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Downtown to See More Meters, Less Free Parking

By Cathy Tyson



Photo Cathy Tyson

Drivers, brace yourselves for more parking meters, as rates for many previously free on-street parking options will now have hungry meters standing at attention, ready for your credit card or coins.

Sweeping parking changes recently adopted by Lafayette city leaders also decreased the cost of parking at one lot, and will stage a trial run to give preference to local cars near BART. Although free parking can be found on a Monopoly board, it's becoming increasingly rare downtown, for the simple reason that free parking encourages drivers to leave their cars all day long, locking up spots that could be used by multiple vehicles.

Tasked with finding actions to immediately improve the parking situation, the Parking Ordinance Committee has worked with the Chief of Police to find ways to improve the use and efficiency and encourage turnover of existing public parking spaces downtown.

All of the committee's concrete suggestions were approved by the city council, with just one exception. Installing parking meters on Carol Lane is slated for further study. Council members hesitated to adopt changes that would affect the 26 on-street spaces which are mainly used by employees of nearby businesses.

Jesse Wellen, longtime owner of the Lafayette Car Wash on the corner of Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Carol Lane, acknowledged that meters are necessary for turnover; however he estimates there are many employees of various businesses in the area, and existing adequate customer parking at Ace Hardware. He feels installing meters on Carol Lane would create a "financial hardship" for many of the workers.

It wasn't all bad news: parking at the city-owned lot directly across the street from Lafayette Elementary School will soon be cheaper. It was \$5 per day, and will be \$2 per day, once the official parking changes take effect sometime this summer. The gravel lot used to be free, but when the rate went up to \$5, the occupancy rates fell considerably, an indication that it was too expensive. Because of its location, this lot is intended to serve downtown employees and carpoolers.

Parking meters will be coming to 24 previously free spaces on Golden Gate Way to encourage turnover of heavily used spots by the library; the eastern end of the street will remain unmetered. Meters will cost \$1 per hour and be enforced from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., while parking within the library structure will continue to be free.

The eastern portion of Lafayette Circle from Mt. Diablo to Hough Avenue will also see new two-hour maximum parking meters at 24 spaces, to discourage employee parking there. Many employees used these free street spaces since the privately owned La Fiesta lot became metered. Police observed that some drivers abuse the timed spaces, moving their vehicles only a few feet to foil enforcement chalk marks on tires.

It will soon cost \$5 per day for long-term parking on Dolores Drive. Currently the 15 on-street spaces are unregulated and are used by BART patrons and local store employees. Nearby Via Roble will have signage posted on the lower section limiting parking to two hours. This move is being made to deter long term parkers in the residential area, and allow the use of spaces by residents and their guests.

Also in response to pressure of BART parkers, and to benefit Lafayette residents, a six-month test period for 40 street spaces on Happy Valley Road, from the freeway to Deer Hill Road, will be reserved for Lafayette residents and marked with Permit Parking Only signs. These spaces will be on a first come, first served basis. Residents will have to register their car license plates in order to obtain a permit; police will be checking the cars parked in this designated area to verify the vehicle belongs to a local. Meter fees still need to be paid.

This program may take a little longer to implement said Planning and Building Services Director Niroop Srivatsa, since the city will have to get the word out to residents who will then need to register their cars, but it should be up and running later this summer.

Other changes include establishing a \$1 minimum meter credit card payment, since service charges eat up \$.40 of every credit card transaction. The parking ordinance committee will also work with existing banks and other businesses to allow public parking use of their lots after business hours. The POC is also looking at longer term solutions to manage parking better - including installing smart meters and parking pucks in the street and have the city enter into partnership with the private sector to increase the supply of public parking. According to its research and occupancy studies, the city already has a significant amount of parking, the problem is where it's located, how accessible it is and how it is regulated or restricted. Other options on the table are ways to incentivize property owners to connect rear parking lots, opening them up to easier public access.

The current substantial city-imposed in-lieu fee, a whopping \$36,900 per parking space in the downtown core, going down to \$19,200 in the east and west ends of town, is being examined. The owner of a parcel who is unable to provide all of the off-street parking required by city code is responsible for in-lieu fees. These amounts represent the actual cost of purchasing land and constructing one parking space, and the POC recommends restructuring this fee so that it is more predictable and fair.

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[back](#)

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