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Carmel paves the way for a paid parking program, leveraging technology to address old concerns.

Pam Marino

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The streets of Carmel are regularly parked up. New technology allows people to pay for parking digitally, and could allow residents to park for free and business owners to enter customer license plates.

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Ashley Stoddard, owner of the Bennett Sculpture Gallery, has experienced the challenges of downtown Carmel parking firsthand. She hosts at least two events for the gallery each year, plus a number of fundraising events for nonprofits. She has heard from many would-be guests who tried to attend but gave up because they couldn't find parking – even after circling nearby blocks for 30 minutes.

Then there are the times she's lost sales. "I've been in the middle of selling a piece of artwork and people are panicking because they have to move their car," Bennett says. "And when they're out, they're out." She sometimes receives apologetic phone calls from customers, saying they couldn't find a new parking spot.

Parking has long been an issue in the village, mostly driven by employees taking prime downtown spots – up to 50 percent – according to a 2014 study. A two-hour limit imposed to incentivize employees to use free city lots hasn't worked; they simply move their cars. Also unsuccessful was a pilot paid parking program in 2014 that involved large kiosks that residents found ugly.

Nearly 10 years later, technology may have the solution. The Carmel City Council is pursuing the possibility of a paid parking program using an app that allows users to pay for parking digitally. Not only has technology advanced since the days of clunky kiosks, but the public has gotten used to using cell phones to pay for almost anything, says Brian Uhler, a consultant with the firm MGR, hired by the council to roll out an engagement campaign to educate the public about what is being called PACT – Parking and Congested Traffic Program.

Uhler is no stranger to Carmel – he's a former police officer who served as Carmel's interim chief in 2021-22. He says one of the main goals of PACT is to reduce the traffic congestion caused mainly by visitors and employees circling around, looking for open parking spaces. The program could bring in an estimated \$2.84 million a year, which would pay for the program plus other downtown improvements.

An app would allow people to pay for parking electronically at a yet-to-be determined hourly rate, possibly somewhere around \$2. Enforcement hours might be 10am-8pm, which could mean up to \$20 a day.

The proposed program would cover 20 blocks of the downtown district, bordered by Junipero Street, Monte Verde Street, 5th Avenue and 8th Avenue – nearly 900 parking spaces. The city is also considering a buffer of permit parking only in the surrounding neighborhoods. Free parking lots

would be available at the Sunset Center, Vista Lobos and the bottom of Ocean Avenue by Carmel Beach.

The council approved \$119,550 in February to pay for the engagement campaign, which includes four public meetings and a portal on the city's website (ci.carmel.ca.us/pact-program) with information and a way for people to submit comments and questions. Meetings, to be held in Carpenter Hall (inside Sunset Center) are scheduled at the following times: 10am May 1; 4pm May 3; 6pm May 9; noon May 11.

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Pam Marino joined the Monterey County Weekly in November 2016. She covers Carmel, Pacific Grove and Monterey. She also covers health, housing and homelessness, tourism and higher education.