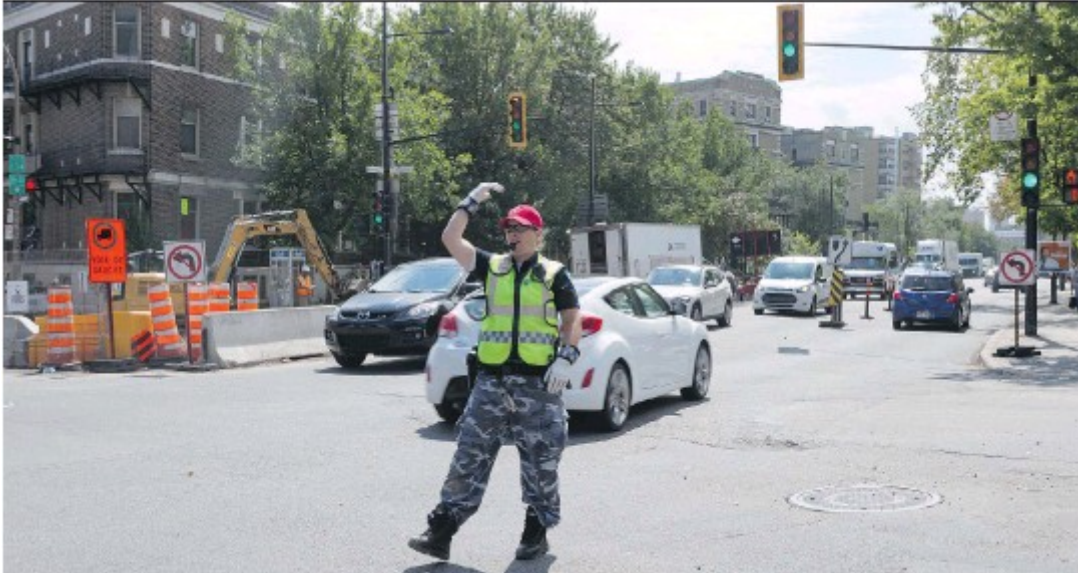


Traffic cops costing city a small fortune

Wages can reach \$62 an hour, while Vancouver pays civilians \$26 to do job

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Should Montreal be using lowerpriced civilian employees instead of police officers to direct traffic?



The sight of Montreal police in festive pants guiding pedestrians and drivers through problematic intersections has become ubiquitous in this summer of omnipresent construction zones.

Anywhere from 60 to 250 police officers a day are employed to work traffic detail. They volunteer for the shifts, which last anywhere from four to eight hours, and do it on their off time so as not to take away resources from regular policing duties. They are paid overtime fees of one and a half times their regular salaries. A police officer with six years' experience earns \$77,000 not including benefits, which works out to \$62 an hour for directing traffic.

In Vancouver, the police department uses trained civilians hired under their Traffic Authority division to direct traffic. They are paid between \$22 and \$26 an hour.

The Montreal police force billed the city of Montreal and province of Quebec \$4.4 million for traffic duties in 2014. With this year's surge in construction projects, 2015 is shaping up to be even more costly.

The principle of exchanging civilian employees for police makes sense, said Alex Norris, vice-president of the city's standing committee on public security and a city councillor with opposition party Projet Montréal.

"Anything we can do to reduce the costs of our police service while maintaining services to the public should be looked at," he said, adding that similar policies have been introduced successfully in the United States and England.

“We do have to ensure, however, that any such arrangement is consistent with what’s provided for in the collective agreement ...

“We really need to get policing costs under control. The crime rate is at an all-time low, yet police costs are going up. We need to change that.”

The concept of transferring nonessential police duties like directing traffic or administrative tasks from officers to civilians is gaining ground as cash-strapped municipalities look to combat rising police costs.

In April, Toronto Mayor John Tory said it was time to look into using lesser-paid civilians to take over some duties done by police, including traffic detail, the Toronto Star reported. The Association of Ontario Municipalities called on the province to make legislative changes to permit “the greater transfer of special functions to civilians or other security providers where appropriate,” in its Policing Modernization Report. Security, prisoner transportation, data entry, accident reporting, burglary investigations, (providing the burglary is no longer in progress) and forensics were among the duties the association suggested could be transferred.

Municipalities like Montreal, Calgary and Edmonton have already transferred responsibility for doling out parking tickets and monitoring parking meters to security agents.

Last December, during a special meeting of the city’s standing committee on public security, police chief Marc Parent said management had already considered the idea of transferring duties for things like managing traffic and was open to it. With the city requesting the police service cull 225 positions over the next five years from its current force of 4,869 officers (the force also employs 1,575 civilian staffers), transferring nonessential police duties would aid in hitting that target.

Police unions, however, have not been open to the idea of losing extra income popular with their members. And municipal politicians have been hesitant to tackle the city’s powerful public security brotherhoods.

In 2011, Toronto police rejected the suggestion of the city’s auditor general that it create a separate traffic authority as exists in Vancouver.

Montreal’s police union declined a request for an interview from the Montreal Gazette.

In response to an interview request with Anie Samson, chair of the city’s standing committee on public security, city spokespeople emailed the following statement: “We are reflecting on all the options, including keeping the police officers (on traffic duty). We are always reflecting on providing the best practices and improving the organizational performance of the city.”

Police officers have argued using police on traffic sites makes the city safer, as they can intervene if criminal acts occur.

While there are cost savings to be made, the presence of a uniformed police officer has a positive effect on driver conduct, said Ian Lafrenière, head of communications for the Montreal police department.

“I take the Jacques Cartier Bridge. I do see a difference because of the police officers — it helps fluidity, and some people who might have the intention of making an illegal manoeuvre, maybe they won’t do it if they see a police officer. ...

“There are different cases in different cities, different points of view. Now that we have a new police chief (Parent is stepping down in September), we will see how it goes. There are positives on both sides.”

A report published by the independent Montreal Economic Institute in January titled “Private reinforcements for public police forces?” recommends sub-contracting numerous duties to security firms to rein in costs, leaving police more time to deal with the types of specialized services for which they are trained — such as intervening during crimes in progress. Municipalities like New York and Los Angeles that have done so have seen drops in their crime rates, the institute reported.

At drinking and driving roadblocks, using security agents for auxiliary duties like installing signs and administering breathalyzer tests while police arrest drivers would cut the costs of those operations in half, the institute estimated. In London, England, security agents do the work of recording the event and filing a report after a break-in has occurred, which typically involves five to 10 hours of work. For the 10,499 break-ins recorded in Montreal in 2013, using police to secure the premises and collect evidence while security agents do the rest could have saved the city \$3.9 million, the Montreal Economic Institute estimates.

Security agencies like GardaWorld, which is headquartered in Montreal and employs 48,000 people worldwide, have started taking over police duties in several areas.

“It’s part of our top management discussion and current business expansion model,” said president and chief operating officer MarcAndré Aubé.

“We are working with different police corps around Quebec and Canada to find different ways to increase the use of private security and traffic control agents to enhance the quality of the work of the police officers, who we think are way overqualified to do some of these duties,” he said.

The company has already been hired to do public security in municipalities like Dollard-desOrmeaux and Town of Mount Royal, responding to certain types of calls such as complaints about excessive noise at house parties, or doing street patrols. Other tasks include front-office administrative tasks at police stations, responding to house alarms and radar speed checks and traffic control at construction sites. GardaWorld security agents earn about \$40,000 a year.

The main impediment has been unions wary of staffing cuts. But in many cases police unions have been happy to give up some duties their members would rather not do, Aubé said, especially if any cuts are handled through attrition.