



Ellicott City's meters could expire

By **Amanda Yeager** Howard County Times ***contact the reporter***

February 27, 2015

Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman considers removing Ellicott City's parking meters
Main Street merchants agree current system has flaws, but differ on whether meters should be banished
County executive talks to merchants as he considers change for Main Street

Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman says he's considering the removal of parking meters along Ellicott City's historic Main Street, touching on an issue that's been a point of controversy among merchants and shoppers since the meters were installed two and a half years ago.

Supporters say the meters encourage turnover of parking spaces, keeping them open for customers, while opponents have complained that they're difficult to use and kept potential visitors to the historic town away.

Kittleman pledged to get rid of the meters during his campaign. At a forum in October, he said he'd rather focus on building a parking garage in a lot near Ellicott Mills Drive and Main Street.

"I would like us to be focusing on providing parking off the street so people can use the sidewalks better," he said at the time.

What I had heard from business people that I had talked to was that meters were a hindrance [to business in the historic district].- Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman

On Wednesday, Kittleman said he's leaning toward removing the meters.

"What I had heard from business people that I had talked to was that meters were a hindrance" to business in the historic district, he said.

But, Kittleman said, he plans to consult more business owners before making a decision.

"I made a commitment to talk to everyone," he said.

The town's meters aren't of the traditional variety.

Installed in the fall of 2012 as part of a larger county effort to improve ease of parking in the historic district, the parking system features electronic kiosks at various points along Main Street, where visitors enter the number of their parking space, choose the length of time they want to park -- the maximum is two hours -- and pay with cash or a credit card.

The county also installed sensors under the town's nearly 600 parking spaces, which send data to a smartphone app called Parker that visitors have been encouraged to use to find open spots.

The meters, app and sensors, which officials said cost the county a total of \$275,000 to install and \$170,000 a year to maintain, were championed by former County Executive Ken Ulman as another way "to get more people excited to come down" to shop and dine in the historic district.

County data shows revenue from the parking meters averages about \$12,000 a month and has totaled \$440,000 since the meters were put in place, according to Howard County Councilman Jon Weinstein, a Democrat who represents Ellicott City.

Many of the town's merchants say, however, that they have heard of few people who use the app to find parking -- under Maryland law, it's illegal to use a handheld phone while driving -- and they say the sensors are disrupted by snow. As for the meters, they say customers have had trouble navigating the kiosk's payment system and have sometimes been ticketed while waiting to use the machine. In a few cases, according to some merchants, customers who had time remaining on the meter received a ticket and had no way of proving they had paid because they didn't have any printed proof.

"People are baffled by this system," said Jim Bolton, who owns the Bean Hollow coffee shop on Main Street with his wife, Gretchen Shuey.

Kittleman press secretary Andy Barth said that if the county executive decides to remove them, the meters could be gone as early as April. Parking along Main Street would still be limited to two hours in a spot, he said.

That would be welcome news for Sara Arditti, who owns Still Life Gallery on Main Street and has been fighting the meters since she first heard about them.

"They've been a hindrance to business and to customers," Arditti said, recalling one instance when first-time customers from Bethesda spent \$2,500 at her shop only to walk outside and find a ticket on their car.

"I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that we have lost literally hundreds of customers because of the meters," Arditti said. "I will be really happy when we can say it's safe to come back here, you don't have to worry about getting a ticket anymore."

Other Main Street merchants weren't as enthusiastic about the potential change.

"Free parking on Main Street doesn't work," said Dave Carney, who owns the Wine Bin.

Carney said customers heading to other businesses would often park in his lot before the meters were installed, because street parking was usually occupied by employees from neighboring stores. Now he doesn't have that problem.

Carney said the meters aren't perfect. But, he said, they are an improvement.

"The concept actually works," he said.

Bolton, the Bean Hollow co-owner, was initially an opponent of the parking meters.

He still isn't a fan but said their presence has made a difference.

"It turns out the meters, in and of themselves, seem to have improved things for the businesses, because the parking turns over more quickly," Bolton said.

But he still wants a different system. "I can't imagine that it would be prohibitively expensive to abandon the old system and just put in standard kiosks that cities across the nation have," such as those in Baltimore City, which print tickets for drivers to place on their dashboards.

Main Street manager Debra Korb, who leads the Ellicott City Partnership, a coalition of business owners, preservationists and other stakeholders, said that members of the partnership differed in their opinions about the meters.

But, she said, "they were unified" in the belief that the current system was not the town's best option.

Weinstein said he met with Kittleman on Tuesday to discuss the meters.

The councilman said he hopes Kittleman will bag the meters during a trial period before deciding to remove them.

"Most of the merchants that I've talked to want meters," Weinstein said.

Ultimately, he said, the decision about whether to keep the meters should be "part of a bigger strategy for the overall historic district."

Copyright © 2015, The Baltimore Sun