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Potential Benefits (and Costs) Seen with New Free Parking Program ^[1]

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By:

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Throughout the month of July, the City of East Lansing is offering a half-hour free parking at gated lots and garages in an effort to help ease the pain downtown businesses are feeling from the construction.

Business managers tell ELi they think this incentive will be a benefit to their businesses.

"We will certainly benefit from it, along with the other East Lansing downtown businesses," said Rich Whitman, manager for Blue Owl Coffee on Albert Avenue. "Parking is always a big issue for both our patrons and employees."

Paige Mitchell, an assistant manager at Great Clips in downtown East Lansing, says the construction has definitely had a negative impact on that business.

"It has definitely slowed things down because we have a lot of traffic that comes through here and the construction has made it harder for people to get in and out of the side streets," she said.

She thinks the free half-hour parking will help alleviate that.

"I think it would be really helpful," Mitchell told ELi. "I have a lot of people who come here and they have no idea where to park. Right now, our best suggestion is one of the ramps because we never know what out front [on M.A.C. Avenue] is going to look like. A half hour or hour of free parking during the summer would be a big help for business, and would help with some of those problems."

East Lansing Parking Administrators Caleb Sharrow and Tom Fleury came to the June 11 meeting of City Council to talk about the program and answer the Council's questions.

They told Council that staff has been working hard figuring out how to make things better for businesses downtown during construction. That's how the idea of a free half-hour of parking came up.

Projections by City staff ^[2] indicate that the monthly cost of a half-hour free program like this "would likely be between \$35,000 - \$40,000 per month. This estimate does not factor in any additional revenue that might be gained from an increase in downtown visitors."

Because of the potentially significant revenue loss, the City is considering the July program a test.

"That's a month when the student population is gone from East Lansing and it gives other residents and visitors the opportunity to come downtown" more easily, Fleury told Council.

On June 18, Council unanimously passed a resolution ^[3] to allow for the July half-hour-free program.

The half-hour free program will apply to gated lots and garages, including the ramps at Grove Street, on M.A.C. Avenue (under the Marriott Hotel), on Charles Street, and on Division Street. It will also apply to the gated Bailey Street lot behind Campbell's Market Basket, Evergreen Cycles, the Peanut Barrel, and other businesses.

Fleury explained to Council that the City selected these parking destinations for the discount because it is easier than changing all the meters. Until now, only the first five minutes in these lots was free, and the minimum time purchase was thirty minutes.

The City expects the one-month pilot program to provide two useful data points: it will show the City how much revenue it might lose or gain if this becomes a regular program and it will show whether free parking increases consumer activity downtown.

At the June 11 meeting of Council, City Manager George Lahanas told Council, "I think it's great timing because there's so much development going on downtown, so for people to have an opportunity in July to come downtown and to see the progress would be great timing."

Mayor Pro Tem Erik Altmann agreed, saying, "I think this is a great idea and I wonder whether we can team up with some of the businesses downtown to see if there is any data they might be willing to collect on whether they see any increase in traffic through the door."

"We can certainly work with the downtown businesses and see who is willing to track that for us," Fluery responded.

Council member Aaron Stephens asked whether it might be possible to reduce the minimum time purchase at meters from one hour to a half-hour. Stephens noted that when businesses pay for customers' parking, paying for time not used ends up costing the businesses needlessly.

Sharrow explained that paying with coins at meters avoids that one-hour minimum, but using a card comes with fees that make it impractical for the City to charge for less than a full hour minimum at meters.

According to the City's website, there are currently more than 55 businesses downtown that validate parking. You can find that list here. ^[4]

Photo by Ann Nichols.

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