

Police chief clarifies downtown parking

Once again the local blogs have been hosting a discussion about downtown parking issues and it appears that some are confused by our unusual local ordinance. The Police Department is ultimately responsible for writing citations and issuing warnings, and often walks a fine line to achieve an appropriate enforcement strategy. In recent months' enforcement has been increased and some questions have been raised about our method and interpretation of the ordinance.

Parking enforcement can be a delicate balance between public education and sanctions designed to achieve the goal of compliance so that parking is easily available for those less familiar with our community. Although parking issues can present a challenge for local law enforcement, the current discussion can also provide an opportunity to communicate effectively with residents and visitors alike.

Without random enforcement along our beach and the downtown corridor, we allow patterns of abuse to thrive, especially among local residents, business owners and employees of our downtown businesses, so much so that parking spaces in close proximity to our businesses often become impossible to locate. Streets like Ocean Avenue often become impassable if we don't stay on top of the problem, and delivery trucks create similar problems downtown. In both cases we certainly get an earful from those that are negatively affected or reside in the area.



Hurley

It is important to note that video has replaced the outdated method of chalking tires to determine violations of the three-hour limit. For example, if an individual parks at 8 a.m. and subsequently moves the vehicle, they cannot park again in the same block until after 11 a.m. This cumulative factor was specifically written into the ordinance many years ago to prevent the jockeying of vehicles from space to space. Unfortunately, many people appear to believe that they can restart the three-hour clock by moving their vehicle to another parking space, or by leaving the area and returning to the same parking area. In fact, the ordinance does not allow for this type of manipulation of legal intent by specifically requiring that the vehicle, if moved within three hours after first being parked, must next be parked on another block.

We certainly understand the disappointment with having been cited for a parking violation, especially in light of the ongoing construction at the library and other obstacles that may occur from time to time, such as road closures and special events. We also know that it must seem like a trivial and counterproductive practice to ticket visitors as they may be in the process of forming general opinions about our city, or residents

and businesses that support the city all year long.

Although some think otherwise, the city has never suspended the three-hour parking ordinance because of the construction at the library or the impact on parking in the library lot, or for any other reason in recent years.

Our goal is to keep the parking spaces turning over in a manner consistent with short-term usage, which is why our ordinance allows for three-hour parking throughout downtown, and why we have no parking meters or kiosks, as is very common in most beach communities. Our bottom line is that we simply will not "target" tourists or attempt to generate revenue by exclusively citing out of town visitors. Such a practice would be wholly improper. On the other hand, we actively advocate for parking north of Alachua or south of Ash and walking the short distance to your destination. We invite residents and business owners to lead by example.

This issue has been discussed for many years, resulting in the Walker Parking Consultants study in 2000, which opined that business owners and employees parking between Ash and Alachua in the downtown area helped to create the perception of a shortage of parking spaces available for short-term use by visitors. More recently, we have heard from the Historic Downtown Business Association, which is emphatic about making the three-hour parking ordinance a priority. The city commission has similarly asked us for

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increased enforcement of the ordinance.

Admittedly, because of staffing shortages over the past few years, we have attempted to regulate short-term parking with more warnings than fines, although we did issue 436 parking citations in 2014, and are fast approaching 100 tickets written in 2015. Also, while going about the business of parking enforcement, our officers frequently encounter additional violations, such as expired tags, parking too close to a stop sign (30 feet) and parking with left wheels to the curb (opposite the proper lane of traffic). These violations can also generate warnings and citations.

We hope that citizens understand our parking enforcement rationale and that they are able to find a workable solution during the construction at the library and after it has been completed. Meanwhile, limited public parking currently exists north of Alachua and south of Ash Street and new parking spaces are now being completed along the west side of the 100 block of North Second Street and at the corner of North Second Street at Broome. Public parking lots are also available on Front Street by the waterfront, as well as along Front Street north of

Centre Street. Other public parking can be found at the corner of South Second Street and Ash Street on the west side of City Hall, the corner of North Second Street and Alachua, the library at North Third Street and Alachua, the west side of the unit block of South Fourth Street and the west side of the unit block of North Fifth Street.

New parking signs will soon announce our focus on enforcement of the three-hour parking ordinance between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. only, which effectively means that some-one parking downtown after 4 p.m. will not be ticketed until after 10 a.m. the following day. We will aggressively enforce the three-hour parking rule during the daytime to promote turnover during the

lunch and dinner hours. This will eliminate overnight parking as an issue (in those areas where overnight parking is not expressly prohibited).

Some Facebook comments speak to the practice of writing citations to individuals that elect to leave their vehicles parked downtown because they do not wish to drive while impaired. In fact, no such appeal has ever been denied. The Police Department promotes responsible behavior and wants you always to select the safe and responsible solution.

We do not otherwise encourage overnight parking because the street-sweeper is more effective with fewer vehicles consistently parking overnight. After we test this change we may elect to adjust this position in the future, perhaps with an odd/even solution or other method. However, the Police Department has been specifically challenged to actively enforce parking restrictions and will continue to do so in the future.

Patchington

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