

latimes.com/news/local/la-me-express-park-20100822,0,4725469.story

latimes.com

L.A. program aims to make parking easier

The yearlong ExpressPark program will use new meters and pavement sensors to keep track of parked vehicles. Eventually, signs will guide drivers to empty spaces in city garages and lots.

By Martha Groves, Los Angeles Times

August 22, 2010

The days of lugging around fistfuls of quarters to feed hungry parking meters, or circling the block repeatedly in search of a parking space, could be nearing an end for downtown motorists. advertisement

The Los Angeles Department of Transportation has begun installing 10,000 high-tech parking meters throughout the city that allow for credit and debit card payment, in addition to coins. And next year, the downtown area will host an experimental program that aims to take much of the hassle out of parking.

The yearlong ExpressPark program, slated to begin next summer, will use not only new meters but also a network of wireless pavement sensors to keep track of parked vehicles in real time. The sensors will help transportation officials determine which meters are in use and which have expired. Eventually, roadside signs will guide motorists to empty spaces in municipal parking garages and lots.

The program — which involves only city-owned parking in a 4.5-square-mile area — will feature adjustable parking rates, or "dynamic pricing." In other words, when parking demand increases, meter rates increase; when demand drops, rates drop.

"ExpressPark will allow Los Angeles to take the lead in testing new ways to manage curb parking," said Donald C. Shoup, a UCLA professor of urban planning and a longtime proponent of pricing based on supply and demand.

Although encouraging use of public transit is a goal, the program's chief aims are to make sure that a space is always available and to reduce the pollution and congestion caused by motorists cruising around the block in search of an open space.

"What we're striving for is pricing such that 85% of meters are occupied and 15% are open," said Peer Ghent, senior management analyst with the meter operations division of the city's Department of Transportation, or LADOT.

Studies have shown that drivers cruising for a parking spot account for about 30% of urban traffic. "We can reduce congestion on the street by making more parking available," said Ken Voss, executive vice president of Streetline Networks, a San Francisco-based developer of high-tech parking solutions.

Los Angeles is developing ExpressPark in partnership with Caltrans and the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, using \$15 million in grants from the federal Department of Transportation and \$3.5 million in city funds. The program is similar to one recently launched in San Francisco and will cover 5,500 on-street metered spaces and 7,500 unmetered public parking spaces in off-street, city-operated facilities. The targeted area includes Civic Center, the central business district, Chinatown and Little Tokyo.

Meter rates downtown now range from \$1 to \$4 an hour. Under the ExpressPark pilot, the prices would be adjusted, probably once a month, but would rise or fall no more than 50% at a time, officials say. (Ghent says prices won't change mid-park, so to speak. "Rest assured we will never get into a 'bait-and-switch' situation," Ghent said in an e-mail. "The price will be disclosed when the motorist parks.")

Downtown businesses are largely supportive, said Carol E. Schatz, president and chief executive of the Central City Assn. Executives at a recent meeting peppered LADOT officials with questions, such as whether pricing increases would end up being prohibitive for people heading downtown for big events at peak hours. "They answered them all satisfactorily," Schatz said.

The city has already begun experimenting with street sensors in city parking spaces: They've been installed in 1,000 parking spaces in Hollywood. The sensors resemble small reflectors and detect whether a vehicle is arriving, stationary or leaving. The data — which LADOT employees monitor on screens at the parking management center in Piper Technical Center near Union Station — have prompted a switch in some areas to multi-space meters known as pay stations.

Bruce Gillman, an LADOT spokesman, said the city took in \$33 million from parking meters in the most recent fiscal year. What effect ExpressPark will have is unknown because revenue will rise in some areas and shrink in others.

The new pay stations and meters popping up throughout the city are harder to thwart. Even if the coin slot is clogged, motorists have the option of paying by credit card. It will no longer do to place a plastic bag over a broken meter and pray.

This is welcome news for the repair technicians in the meter shop at Piper Tech. "Right now, it's overwhelming because of the vandalism," said LADOT's David Hardie, who supervises meter operations. Vandals routinely jam older-style meters with paper clips or coins. They spray in foam that hardens and locks the works. Other weapons of choice: chocolate syrup, paint, straws, rubber bands or the contents of a diaper.

However, Shoup and others fear that ExpressPark could be stymied by cheaters of another sort.

"My main concern is that rampant abuse of disabled parking placards will short-circuit the policy of using flexible prices to manage curb parking spaces," Shoup said. "If most curb spaces are occupied by cars parked free with fraudulent placards, fine-tuning the meter rates will not produce the desired effects."

martha.groves@latimes.com

Copyright © 2010, [Los Angeles Times](#)