BY ASHLEY CISNEROS

GNV

The $80 Parking Space
Roam towing provides the hook up

Welcome to Gainesville, home of perpetual roam towing. Ask any longtime resident or student and he or she will tell you that coming to Gainesville requires extra attention when it comes to something as simple as parking.

"Towing is the one thing that makes me hate Gainesville sometimes," says sophomore Analiz Velazquez. "I accept it as a necessary evil to being a Gator."

As any seasoned resident will know, roam towing is a practice where property owners hire towing companies to inspect their lots periodically for illegally parked vehicles or cars without proper decals. Velazquez has been towed three times since she moved to Gainesville to study sociology. One time, she was parked at a friend's home at La Mancha Apartments for a mere 30 minutes. Upon walking out to the parking lot, she saw that her car was gone.

"I had this sickening feeling at the pit of my stomach," she said. "I panicked."

A neighbor saw her looking around the lot and informed her that her car had been towed just 10 minutes before.

"When I called the towing place, the truck hadn't even gotten to the lot yet, and even after pleading with him, he wouldn't turn around," Velazquez complains. "He was a complete jerk about it."

She ended up calling her older sister, who picked her up, took her to an ATM to withdraw $80, and then hauled her to the towing office to bail her car out.

"I think the worst thing about it was the lack of professionalism when I called their office," Velazquez said. "Someone was laughing in the background while I pleaded to the man to return my car."

Maria Rodriguez agrees. "Towing in Gainesville is relentless; they don't care about you or your situation," she says. Rodriguez graduated in December 2001 and said that she had been towed about 12 times during her years at the University of Florida. On one occasion, she managed to catch the tower as he was strapping in her Kia. She decided to sit on the hood of the car so he couldn't tow it away.

Rodriguez finally talked the tower into releasing her car if she paid him $35, half of the $70 rate at that time.

While many students like Velazquez and Rodriguez have stories about towing traumas, employees at towing companies argue that they are just doing their job.

The fight among students and towing companies has a long history and there have even been instances where students have taken tow companies to court.

The latest news in towing has been the city commission's decision to increase the roam-towing rate to $76 in addition to banning any other fees that some companies added on. Prior to that the towing companies were allowed to charge $73.

But are towers really the bad guys? Has towing in Gainesville gotten out of hand? Here is what the men behind the wheel had to say.

"I am just doin' my job."

Gene Watson, owner of Watson's Towing, has been in the business for almost 10 years. He was a proponent for a bill to raise the roam towing rate to $80 in Gainesville because of the rising expenses associated with towing such as gas and maintenance.

Despite the fact that the city commission did not approve the bill, Watson says he may pursue this issue again due to the increase in gas prices.

"Imagine, with 10 or 11 trucks, you have thousands to pay in insurance in maintenance, and sometimes you don't make enough to cover all of that," he argues.

However, most people do not feel that they should have to absorb these costs.

"What I am doing is providing a service because there has to be some system in place to protect the rights of the property owners," Watson says.

Watson says sometimes, the situation can get ugly.

"We get people in here who come angry and screaming profanities," he says. "We sometimes have to summon the law enforcement to calm them down."

Watson likens getting towed to getting a speeding ticket.

"I know that people are in a hurry here and that they may see the sign, but decide to take their chances and then get caught," he says. "We all have sped before, and just as in speeding, you have to pay the consequences."

But Watson says he shouldn't be blamed for someone deciding to disobey the signs.

"I know that there is a parking problem in Gainesville, but I didn't create that," Watson says. "Just obey the sign, and you won't have to deal with it," he advises.

Watson says that his business does not do as much roam towing as some of its competitors. They also don't tack on other charges, because they feel it is those practices that give everyone in the industry a bad name.

"Even with all the bad publicity we have received lately, I don't regret getting in this business because I have been in it for 8 years," he says. "For me, this is a family business."

Apartment complex

Scott Heegcot has been in the towing business for a number of years, 24 to be exact. His company, University Towing, stopped working roam towing lots five years ago because they felt it had gotten out of hand. Now University Towing has contracts with services like AAA and also does towing for the University of Florida.

"My company has gotten out of roam towing because people were getting more confrontational and it was just not worth it to risk someone getting hurt," Heegcot says. "When competitors saw that there was a market created by the (apartment) complexes, they jumped in and we couldn't compete anymore."

He says that for too long, the bad guys have been the towing companies. Now it is time to look at who is hiring the towers. Heegcot says that without the apartment complexes hiring the towing companies, they would be out of business.

"If you have 500 apartments in one complex with four students in each, you have 2,000 students," Heegcot illustrates. "But if you provide them with just 1,500 spaces, what happens to the other 500 students and mom and dad when they come to visit?"

Heegcot says that prospective residents should ask the complex owners or managers if they provide adequate parking for their tenants and their visitors.

"Why is towing needed in the complexes if the complexes do their job to provide enough parking for everyone?" he asks.

Heegot also questions the idea of raising the roam towing fee to $80. He even thinks that $76 is too high.

"Why don't the companies raise the cost for all their services, not just roam towing that affects mostly students?" he argues.

Heegot thinks that the companies should raise the rates for their contracts with the city if they raise the rates on roam towing.

He also understands that business owners want to protect their property, pointing out that while there are businesses downtown that close at night, students should understand that they still want to protect their property from drunk students who may trash the lot after a night at the club.

Heegcot shares what he tells to his own 20-year-old son in college, "If you see a sign, don't park there, it's as simple as that." ✺