as a revenue source.

The disadvantages are that it would require significantly more staff time and would likely require an additional staff or contract resources assigned solely to deal with the newspaper boxes. The cost of additional staff or other resources could, however, be covered by the permit fee. The other issue would be determining which papers are permitted to go at each location. It is envisaged that there would be a limited number of boxes permitted for any given location. One could expect that no matter the method used to establish this, there will be some publishers unhappy with their assigned locations.

## **SUMMARY**

Option 1 (no newspaper boxes, i.e., no new ones and phase out existing ones) is the most administratively straight forward approach, treats all companies equally, and minimizes street clutter. It eliminates any City staff costs and addresses all concerns relating to litter and vandalism, and increases the street appeal of our major roadways.

Option 2 (no new newspaper boxes, but allow existing boxes with permits to remain) address most of the concerns but may not be perceived as fair by the free newspaper publishers or new publishers of pay newspapers.

Option 3 (newspaper boxes allowed under permit) could address most concerns but would require significant staff or other resources and would likely result in complaints of unfair newspaper box location assignment and continued pressure for an ever increasing number of newspaper boxes. Permit fees associated with Option 3 could be set to cover the costs incurred; however, as is the case in Vancouver, there will be ongoing issues with boxes in unauthorized locations, and the need to coordinate with newspaper companies the removal of these authorized boxes.

We have contacted the various newspapers wanting to place boxes on the City's road allowances. Basically, all of these newspaper companies are prepared to cooperate with a permit system for boxes and would prefer the City take this approach.

Of the various options, Option 1 minimizes City costs, resource demands, and concerns relating to the boxes ranging from litter to visual clutter. Option 1 places the onus for the distribution of commercial goods (in this case, newspapers) on arrangements between the newspaper companies and private commercial and institutional properties. No other commercial goods are sold or distributed using the City's road allowances as a 'retail outlet' location.

However, should Council feel that newspapers are a special case and that distribution should be allowed from the City's road allowances, then staff would recommend that a permit system, with location criteria, be established.

Paul Ham, P.Eng.

General Manager, Engineering

PH/JB/VL/fsa/rdd/brb

g:\wp-docs\2005\utilities\04251618vl.doc

AMR 5/30/05 10:13 AM