

City of Westmount Redefines Its Parking Strategy

Implementation of the first pay-by-plate parking management system on the Island of Montreal



Overview

In recent years, Westmount noticed that the limited parking spots available, as well as construction in the area, were deterring potential customers from shopping in the area. The City decided to take the challenge head-on by implementing the first on-street pay-by-plate parking management system in Canada.

Westmount's 20,000+ residents are proud to be part of a city that values open communication, fosters a sense of community, preserves heritage and protects green spaces and the environment—a city that promotes leadership, and strives to give their residents the best possible services and policies. As one of the oldest municipalities in Montreal, Westmount has a rich history to preserve while continuing to support initiatives that will carry it into the future.

Challenge

Outdated coin-operated parking meters

There were around 750 parking spaces available in Westmount and yet there were still a significant number of complaints regarding the number of spaces available, inadequate parking, turnover, ongoing construction in the area, or simply lack of proximity to local stores. The parking situation had a direct effect on local merchants and their business potential. No customers in the area means no sales, no sales means no businesses, no businesses no money, no money no economy and so on.

Increasing the number of parking spots available became one of the city's top priorities, along with finding an overall better

management system to address other issues and complaints such as defective meters, or the constant struggle of finding change to feed the meter.

Westmount also wanted to address the issue of esthetics. Multiple factors can affect the city's visual appeal. Anything from paint on the streets used to designate different parking spots, to sidewalks covered with single-space meters. In the winter, meters can block access to snow removal teams leaving snow to pile up, a blight on city esthetics and an inconvenience to drivers trying to locate and access available parking spaces.

Change management

Additionally, the City of Westmount had to take into account their residents as well as a demographic of non-residents. While most may welcome an update, a percentage of the population may be unhappy with the change. Some are not so tech savvy, others are uncomfortable with change in general, and lastly, some do not see the improvement as benefit for them, but rather as a way for the city to make more money. How do you implement change with all these obstacles in your way? You come up with a proactive plan to address the issues before implementing the change.

Solution

Pay-by-plate technology

Representatives of the City of Westmount were in Chicago for a trade show and noticed market leader gtechna as well as other parking solution vendors. Given that gtechna had a local foothold on the market and was partnering with numerous pay-by-phone and meter vendors, they had the edge over the competition. Though the RFP was not direct through gtechna, out of the 5 pay-by-phone and meter vendors who met the project criteria, the 3 proposals that were shortlisted presented solutions in partnership with gtechna. The City of Westmount eventually selected MacKay Meters as their meter provider for the project.

Westmount also was already working successfully with gtechna on their back-end administrative system and therefore opted to partner with them and their pay-by-plate technology that allows for vehicles to move to other available parking spaces within a designated area. The pay-by-plate system was already being used in Pittsburgh, Washington, Seattle as well as several other US and Canadian cities.

As a solution provider, gtechna is best known for its unified full-featured real-time parking systems.

In terms of integration, Westmount already had a standard e-ticketing system with gtechna. Therefore, the current system was updated to the latest version, upgraded from PDA to Android devices and enhanced with the add-on of new parking management component.

“This simple and elegant solution to updating on-street parking is yet another example of the City’s long-standing penchant for innovation”, said the Mayor, Peter F. Trent.

A total of 73 new parking pay stations featured pay-by-plate technology.

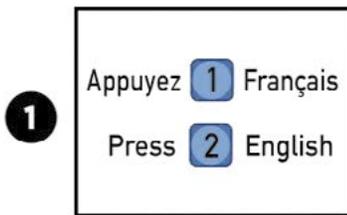
“Metered parking is a point of frustration that motorists experience on a frequent basis. With the introduction of pay-by-plate parking, Westmount is reducing that pain and ultimately making metered parking more convenient, accessible and efficient through innovative technology”, said Councillor Philip A. Cutler.

Public Security officers will use an automated license plate recognition Android device, equipped with a camera, to detect whether a vehicle is compliant, meaning “As it reads each plate, it will say paid or unpaid,” said Director of Public Safety, Gregory McBain. “If it says unpaid, it will print out a ticket.”

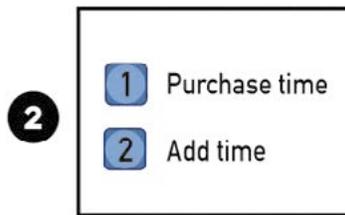
In collaboration with a pay-by-phone vendor, the parking system is easy to use, accepts payments by coin, by credit card and, of course, also by mobile device. Drivers have the ability to pay for a certain amount of time on their license plate and this allows them to move around from parking spot to parking spot if they have multiple errands to run within a certain designated area. It is therefore possible to add minutes to your parking using any of the available MacKay Meters in the area. The mobile app also allows users to add on minutes from anywhere without returning to a pay station. The biggest advantage is that there is no need to look for change if you don’t have any. Westmount has also eliminated lines on the road to designate parking spots. This will allow for more parking spaces to be available. “The biggest advantage right off the bat is you get 15% more spots because you eliminate the stripes on the road,” said Philip Cutler, City Councillor. Total number of spaces went from 750 to nearly 900!

The one catch is you’ll need to remember your license plate.

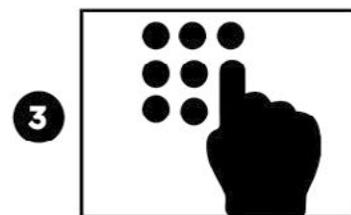
Pay at the pay station in a few steps



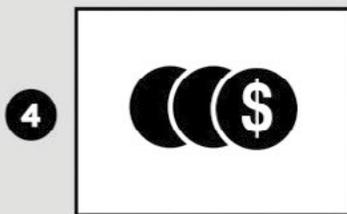
Press 1 or 2 on the keypad to choose the language.



Press 1 or 2 on the keypad to choose the option.



Enter plate number.



Insert coins.

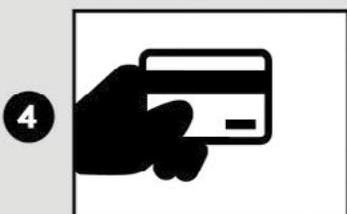


Choose "continue" to confirm.

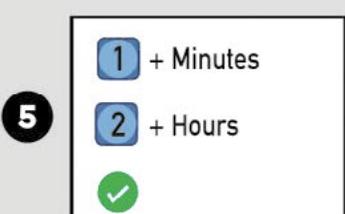


Take your receipt!

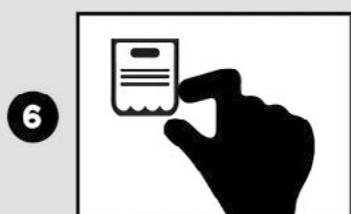
OR



Insert and remove credit card.



Choose "continue" to confirm.



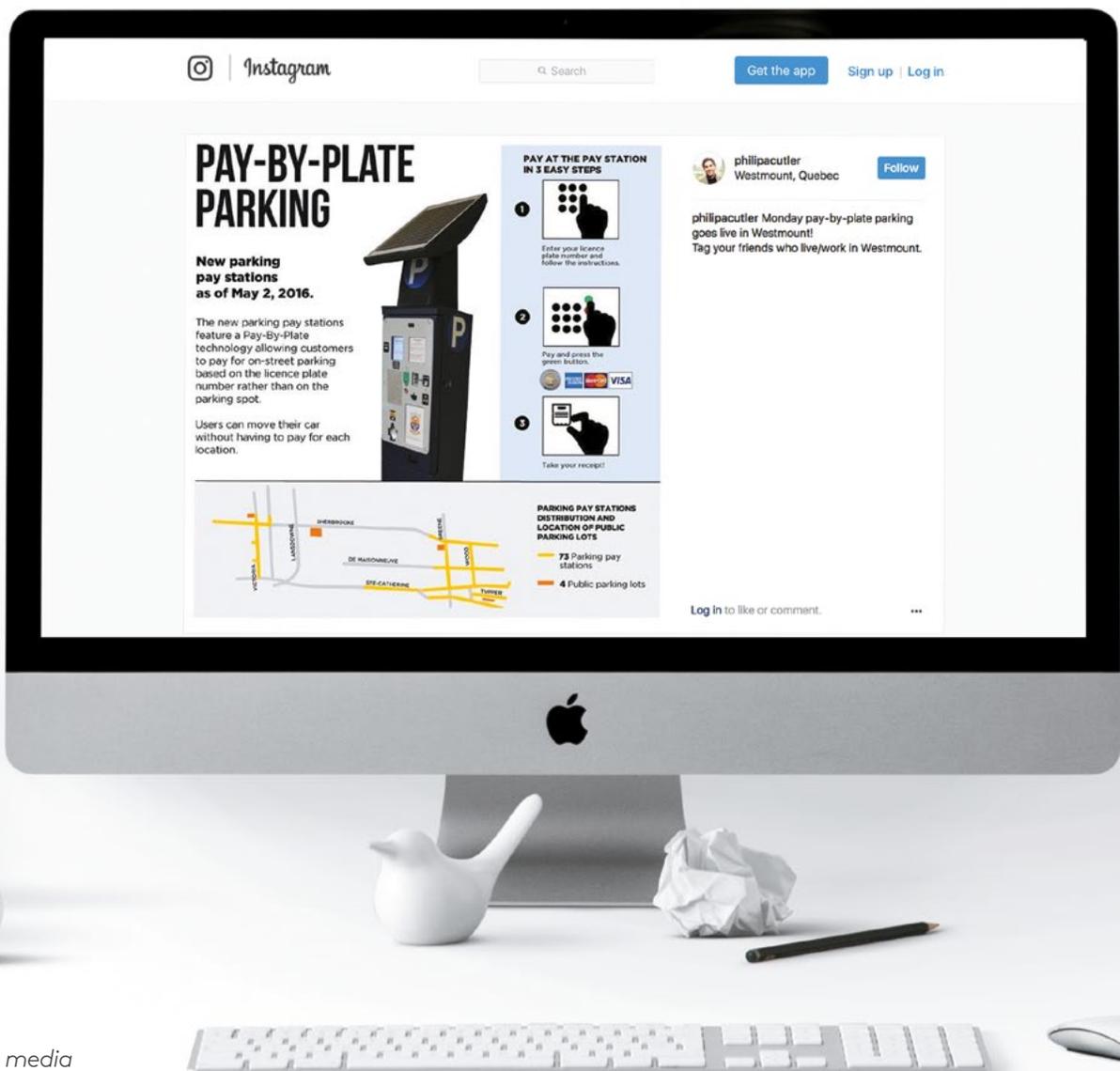
Take your receipt!

Public relations

To ensure a smooth transition for residents and non-residents alike, Westmount planned 6 months in advance. They reached out to their community through news, radio, newspapers, door-to-door visits and handouts to local merchants, informing them of what was to come. They even installed two demo pay stations 3 months in advance, one next to the recreation center and the other near City Hall. This not only served as a demo for citizens, but was also a test to determine if the pay stations could withstand the cold Montreal winters.

“From a customer service standpoint, it’s a beneficial trade-off for everybody,” said Philip Cutler, City Councillor, adding that the two demonstrator pay stations — one outside city hall and one inside the Westmount Recreation Centre—had garnered overwhelmingly positive feedback from users.

On Monday, May 2 at 11 a.m., Westmount organized an official launch outside, complete with Mayor Peter F. Trent who was joined by City Councillors, Director General, Mike Deegan, and Director of Public Safety, Gregory McBain. Public Security Commissioner and Councillor, Philip Cutler, answered questions and demonstrated the pay-by-plate system using one of the city’s 73 pay stations. Throughout the day, people were guided to the new parking stations and shown how to enter their information. While not everyone is tech savvy, the demonstrations allowed residents to ease into the transition and learn how the system works. “People just need to get used to the machine itself and that’s it” says Public Security Officer, Nicolas Bouchard.



Pay-by-Plate
debut on social media

Of course, no transition is 100% smooth and there were some complaints to handle, especially during the first couple of months, but the number of complaints has significantly decreased since. Most were due to having to memorize your plate number and not understanding why Westmount didn't use the same system as Montreal. However, the percentage of complaints versus the compliance rate was very minimal and Westmount managed to address a vast majority of the complaints, therefore the integration can be qualified as highly successful.

For the first few weeks, parking officers were focused on commercial areas and were present to assist people with using the machine. The Westmount philosophy is not about ticketing but rather compliance. They view their parking officers as parking ambassadors, and to this day, encourage their ambassadors to forget about issuing a ticket if they see someone struggling to pay their parking fee. It is more important to create a positive user experience than it is to generate revenue through parking tickets. For Westmount, citizens come first.

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Further proof of this philosophy is that Westmount decided to set up a two-week grace period where no tickets were issued and the focus was strictly on helping people pay for their parking.

Parking rates have not changed and in fact, hours of operations have diminished, therefore during certain hours, parking is free. Parking is now also free on holidays, whereas previously, calling the station was the only way people knew if parking was free. Most people chose to just pay for their parking instead of making a phone call. Today, the pay stations greet users with a happy holiday message and lets them know, there is no fee for that day. Westmount believes that if no one is ticketing on those days, then no one should pay for parking either.

And lastly, though this feature has no direct impact on parking fees, it remains a valuable bonus: the pay stations are environmentally friendly as they are solar powered and not electric. Westmount is doing a little something for the planet as well!

Results

Westmount is proud to join the many municipalities around the world using this system, and to be the first to adopt it in Canada. The change has attracted people to the area and encouraged them to shop at local businesses. Merchants have increased their business as well as their relationship with the shoppers. Some merchants even thank shoppers by validating their parking.

As a bonus, the meter-free sidewalks have improved walkability and snow removal operations. The elimination of designated spaces allows for various sizes of cars or SUV to find a parking spot.

Parking rates are not expected to rise. Westmount has two parking zones: one with parking costs of \$3 per hour (the same as downtown Montreal) and in the rest of the city it costs \$2 per hour.

Revenue is expected to increase and should offset the cost of Westmount's migration to the new system, though not by much. Westmount has decreased the hours of operations however, the pay-by-plate solution has increased the number

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of parking spots available by 15%. The revenue generated balances out and should therefore be more or less the same.

Additionally, Westmount is very often at full capacity which means they have reached a cap on possible additional revenue. For the time being, it is not a concern and this will likely be addressed in phase 2 of the project.

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With over 20,000 users using the app exclusively, and the app accounting for 1/3 of the transactions, integration with convenient payment technologies has given more options and convenience to the driver. In turn, this has helped reduce complaints, increase compliance and overall customer satisfaction. Actually, the number of app users keeps growing, while complaints continue to decrease.

In numbers

	May 2016 to October 2016
Average number of cars/plates checked per shift	Approximately 400 per shift
Average number of infractions/ticket volume	25,000
Number of transactions	900,000
Total number of parking spaces	900
# of pay-by-plate transactions vs coin	⅓ coin ⅓ credit card ⅓ pay-by-phone
Pay-by-phone users	Over 20,000
Transactions per day	2,000 to 3,000

Conclusion

This project has generated a lot of interest from other cities looking for real-time parking solutions. Several cities have been impressed by the implementation and success of Westmount's pay-by-plate system.

In June 2017, this innovative project earned the City of Westmount a nomination by the Quebec Transport Association for the Grand Prize for Excellence in Transport. This prize recognizes various projects in the transportation industry and inspires and encourages local initiatives.

And while this is all great news, Westmount is focused on continuing the implementation of phase 1. The project's next steps are the launch of a promotional campaign to promote

the use of the app and by identifying the areas in the city with less activity and optimizing the available parking spaces in those areas to ensure all parking spots are in use at all times.

Phase 2, which is even more technologically advanced, will be rolled out next. This second phase will expand to the rest of the city, remove stickers for annual parking and move towards pay-by-plate by adding license plate recognition (LPR) cameras to vehicles for enforcement on meters and parking permits.

Westmount has been and will always be a pioneer and early adopter of new technology. Who will follow in their footsteps?

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