

# Dealing with parking

Part 1 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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Is there a parking problem or a walking problem? We have heard repeatedly how this complex topic can be boiled down to this one simple recipe, like so many shrimp in a bag. However, by framing the discussion in this manner, we risk losing sight of the fact that both answers are correct. In fact, shaping the debate in these general terms does not serve the greater purpose of finding consensus or directing that appropriate action be taken to resolve the issue.

It might even be considered rude or dismissive to suggest that a parking problem does not exist merely because one believes that walking a relatively short distance is a desirable aspect of the downtown experience, although unquestionably the more people that embrace the Fitbit mentality, the better any parking proposal will work.

Many visitors are unfamiliar with the exact location of their destination, the one-way street pattern, and available public lots or street parking options. They simply wish to eliminate confusion in favor of convenience. They prefer to pay for prime parking on the main corridors where they intend to eat and shop. In this way "prime parking" becomes the focus of discussion, as it always does.

Yes, of course there is a parking problem! Any place worth going to is going to have a parking problem!

To be sure, much has been written about parking concerns in downtown Fernandina Beach. In fact, way back in 1947 the City Commission instructed the city manager to open negotiations for the purchase of parking meters, and then tabled the discussion. Individual meters were later installed, only to be decommissioned. As you know, this tumultuous issue has been left unresolved ever since the last pole was sawed down on Centre Street. We have posted some of the more recent and notable efforts on the city website so that anyone interested in this topic can find the referenced material in one place.

I was delighted (LOL) to learn recently that I had been chosen to chair a committee specifically tasked with making recommendations about downtown parking, or as some disparaging letters suggest, running roughshod over the political process by seeking only staff opinions. Never one to shrink from a challenge, I have been meeting with city staff members, including Rex Lester, Kelly Gibson, Jeremiah Glisson and Andre Desilet, on a regular basis to prepare for an Aug. 1 deadline for a presentation to the City Commission. Of course, the commission can choose to take action or not in any number of ways, but clearly this issue remains a political decision point, and many stakeholders will be affected in the short and long term. Taking a clue from James Comey, I decided to share the thinking of the committee in advance of the presentation so that those hanging on the edge of their seats can take a breath.

For anyone familiar with this discussion, "analysis paralysis" should be on the tip of your tongue. Keeping that in mind, the committee decided early on to rely on the body of work already compiled to form a base of knowledge from which to proceed. Clearly we do have a parking problem if the topic is brought back to the forefront every couple of years! Simple observation and common sense confirm what the



**Hurley**

studies have already told us about human nature and the search for convenience. Our observation and enforcement efforts confirm that those working in the downtown core arrive earlier,

take advantage of prime parking, and often jockey their vehicles to avoid the current three-hour limit on parking. Compounding the problem, human nature suggests they are less likely to "do the right thing" when they see their neighbors consistently violating the same unwritten rules.

Suffice to say, many people truly cannot walk several blocks to their destination, or prefer to enjoy the convenience of prime parking while on vacation in unfamiliar surroundings or when pressed for time but still anxious to enjoy our wonderful downtown restaurants. Paying a reasonable charge for the best parking is hardly a new concept. As the 2002 Walker study rightfully pointed out, fee-based parking is the most efficient way to manage the turnover of prime, convenient parking spaces. The study also opined that a two-hour limit might be a reasonable solution, if adequately enforced.

Admittedly, enforcement has been a challenge, especially with reduced staffing levels over the past several years. The police department has primarily relied on a part-time police service aide for enforcement and education, to include handing out brochures produced in partnership with the Amelia Island Tourism and Development Council, and talking with business owners and visitors. We have recently assigned officers Jorge Hernandez and Christina Woods to permanent downtown duty and hopefully their efforts are being immediately felt.

The committee also recognized that a very vocal minority often dominate and splinter the discussion, so the committee was challenged to identify those deemed to have the very most at stake, a priority interest so to speak, and we decided to first focus on the Historic Downtown Merchants Association. It is appropriate that we consider those that are emotionally and financially invested in our downtown and to attempt to hear the prevailing voice. We were not sure how this poll would take shape. If the businesses in our downtown are clearly opposed to paid parking, why should we make such a recommendation to our elected officials? Would the potential for parking revenue, even if earmarked for downtown improvements and additional parking, outweigh the will of those most affected by the decision? We didn't think so, but we wanted this group to weigh in on the topic.

We met with the downtown business owners at City Hall on June 15 and discussed these issues at length. We then provided every downtown business, between Ash and Alachua, and Eighth Street to Front Street, with a survey instrument asking, among other things, if they supported paid parking for those spaces considered "prime" or "convenient" to local businesses, as in those spaces along Centre Street and the perpendicular roadways from Second to Fifth streets, while leaving city lots and other perimeter parking free-of-charge. Perhaps surprisingly, nearly half the respondents chose to initiate paid parking under these conditions.