

LOCAL NEWS

Carmel: city to launch public engagement on proposed paid parking initiative



A Toyota Prius parallel parks on Dolores Street in downtown Carmel. (Monterey Herald file)
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CARMEL – Tight roadways and even tighter parking spaces are woven into the fabric – or rather traffic – of Carmel-by-the-Sea. But with a new initiative poised to tackle overcrowding now in the works, city officials are optimistic that change – and maybe some breathing room – is finally on the way.

This week, Carmel announced it will soon start engaging the public in an endeavor that, if implemented, would aim to reduce traffic jams and improve parking availability for its residents, visitors and local workforce – primarily through paid parking.

Called the Parking and Congested Traffic (PACT) Program, the idea is launching with public engagement this spring, followed by a summer of refining draft plans before they are presented to the Carmel City Council in the fall.

Though still in the beginning phase, early aspirations for the PACT program propose the conversion of about 800 parking spaces in Carmel’s business district into paid spots. The tentative project area would add paid parking between Junipero Avenue

and Monte Verde Street (east/west boundary) and 5th and 8th streets (north/south boundary), though exact boundaries would hinge on future public input and City Council action. By doing so, city leaders are hoping long-term parkers – such as employees or local business owners – are discouraged from snagging the limited slate of business district spots, leaving them open to visitors.

The city is eyeing a potential program start date of January 2024. It's an ambitious goal, after years of back-and-forth and no action on Carmel's long beleaguered traffic headache.

Like other visitor destinations, finding a parking space in Carmel can be a frustrating experience, especially in its business district. According to city staff reports, the problem is twofold. Limited parking in downtown Carmel often means those arriving to shop and dine are circling the area several times over in search of a coveted parking spot. Meanwhile, parking time limits require not only visitors, but also those working in the city – who make frequent use of on-street spaces – to frequently move their cars to avoid time violations, which only adds to the round-robin hunt for parking.

The issue, clear from just a mid-Saturday stroll on Ocean Avenue, has been studied, examined, explored and prioritized over the years.

A baseline for traffic congestion and parking availability in Carmel's business district was laid out in 1999 and again in 2013. In both cases, the city hired Walking Parker Consultants to conduct a downtown parking study. Conclusions were similar – and consistent. The studies found that on-street parking in the city's business district had “very high occupancy,” which led to visitor frustration. The studies also found that employees and business owners added to the high occupancy, exacerbating the problem.

Shortly after the 2013 Walker study, the city experimented with paid parking to see if it would lighten the traffic load. From December 2014 to July 2015, Carmel piloted paid parking on Ocean Avenue between Junipero and Monte Verde Street. According to [previous reports](#) from the Herald, spaces cost \$2 an hour, paid for at kiosks, with a four-hour limit.

At the time, staff indicated that the program met stated goals, including positively impacting parking availability, according to city documents. Still, the initiative didn't get far. The city ultimately abandoned the 2014/15 pilot program due to community outcry related to the look of pay stations. Essentially, kiosks didn't meet Carmel's aesthetic standards, so they had to go.

For the next six years or so, the problem fell on the back burner. Until March 2021, when the City Council defined traffic congestion and parking a city priority. Since then, the push to reimagine parking in downtown Carmel has returned to active conversation.

Last October, after receiving a renewed report on the matter, the City Council expressed support for exploring paid parking again, starting with public engagement come 2023 (once a new council after November's election was seated and briefed).

Now, outreach plans are fast-approaching.

Community members will have the chance to comment, question and voice their concerns about the proposed PACT program at a series of public meetings lined up for next month. The first will take place on May 1 at 10 a.m., followed by three more on May 3 at 4 p.m., May 9 at 6 p.m. and May 11 at 12 p.m. All public meetings will be held in Carpenter Hall at the Sunset Center, located on the west side of Mission Street between 8th and 10th avenues.

Information will also be available at the Carmel Farmers' Market on April 27th or May 4th, where the city will be staging a PACT program booth. The city's Farmers' Market is held on Thursdays from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. on 6th Avenue between Junipero and Mission Streets. Finally, two meetings specifically for the business community are likewise scheduled for coming weeks.

More details about Carmel's proposed paid parking initiative – including program overview, frequently asked questions, resources and a calendar of upcoming events – can be found at the city's PACT program web portal: <https://ci.carmel.ca.us/pact-program>.