

NEWS

No coins, no problem? Long Beach may make parking meters cashless



by **Alicia Robinson**

Jul 24, 2023



People walk along Second Street at Belmont Shore as they pass a parking meter in Long Beach, Thursday, July 20, 2023. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

Visitors to the city's beaches and business districts who usually grab a fistful of coins to pay for parking may have to find another use for their spare change, as Long Beach prepares to potentially switch to cashless parking meters.

It's unclear how soon the city would make the change, but it would be piloted on several streets before it goes citywide, according to a memo from City Manager Tom Modica.

In an interview, Public Works Director Eric Lopez said the idea of coin-free meters had already been kicked around City Hall, and it resurfaced when City Auditor Laura Doud performed a recent audit of the city's parking meter coin operations.

Doud reviewed parking meter practices after a tip to the city's fraud hotline, she says in the audit report. She didn't conclude any money was missing, but she made several recommendations to tighten up procedures and noted that in the past decade or so, several cities around the U.S. have lost tens of thousands of dollars in parking revenue to theft by city workers.

The more than 1,700 parking meters in Long Beach can be paid with coins, credit and debit cards, and some accept payment through the Passport smartphone app.

The city annually collects about \$1 million in coins from meters, which made up a little more than 40% of total parking revenue Long Beach received from fiscal years 2019 to 2022, according to the audit.

Lopez said Doud's audit provided "an opportunity to start having the conversation" about how switching to newer technology could make it easier and more convenient to pay for parking.

Modica's letter said cashless meters will be tested for 90 days on Fourth Street between Cherry and Junipero avenues, and on Junipero and Golden Shore Drive south of Ocean Boulevard; after that, the rollout at all metered parking in the city is expected to take a year and a half.

Lopez couldn't say when the pilot program is expected to start because there's still more work to do first.

"We need to have the conversations with the public, with the business improvement districts," he said. "Part of the success of the pilot will involve the communications with the public."

If the city pursues the change, it may be met with mixed opinions.

In Downtown Long Beach Alliance CEO Austin Metoyer's view, meters that don't take coins likely won't be a big problem – most people are used to using a credit card to pay for parking, he said – but the experience has to be easy or it could discourage people from stopping to shop, dine and do business around the city.

"Is it confusing and am I going to get a ticket?" he said. "I think people just want to have clear direction on what they have to do in order to pay."

Matt Peterson, who chairs the Belmont Shore Parking and Business Improvement Area Advisory Commission, questioned the need for the switch, noting that the meters in place now work fine (it's unclear whether they would be replaced).

He uses the Passport app regularly and thinks it's fast and easy – users can add time from their phones without having to walk back to the meter. But with nearly half of parking revenue coming from coins, he said, “why would you make a change and say no to 41% of your customers?”

In a response to Modica's letter, Doud raised questions about how the city would ensure people without smartphones or bank cards could still use metered parking, what it might cost to implement a new system and how parking revenues would be affected – and she recommended presenting the issue to the community and the City Council before starting a pilot program.

Lopez said the city will consider some way to accommodate people who don't have a credit card or don't want to use the mobile app, such as a prepaid card they could buy.

One big question Lopez said it's too early to answer is whether the city would continue to offer the 15 minutes of free parking available at many meters.

Peterson, who helped make free parking happen, said losing that amenity would be a bridge too far.

“If the city is considering making that change, they're going to have a fight on their hands.”