by Zac Blanchard12:30 pmOct 4, 2022*47*

With towing reform shot down by the City Council, high fees and aggressive practices will continue in Baltimore

Pouncing on unsuspecting parkers, demanding cash at triple the rate allowed in Washington – Baltimore's towing industry escapes the latest attempt at regulation

Above: Security camera footage shows a Greenwood Towing truck removing a car from a private parking lot at 11:35 p.m. in Federal Hill last June.

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Between 7 p.m. on Friday, June 24, and 2 a.m. on Sunday, June 26, Greenwood Towing Inc. made $2,700 in towing fees off a 27-space parking lot nestled north of the Cross Street Market in Federal Hill.

Security camera footage shows four cars were towed on Friday evening, each at $300. One was released after paying a $150 "drop fee." An identical number of cars were towed and dropped on Saturday evening.

Average those numbers over a month and almost $12,000 was picked up by the towing company – or roughly three times as much as Bank of America, who owned the lot at the time, likely made on parking each month. Note that this estimate excludes the other 137 hours in the week.

Most of the vehicles towed from lots in Federal Hill belong to people who are visiting neighborhood for its restaurant and bar scene.

But Sam Harrington, who lives across the street from the lot, can reel off other examples. Grubhub drivers as well as customers who park for a few minutes to pick up food get towed so frequently that "you honestly stop noticing it."

A neighbor once had to pay a $150 drop fee because his parking pass wasn't hanging from his rearview mirror, even though Harrington and several others pointed out to the tow driver that the parking pass was visible in the car.

Lenna Vaughn, who lives on an adjacent block, has photos of Greenwood tow trucks parked at the intersection of Poultney and Patapsco street, waiting to pounce on cars that illegally park at the lot.

She recalls a man having to pay $150 after leaving his car for no more than 45 seconds to retrieve a parking pass from his daughter's house across the street.

Greenwood's owner, Burt "Buz" Greenwood Jr., was said to be unavailable when contacted by *The Brew.* The company did not respond to questions about its business practices by phone and on its website comment box.

A Greenwood tow truck idles on Poultney Steet, waiting for a vehicle to park at a nearby private lot. (Lenna Vaughn)

Citywide Issue

Overly aggressive “patrol tows” – where tow operators search private property for the purpose of identifying unauthorized or improperly parked vehicles – are not unique to Federal Hill.

In written testimony to the City Council, a resident in Mount Vernon said that even during the Covid pandemic, a tow company would drive through her lot four of five times a day, looking for vehicles to pick up and remove.

“Daily there were two or three cars towed from the lot, including my ex-partner’s and my friends who helped me move out. We had paid – but the meter was broken and did not dispense proper tickets.”

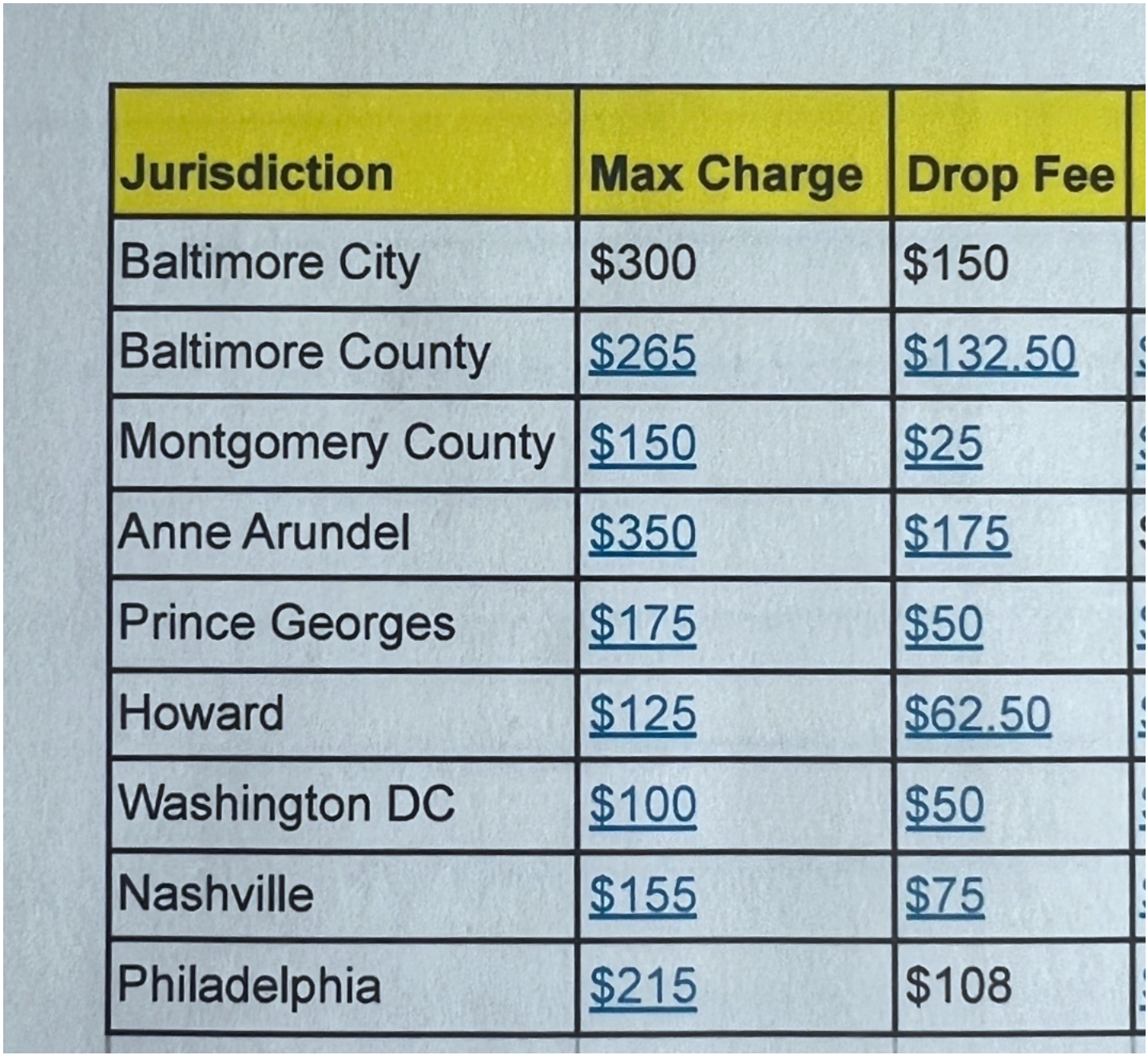
The resident said her car was once towed after her monthly parking pass was delayed in the mail. When she went to pay the $300 fee, the tow company refused to accept her debit card. She said she had to call her mother to bring the $300 in cash to get her car back.

Legislation to place restrictions on Baltimore’s towing industry was defeated in 2004, 2008, 2009, 2011 and 2014. Last month, it happened again.

Such practices are incentivized by the high prices that Baltimore allows licensed towing companies to charge for “trespass towing,” the term used for vehicles towed from private parking lots. (There is also “police-initiated towing” of vehicles obstructing traffic, abandoned on city streets or disabled in accidents. This operation has had its share of scandals.)

While Maryland nominally sets the fee at $250 per trespass tow, it allows counties to set their rate at a higher amount.

Baltimore City uses this loophole to set rates at $300 per tow, more than double the fee in Washington, D.C., and most other jurisdictions.



Jurisdiction	Max Charge	Drop Fee
Baltimore City	$300	$150
Baltimore County	$265	$132.50
Montgomery County	$150	$25
Anne Arundel	$350	$175
Prince Georges	$175	$50
Howard	$125	$62.50
Washington DC	$100	$50
Nashville	$155	$75
Philadelphia	$215	$108

Only Anne Arundel County has higher towing fees than Baltimore City, according to this survey by Councilman Ryan Dorsey’s office. BELOW: Pollard’s Towing char from a North Baltimore lot. (Mark Reutter)

City rules also permit tow drivers to demand only cash payments, and towing yards to charge drivers more when they pay by credit card. Such rules not only hurt motorists, critics say, but make it hard to track money for taxation and other purposes.

4-3 Defeat of Dorsey Bill

Past legislation to place restrictions on the towing industry was shot down by the City Council in 2004, 2008, 2009, 2011 and 2014.

The latest attempt at reform, championed by Councilman Ryan Dorsey, was introduced last year.

Bill 21-0125 would reduce Baltimore's towing fee from $300 to $250, lower the drop fee from $150 to $62.50, prohibit any charges when a vehicle has not yet been lifted from the ground, and require the acceptance of at least two credit cards for payment.

The measure also would have banned patrol towing outside of the hours of 2 a.m. to 7 a.m.

Despite hearing no objections from city agencies or from Mayor Brandon Scott, the bill sat in the Rules and Legislative Oversight Committee for a year before getting a perfunctory hearing last month.

> "Best practice reforms were on the table and rejected without reason" – Councilman Ryan Dorsey.

After the brief hearing, the committee rejected the bill in a 4-3 vote, prompting Dorsey (who was not a member of the panel) to vent his frustrations on Twitter.

"A vote was taken to continue to allow predatory towers to take advantage of people because it's convenient for landlords and lucrative for towing companies," the 3rd District lawmaker said.

"Best practice reforms were on the table and rejected without reason," he declared.

Voting "no" were committee chair Isaac "Yitzy" Schleifer, Mark Conway, Eric Costello and Sharon Green Middleton.

Voting "yes" were Kristerfer Burnett, Odette Ramos and James Torrence.

Schleifer did not return a half dozen emails and phone calls seeking comment on why he opposed the bill.

Conway, originally a co-sponsor of the Dorsey bill, did not publicly explain his change of heart. Nor did he respond to requests for comment.

10/05/2020	Protani, Paul	3606 Bayonne Ave, Baltimore, MD 21206	Individual	Franfkfor Towing	Administrative and Management	Credit Card	4000.00
12/01/2021	Protani, Paula	3606 Bayonne Ave, Baltimore, MD 21206	Individual	Frankford Towing	Administrative and Management	Credit Card	2500.00

Contributions by the owner of Frankford Towing to Yitzy Schleifer's campaign committee. The $4,000 donation in October 2020 cites a "Paul" Protani representing "F State Board of Elections)

$10,000 in Contributions

Between the bill's introduction and the vote last month, Schleifer received $3,750 in campaign contributions from local towing interests.

The biggest contribution came from Pauli Protani, owner of Frankford Towing on Belair Road.

She gave $2,500 to Schleifer's campaign committee last December and, prior to that, $4,000 as Schleifer coasted to reelection to the City Council in November 2020.

Two persons, both listed as employees of The Auto Barn, gave another $500 to the 5th District councilman, representing northwest Baltimore, in December 2021.

> Councilmen Schleifer and Costello, who both voted "no" on the Dorsey bill, have swooped up contributions from towing interests.

Two months later, Schleifer got $250 from Charles Parrish, manager of Vision Wrecker Services.

Another key "no" vote came from Eric Costello, who represents Federal Hill, Mount Vernon and other downtown neighborhoods.

In the last year, Costello has picked up campaign funds from various towing and parking interests. They include $500 from Frankford Towing and affiliate Ted's Towing, and $2,000 from Arrow Parking's Ben Greenwald.

"Norman" speaks at the City Council hearing. (CharmTV)

Protecting the Public

Testifying at the September 15 Council hearing, Charles Parrish said flaws in the Dorsey bill would have serious safety consequences.

"If this bill [passes], there is no public safety for the [tow-truck driver] or for the property owners or management," he said, arguing that the presence of tow trucks improves the security of those using parking lots and garages at night.

Another towing industry representative, identified only as "Norman," said Dorsey's measure posed a threat to a business that people "love."

"People complaining? I don't know who Councilman Dorsey is talking about. People love it when we come. I'll show you the emojis. They appreciate it," he said, describing the Dorsey bill as "shameful."

> "People love it when we come. I'll show you the emojis" – Towing Representative "Norman."

Frankford Towing's Protani did not testify before the Council, but she worried in an interview about the now-defeated bill's restrictions on patrol towing.

"If the general public found out no one can patrol tow, they would abuse it," she told *The Brew*. "Frankford doesn't patrol tow, but some towers do, and some businesses have a legitimate need for patrol towing."

Asked how to handle tow companies that abuse the public, she said, "Someone should do a study to see how many places need patrol towing during daylight hours before this bill moves forward."

• ***Zac Blanchard*** *is a freelance journalist and resident of Federal Hill.*
• ***Mark Reutter*** *contributed to this article.*

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mark adams
3 years ago

The city should require lot owners to initiate a complaint before the towing companies take someone's car. If they don't want people parking on their lots after hours, they should chain off the entrances to the lots. It is a hazard to public safety to give tow truck drivers discretion to decide whether or not to confiscate

someone's property. These are decisions that should either be made by the property owner or by a law enforcement officer.

Someone should ask Bank of America why it uses a towing company that does not accept its credit and debit cards?

4 0 Reply Share ›

craigpurcell → mark adams
3 years ago edited

Surface parking lots don't contribute to positive urban vibe in pedestrian friendly areas and in general create a blighted landscape. When will the city plan for a better future for those living within its urban fabric ?

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JustSomeGuy → craigpurcell
3 years ago

By banning the private ownership of automobiles or by requiring the building of more parking garages?

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TucoBird
3 years ago

If only the Mosby's started a towing company...

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The 42 Mile Perspective
3 years ago edited

Years ago there was a racket going on during Ravens games. I was among several people who paid to park in a nearby lot. When we came out from the game the last two cars were being towed away. Probably 25-30 cars in total. It turns out someone had just put a big piece of cardboard in front of the private lot sign and started charging. And wouldn't you know it, but there was a line of cabs waiting to take everyone down to Brooklyn to get their vehicles back. We took a cab down to the tow lot, and I marched right up to my truck while my friend played drunk and distracted the guy in the trailer. Fired it up and flipped him off when he came running after us as we left. I think the following week they towed a councilman and the scam was exposed. Everyone was in on it. Good memories of Baltimore. LOL.

5 0 Reply Share ›

JustSomeGuy → The 42 Mile Perspective
3 years ago

I recall that back in the day people who lived near Memorial Stadium would come home to find that someone was collecting $20 a pop to let people park on their lawns.

0 0 Reply Share ›

Digital Dan → The 42 Mile Perspective
3 years ago

From running the gauntlet of the squeegee boys, the carjackers, the invasion of the dirt bikers, and the predators driving tow trucks; Baltimore is a great place to test your skills in coping with a multitude of challenges. Visitors are fair game.

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The 42 Mile Perspective → Digital Dan
3 years ago edited

Indeed. One of my favorite things is when I'm in another city and someone tells me to watch out for the bad areas. I just chuckle and tell them I'm from Baltimore.

3 0 Reply Share ›

L

Lt. Dan → The 42 Mile Perspective
3 years ago

Good one! That gave me a chuckle as well. I shared it with my kids who now live in other cities.

2 0 Reply Share ›

H

Humanity
3 years ago

Day after day I pray for someone to run against Costello.

2 0 Reply Share ›

Rodman
3 years ago

Towing in Baltimore is a complete racket. In April of this year, my house was broken into at 4am and my car stolen. The thief drove it four blocks away before crashing it into the brick wall outside of the Wexter Center. Frankford Towing has the contract with the city to pick up crashed vehicles. When I drove to Frankford to collect my belongings (which I couldn't do because Baltimore City's Dept, of Transportation's Towing Dept. is a complete and utter dysfunctional mess), they had no idea where my car was. I waited for 30 minutes until the women were able to track it down. Their system is not automated - instead they rely on paper ledgers and phone calls to track cars. While I waited, I watched as they fielded endless phone calls of people trying to track down their cars. It should not be this difficult.
I'm not surprised that this got voted down. I suspect there are a lot of people (including those at DOT and Towing Division) who are getting their palms greased for these exorbitant towing fees. I also suspect that the cash payments are not all reported to the IRS - I'm sure some of that money is making its way to DOT officials and our council people. $300 cash to retrieve your car is unreasonable when compared with the rates of other cities.

6 0 Reply Share ›

Digital Dan
3 years ago

I knew that the squeegee boys were a special protected class in Baltimore, but I did not know tow truck drivers were protected too. Some cities roll out the red carpet for visitors, Baltimore rolls them up in the carpet. Legal extortion, the Baltimore way.

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Person of Interest
3 years ago edited

Drip, drip, drip...

The city continues to lose population and the elected dimwits are incapable of seeing how all these stories, drip by drip, **contributes** to population decrease.

7 0 Reply Share ›

D

DJN → Person of Interest
3 years ago

Elected officials would still get paid the same, probably get a 'forced increase', if the population dropped by 50,000 overnight. Towing companies would still write them checks. The vultures that are in city government don't care if the population decreases, because it's not the poor section 8 handout loving people that vote for them no matter what they do that are leaving. It's the semi educated pop. that are the ones leaving, they demand shit from their reps, they make phone calls when they're angry and they might find someone else to vote for. The Mosbys, the Scotts, the Costellos of this city would prefer if you left so they could go about their grifting in quiet.

0 0 Reply Share ›

Digital Dan → Person of Interest
3 years ago

If I were in charge of the city and had my finger on the pulse of everything that was happening in Baltimore, it might be tempting to ignore the decay, mismanagement, corruption, and general neglect we see today.

The reason is that the culture of the city's leadership has not had to be accountable for much in many decades. There is also the probability that when things get to a new record low that the state will finally step in and take over. So in the meantime you may as well cash in all that you can and make hay when the sun is shining.

0 0 Reply Share ›

R

RP Reader → Digital Dan
3 years ago edited

They haven't had to be accountable to you because your cares likely aren't don't reflect the priorities of most voters. By definition, they are accountable to voters. Voters either like what they are doing, or are concerned about what someone else might do that's worse.

1 1 Reply Share ›

D.
3 years ago edited

...and this week the Nobel in Medicine went to a researcher who deduced the genome of the Neanderthals....
Hummm.... seems like this "mobile" genome is plainly visible in many Baltimore neighborhoods and is FIERCELY guarded by numerous Councilpersons [who, curiously, all share the same knuckle walking gait that's particularly evident when they affirm the status quo for no particular logic, rationale, or barometric

pressure.] *(fade chorus of "Alley OOP-oop, oop-ooop ...)*

0 0 Reply Share ›

MartzeeIsArtsy
3 years ago

I've got to say I did not get all the way through this article without thinking, "what does the campaign contribution spread sheet look like?" Asked and answered, thank you Brew—although it is disappointing at that such measly amounts can buy the vote.

4 0 Reply Share ›

strategylog
3 years ago edited

Dorsey / bike-lane haters take note, here was the councilman trying to help out car drivers who don't deserve to be price gouged. To be clear, Ryan Dorsey was trying to make life easier for people having a hard time finding parking. Keep that in mind before spouting off about him being a single issue ideologue.

4 0 Reply Share ›

MartzeeIsArtsy ↗ strategylog
3 years ago

I hear you. And I do give Dorsey his due on this and other things. Walkers, bikers, drivers all need to see some value in where they travel. Toothpicks lining Harford Road do not do it, and I find myself going to commercial venues in other locales to avoid them. That being said, he got very tempted by some contribution $$ being waved his way for the establishment of a drug rehab facility in our neighborhood. He did the right thing and gave it back. That is the behavior we're trying to promote in newly elected officials. "See that it is wrong, make it right."

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