



Parkers can now take their time, By Charisse Jones, USA TODAY

Updated 5/3/2006 12:10 AM ET



Officer Brad Crosier writes a parking ticket along a stretch of street with metered parking in Bellingham, Wash.

By Philip A. Dwyer, the Bellingham Herald via AP

For the past month, Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown has been making an unusual pitch to motorists: Buy your very own parking meters.

He doesn't mean the familiar coin-swallowing sentinels on metal posts that have guarded America's parking spaces for nearly a century. The Buffalo solution is a small gadget that hangs from a vehicle's rearview mirror. Loaded with prepaid time, it frees shoppers, couriers and business people from having to fumble for change.

Widely popular in Europe, the device is catching on with several cities and college campuses around the USA that are adding the in-car meter to a menu of parking choices and making old-time meters a little harder to find.

"It's maybe the hottest new thing that nobody knows about in the U.S.," says Donald Shoup, an urban planning professor at UCLA and an expert on parking trends. "The nice thing about the in-vehicle meter is there's no poaching on anybody else's time or leaving time behind. You pay for the time you use."

Aesthetics, convenience for drivers and the potential to boost revenue are some of the reasons cities such as Fort Lauderdale and Aspen, Colo., have adopted the in-car meters.

Motorists buy or pay a refundable deposit on the units, which are about the size of a pocket calculator. After parking, the user turns on the unit and inserts a card loaded with prepaid parking time. The units are programmed to know the cost and maximum time allowed in a given parking zone. Once activated, the unit ticks away the minutes until it's turned off.

No more guesswork

"Any parking meter you use, you've got to predict how long you're going to be," says Tim Ware, parking director for Aspen. "You predict too little, you pay too little. You predict too much, you pay more than you needed to. This works in real time. If you park for one hour, two minutes, that's all you pay for."

Other cities and universities using the meters include:

- Grand Rapids, Mich., which in January had enforcement officers include information about in-car meters when leaving parking tickets. Fifty meters have been sold since they became available to the public in November, says Barbara Singleton, the city's parking meter operations supervisor.

- Fort Lauderdale, which introduced the meters in 2004. Motorists have bought nearly 600 of the \$55 units, says John Hoelzle, director of the city's parking and fleet services. The machines, he says, speed up work for parking enforcement officers who simply check that the meter is on, "verify the zone ... and they can move on."

•The University of Wisconsin-Madison, which offers the units to faculty and staff who normally ride bicycles or carpools to campus but occasionally drive and would otherwise have to buy a yearly parking permit. About 1,200 drivers have paid a \$50 deposit for the meters, says Lance Lunsway, director of the school's transportation services.

Beyond providing convenience to drivers, the in-car units cut the costs of maintenance and repairing vandalism to street meters and reduce the number of workers collecting coins. They also help boost parking revenue: Cities lose money when drivers don't pay or avoid paid street parking completely.

Surveys have shown that half of all parked cars are in violation at a given time, Shoup says. "Parking is fraught with anxiety," he says. " 'Am I going to get a ticket?' There's no reason you should ever get a ticket if you have a convenient way to pay."

Buffalo began offering the meters in 2003, primarily to disabled motorists, says Leonard Sciolino, the city's director of on-street parking. But last month Brown began targeting all drivers with a marketing campaign that includes detailed information on the city's website.

Debra Chernoff, planning manager for a non-profit group that runs a business improvement district downtown, says she likes the convenience. "On Friday, I had a bunch of little errands," she says. "If you pay at a (single space) meter, you don't pay less than a quarter. But I literally ran in, picked something up, and was gone for four minutes. And I shut off the meter. It probably charged me 4 cents."

Sciolino says more than 80 units have been sold in 2006, compared with 120 in the preceding three years. "Besides making it convenient, we want people to come downtown and spend money," he says. "I do see a definite increase in parkers coming downtown."

Other payment systems and technologies are reshaping parking customs. Since August 2004, Fort Lauderdale has allowed drivers to use prepaid cards that they insert into a slot in a single-space meter. Many cities, including most that offer the in-car meters, have multispace "pay and display" units, which allow drivers to pay for parking at a central meter, then display the receipt in the car window.

Tracking scofflaws

Since June 2004, Sacramento has equipped some parking enforcement vehicles with units that use cameras and global positioning systems to scan license plates and determine which parked cars have overstayed their time. The unit also links to databases that show cars that have been stolen or have at least five unpaid citations.

The cutting edge of parking isn't for everybody, however. The University of California, Santa Barbara, which allowed motorists to pay for parking via phone, will end that option in July because of a lack of interest, says Robert Sundberg, associate director of the university's transportation and parking services.

Officials in some cities say that despite the innovations, single-space meters will not disappear.

"Not everybody's interested in the in-car meter, and we get complaints about the pay-and-display too," Grand Rapids' Singleton says. "Everybody doesn't have a credit card. The older people, we find, just like the single space. They go put their coin in, and they're on their way."

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