

# No Checkstop on St. Paddy's Day



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It didn't take the luck of the Irish to avoid Checkstops this past weekend — in fact, Calgary's drunks didn't need any luck at all.

St. Patrick's Day may be one of the busiest drinking celebrations of the year, but in Calgary, there wasn't a single Checkstop unit available to nab those driving under the influence of green beer.

Indeed, motorists mixing alcohol and driving on March 17 had more chance of seeing a leprechaun than a Calgary cop pulling cars over at random on the street.

"I was surprised to hear there weren't any out either," said Calgary police Duty Insp. Paul Stacey, confirming the absence of Checkstops on Saturday night.

Apparently, it's a matter of money and manpower.

Despite recent political posturing in Alberta about clamping down on drinking and driving, the reality remains that the province's police only have so many resources to devote to catching drunks.

In Calgary, that means the Checkstop bus is only available for four days out of any given week, with the days changed throughout the year at random to keep drunks guessing.

But the schedule is planned far in advance, and that meant St. Patrick's Day 2012 wasn't one of them.

"It was nothing more than a scheduling issue — they didn't anticipate any additional issues on St. Patrick's Day than on a typical Saturday night, so they left the schedule alone," said Stacey.

"We still had a traffic team working last night, but we didn't have a Checkstop per se."

Maybe not the wisest of decisions with every bar packed and the wait for cabs exceeding an hour — but the shortage of officers meant rejigging the entire schedule, or having no St. Patrick's breath stops.

Of course, any Calgary police officer spotting a car weaving or acting suspicious would certainly pull the suspect over and perform a roadside check for impaired driving.

It happens every night, and this past Saturday night would have resulted in a few impaired charges too.

But a few eagle-eyed officers nabbing the obvious drinkers can't compare to the deterrence and impact of a random Checkstop, complete with a bus, flashing lights and multiple officers.

Stacey, a veteran of the Calgary police Traffic Section, says nothing beats actually pulling drivers over en masse, and asking them for a breath sample.

"We have been beating this drum for so many years, there's no silver bullet for stopping drunks other than enforcement," said Stacey.

But Checkstops are expensive and a huge drain on manpower, with each drunk caught taking an officer out of circulation while reports are written and lawyers called.

Some cynics have cited that as the reason for the province's new .05 drunk driving legislation, because it allows police to suspend licences and impound cars without the need for court.

Critics, including the Wildrose Party, say there's no point in lowering the limit if the level of enforcement remains the same, because drunks are getting away with it at every blood-alcohol level.

And there's the argument that Checkstops have an impact beyond the impaired drivers who are actually caught, because driving through a phalanx of police with flashing lights is a jarring experience. netiquette rules.

It serves to deter — but only if enough drivers encounter a Checkstop on a regular basis. Four Checkstops per week in a city of a million people is pretty slim coverage.

But Alberta's Solicitor General, Jonathan Denis, says he doesn't buy the argument that police don't have the manpower or money to adequately enforce existing drunk driving laws, despite Calgary's St. Paddy's day fail.

"Police are enforcing the existing laws, and always have been — take the example of 42,700 24-hour suspensions in the past five years," said Denis.

"Even if you don't have a Checkstop, if a cop has cause to pull you over, they will enforce that.

"Arguing they haven't been doing enough to enforce the existing laws is absolutely absurd."

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