

# Dealing with parking, is there room for compromise?

Part 2 of 2

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*The city's parking committee will host a public meeting at the Police Department this Friday, July 14, at 6 p.m., to further discuss the issues of paid parking.*

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Have you ever noticed how some folks tend to rely on the “expert from afar,” while others prefer to listen to the homegrown perspective of those within the community? Much can be learned by studying both viewpoints, of course, but the rubber hits the road when an elected body is faced with making changes that both sides can embrace.

The members of our city parking committee have reviewed a ton of related literature dedicated to the fascinating science of parking dynamics. We invite you to visit the city website and peruse the assembled articles and staff studies, and decide for yourself what combination of fact and theory you think will best work in our community. At some point, the experts must be heard, although a leap of faith is sometimes worth the gamble.

For example, angled parking does increase the number of available parking spaces on a roadway, and is safer statistically than parallel parking. Both one-way streets and parking on only one side of the road create the opportunity for angled parking in some areas and is, again, a safer option than having both sides of the street



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filled with vehicles so that public safety becomes a concern. These strategies can also improve traffic circulation and congestion. For those that live in the affected neighborhoods, however, these kinds of changes might be generally unwelcome, considered aesthetically unappealing, and viewed as an invasion of traffic pollution upon their tranquil lifestyle. Is there room for compromise?

These discussions are not, however, the immediate focus of the committee, nor are the issues associated with having paid parking at our beach lots, or additional sidewalks and bike paths, visions for the waterfront and marina, the opening of Alachua, or location-specific issues such as church parking, traditional obstacles to fair access in the form of misused handicapped placards, or the pros and cons of parking garages, which are expensive and traditionally underutilized. These are important topics and deserve proper consideration, but focusing on them here would surely lead to the early death of yet another comprehensive proposal. Besides, this committee is not tasked with making all the decisions related to parking, only with making a general recommendation after review of previous work.

It is the prevailing opinion of committee members that incremental change should be con-

sidered first in the downtown core, before other issues are addressed. Obviously, any changes made in one area of the city should be adequately considered for how they might impact another area. Likewise, the need for additional non-paid parking will certainly increase on the perimeter if paid parking is adopted for the downtown core, but those decisions should be made after this hurdle is cleared.

Won't charging for parking hurt the businesses downtown? Well, if free means “not available,” or promotes endless “cruising” of the area in search of a parking space, then charging a fee for parking can improve business, according to the Metropolitan Area Planning Council. This reality strikes a chord with downtown merchants who appear ready to try something new, as 49 percent of those surveyed favor the paid parking option. In order to further understand the process going forward, the committee met with a parking systems representative and has also spoken with representatives from the city of Dunedin, which recently installed 39 pay stations in their downtown as part of a one-year pilot program.

An important aspect of this discussion centers on advances in technology, which have created a much more stylish and manageable product, compared to the ugly and archaic parking meters of yesteryear. Issues of non-use or frequent use of available parking spaces can be analyzed and adjusted from within the software program. The cost parameters, time limitations, and payment transfers can mostly be done electronically by remote access. The new License Plate Reader

(LPR) technology allows for ease in enforcement, and the mobile phone apps and credit card systems make it user friendly and adjustable on the fly. Most parking systems also allow for the limited use of coins, important for short stops of less than an hour, making it even more convenient for customers, while improving the overall turnover rate.

Several political decision points will determine any future course of action. Does the political will even exist to move forward with a paid parking program of any kind? For what reason would a program be pursued – to assist with traffic flow and available parking, or to generate revenue for downtown improvements, or for a combination of reasons? What hourly fees and fines would be adopted? Would residential amnesty permits be considered?

If a pilot program is adopted by the City Commission, an educational program will be developed in advance to inform the public regarding the implementation strategy and logistics. Staff would then work with vendors, downtown merchants and residents to determine the scope of the project, enforcement protocols, maintenance and replacement of equipment, financial considerations, security and payment options.

The committee would like to hear from residents and have posted a survey instrument online at [www.fbfl.us/parking](http://www.fbfl.us/parking). Please take a few minutes to complete the survey and also be sure to join us at the Police Department today at 6 p.m. for further discussion of these issues.