



Portland's 'phantom' parking ticket case: City, court apologize; readers respond

13290902-mmmmain.jpg

Portland parking enforcer Mary Kisel checks the details of a disable parking permit in downtown Portland during the summer of 2013. (Joseph Rose/The Oregonian)

Joseph Rose | jrose@oregonian.com By Joseph Rose | jrose@oregonian.com

Email the author | Follow on Twitter

on March 24, 2014 at 7:03 AM, updated March 24, 2014 at 7:07 AM

Bray said his office has also contacted the Department of Revenue, asking it not to cash Hope's check for \$164, which included months of late fees.

My most **recent Oregonian commuting column** on how Portland Parking Enforcement and Multnomah County Circuit Court essentially helped themselves to a Lake Oswego woman's money for a non-existent parking ticket triggered a wave of responses from readers.

For example, **Nan Waller**, presiding Multnomah County Circuit Court judge, and Doug Bray, the court's administrator, called to explain why no one responded to Susan Hope's letter expressing her confusion about a \$39 citation that was ringing up late fees.

To me, Hope's complex and infuriating tale of a "phantom" parking ticket serve as further proof that the city's parking-enforcement system has truly become more about making money than making parking in the city a fair fight for commuters and visitors.

"Obviously, I was concerned," Judge Waller said of the column.

Bray, who confirmed that the column was accurate, said his staff did indeed receive Hope's letter asking for an explanation.

However, Bray said, the court's limited, budget-strained staff receives an average of 520 letters about parking citations along every week. Hope's letter was "scanned into the system" as the staff worked through hundreds of other letters, Bray said.

"We're very busy," he said. "We just don't have the staff for an immediate response to every correspondence."

Bray said his clerks eventually caught up to Hope's letter. Records that he provided showed that the court actually sent the city's Parking Enforcement office an electronic notification to void the ticket on March 7.

I'm confused.

You see, after learning of Hope's story from The Oregonian last week, PBOT spokeswoman Diane Dulken said that the agency was unaware of its mistake and that the agency would ask the court to dismiss the citation immediately. Weird.

Bray said his office has also contacted the Department of Revenue, asking it not to cash Hope's check for \$164, which included months of late fees.

He said a new online e-court system, scheduled to go live in May, will fill such "gaps in customer service" by making it easier to respond to people with similar problems.

Of course, if you find yourself with a mystery parking ticket, there's already an alternative to wrestling with the court's intimidating phone tree or waiting months for someone to answer a letter.

On the beat with a Portland parking enforcer

Many readers seem to think that Portland's parking enforcement officers are on a mission to get them at all costs. Well, here's a video from the other side, showing how one parking enforcer approaches her job. **Full story**

Anyone who has a problem with a Portland agency, can call city ombudsman Margie Sollinger in the auditor's office. That number is (503) 823-4503.

But don't ring Sollinger to argue your ticket (save that for the judge). She is there to respond to citizen complaints about city agencies, including PBOT.

Meanwhile, Commissioner Steve Novick, who oversees PBOT, also encouraged people to contact his office at 503-823-4682 if they have issues with the transportation agency.

Hope said Bray and a parking enforcement manager have both contacted her to apologize for the bogus citation.

Still, many readers said the city and court should refund Hope for the frustrating hours that she put into trying to deal with the local government's error:

Not only should she get the money back, she should charge the city fines and late fees for their errors. I am thinking that the city should be charged the same amount she was intimidated into paying... \$164... i.e. she will get her initial payment of 164 back, and then charge the city an extra \$164 as a penalty... that would be a great way to stop that kind of stupidity!

-- bfhypoforever on OregonLive

Why do only people like Joseph Rose, who have some power to make a stink for the city, get return calls from PBOT and their spokespeople?

-- Yohocoma on OregonLive

Readers also sent in a collection of their own parking-ticket horror stories. A Sample:

I had a very unprofessional encounter with a parking patrol person while preparing to leave a parking space prior to my paid time expiring. While putting my top down, I put down the windows and was putting my seatbelt on when "Mr Overzealous" came up to my car and declared that I was not displaying a parking sticker. I politely explained that I removed it prior to putting my top and windows down and was leaving my parking space. He wanted no part of my explanation, demanding that I must display the parking sticker at all times while occupying a parking space. When I asked how that could be reasonably done when I arrived at the space and had to walk a half a block to the payment station, or across the street when the first payment station did not work. He had no rational response but to repeat that I had to display a parking sticker at all times, no matter what. That was nearly 4 years ago and from that day forward, I do not park on the street or shop in Portland. I find that there is nothing that I need or want that can't be found elsewhere without being treated unwelcome. If people feel that they can't change the behavior of the parking patrols, they are just unwilling to do what it takes to prompt the change; don't park on the street. If enough people would actually do something, change would occur, but typically people don't want to be inconvenienced, so nothing changes. Personally, I will not support that behavior and unfortunately do not support the downtown businesses that...more

-- Xxlzr1 on OregonLive

I couldn't resist writing you as I just read your piece in the Oregonian today and had a similar situation with a parking ticket. Although I think mine might have been associated with a parking lot as I can't remember where I actually parked! Here is my story.

I work for a very large world wide manufacturer and our cars are leased. I apparently received a parking ticket...I never found one on my vehicle. I opened up my email this week from corporate and was informed that I had received a ticket in January. I remember the date as I don't go downtown very often...I think I was there about 15 minutes. I think I was parked on the street. But when I returned to my car, I never found a ticket on my car. And now suddenly the fine was doubled to \$83.00 because it was not taken care of within the month. When I called the company listed on the form, they said, I was given a ticket, they sent a letter February 4, which I didn't receive, because it was sent to my corporate headquarters...and there is no negotiating for this fine. My corporate contact denied receiving a letter in February. I just received this notice.

I have copied the email and the form that my company received for you to give me your opinion. I paid the fine yesterday, but feel like it is such a scam...

Anyway, glad to know there are others with similar issues, but it just smells funny to me!

Thank you....

-- Tara via email

But none topped this one sent in via Twitter:

@pdxcommute sounds eerily familiar. I had my vehicle at a shop for some time. Got it back with 23 parking tickets in the passenger seat.

— Mike Thurston (@TheSmokinScot) **March 20, 2014**

@pdxcommute absolutely nothing I could do can't fight the ticket unless you pay the fine. Ended up in small claims court. ...

— Mike Thurston (@TheSmokinScot) **March 21, 2014**

@pdxcommute because they were waiting for parts they kept parking it on the street to make room for other customers vehicles.

— Mike Thurston (@TheSmokinScot) **March 21, 2014**

@pdxcommute was a repair shop. They refused to cover the tickets by reducing the bill accordingly or in cash.

— Mike Thurston (@TheSmokinScot) **March 21, 2014**

@pdxcommute that's fine it's been a few years since it happened. But it sounds like the system is still just as broken

— Mike Thurston (@TheSmokinScot) **March 21, 2014**

Of course, as this report from Philadelphia shows, phantom tickets are a problem in other U.S. cities:

-- Joseph Rose

© 2014 OregonLive.com. All rights reserved.