

CHICAGO, THE CITY THAT LEASES

By James Finn Garner

Chicago used to be known as “The City That Works”, but nowadays it’s become “The City That Rents”. Last week, the City Council approved Mayor Daley’s plan for leasing Chicago’s parking meters to a consortium of private companies. The deal is worth \$1.2 billion, which is a heckuva lot of quarters. The lease will endure for 75 years, which lessens my outrage about it. In 75 years, I don’t think I’ll be taking my isotope fusion hover-mobile downtown to look for a parking space. By that time, I’ll be 123 years old, and I’ll be able to ride the CTA for free. If it hasn’t been privatized by then.

Plans are for parking rates to increase eventually to \$6 per hour on the meters in the loop. But the joke is on our new meter landlords. There actually AREN’T any. Have you ever found a metered spot open in the Loop? I’ve heard from reliable sources that parking spaces in the Loop are bequeathed down from father to son, just like county offices. Sometimes on Sunday, you can see whole families visiting their cars on Lasalle Street and picnicking on the sidewalk like Russians in a cemetery.

Analysts tell us that Chicago is on the forefront of these civic lease deals. It’s an easy way to raise revenue without raising taxes. We already rent out the Skyway out to a French company. As soon as that deal went through, the toll prices jumped to \$3.00, and drivers got a taste of what it’s like to own a car in Europe, but without the benefits of mass transit or socialized medicine to hand out tranquilizers. Midway Airport is another city property that is leased out. If

you're stuck in crowds there during the holiday travel season, remember that it could be worse: Your city could have converted it into a condo.

When you think about it, the number of civic amenities that the city could rent to private, absentee, unaccountable landlords is only limited by our imagination, and the audacity of the mayor's office. Playgrounds could become cash cows if kids had to pay every time they use the slides. Lower Wacker Drive could be leased to car companies as a test track. Even stoplights could be rented out—maybe they'll find out that drivers are more willing to pay to travel north-south than east-west.

And think about the possibilities of the Olympics coming to Chicago. If every event had to pay a separate rent for its facility, the money would just roll in. Though I'm not sure where the marathon runners would keep their spare change for tolls.

At the same time as the parking meter plan was announced, the city told us that lack of funds will make it impossible to salt and plow our streets quickly after a snowstorm. Well, why not privatize that as well? The only question would be whether to lease the plows, or lease the streets.

For years we've been told that America is transforming into an ownership society, and yet again, Chicago bucks the trend. With all these rental deals and the certainty of more on the way, it's heartening to know that one thing around here is bought and paid for. It's all ours, and will always be on our hands. After all, how much would anybody spend to rent a do-nothing City Council?

James Finn Garner's latest work can be found in the anthology Cubbie Blues: 100 Years of Waiting Til Next Year, just released by Can't Miss Press.

#