

Predatory Towing Continues In Downtown Bethesda

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Bob Silverberg claims it took only five minutes.

By the time Silverberg returned to the Connor Building parking lot on Woodmont Avenue, his car had been latched on to a tow truck. A few moments after leaving the parking lot to pick up a sandwich order two blocks away, the tow truck driver pounced.

Silverberg paid him a \$50 drop fee.

“I can’t say I frequent any of the shops in the Connor Building, but now I will not do so for reasons of their parking lot policy,” Silverberg said of the April incident. “Whatever financial penalty the building’s tenants may suffer, I suspect that the revenue loss is more than made up in fees split with the towing company. Why else would they have contracted to have a towing firm literally standing by within a block or two of the lot?”

Silverberg is far from the first to fall victim to [the notorious aggressive towing practices](#) at the Connor Building lot. And his isn’t the worst case of predatory towing there. Silverberg did walk off of the lot, meaning he did park illegally.

But as a practical matter, the predatory towing situation is as concerning as ever, according to Montgomery County Office of Consumer Protection Director Eric Friedman.

“Nothing will kill a business district more than getting towed,” Friedman told the Western Montgomery County Citizens Advisory Board on Monday. “It creates a level of frustration I’ve never seen in consumer protection.”

Friedman has been talking about the issue for years, even [appearing on ABC News’ 20/20 program in 2012](#). On Monday, he indicated there is little hope for improvement. A recent state law made Montgomery County’s ability to operate on its own [more difficult](#) with regards to trespass towing rules. Then, there’s [the federal preemption issue](#) that hinders the ability of local governments to establish their own guidelines.

Friedman estimated there are between 30,000 and 40,000 trespass tows a year in Montgomery County and downtown Bethesda is among the more popular spots to find one. Friedman said trespass towing is a roughly \$5 million a year industry in the county.

The Office of Consumer Protection gets about 3,000 complaints a year about trespass tows. The average cost to reclaim a towed vehicle is \$168, not counting the time and effort it takes to get to the impound lot, which must be in Montgomery County no farther than 12 miles from the spot of the tow.

The Connor Building's owners and other property owners have maintained it's important to enforce parking rules to ensure spots for customers at their buildings.



But Friedman said it's unlikely all property owners are calling their contracted tow truck company to report a walk-off or illegally parked driver — as is legally required.

“You have to have authorization from the property owner before the tow. But in practice, one or two firms get aggressive and work the system,” Friedman said. “One or two companies have spotters and they'll hide and wait and call the owner instead and say, ‘Give me authorization.’”

Rockville-based G&G Towing patrols the Connor Building lot. It's not uncommon to see a G&G tow truck staked out at a parking meter across Woodmont Avenue. G&G [has been cited for its legally dubious](#) practices in Silver Spring. The company doesn't make statements to the media.

Friedman said the other major problem area in downtown Bethesda is a small lot near the U.S. Post Office on Wisconsin Avenue. With no apparent parking near the Post Office, drivers often park in the Mattress Warehouse and Verizon store lot next door.

Tow truck operators pounce, meaning a \$50 or even \$168 trip to pick up some stamps or drop off a package.

And in the case of some — like Silverberg — it means enough frustration to avoid the area at all costs in the future.

“The tow truck hovers on nearby streets ready to pounce on the unsuspecting. The tow truck driver admitted this when asked how he could have responded so quickly,” Silverberg said. “Aggressive is an understatement. The building owners perhaps can be shamed into participating in the civilized world after all.”