

# Ellicott City parking meters to be mothballed

County executive says move made to encourage more economic activity

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Time has run out for Ellicott City's parking meters.

Late last week, Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman announced that parking meters in the historic district would be discontinued immediately, a decision he said was made to promote economic growth for Main Street businesses.

The announcement prompted a gleeful reaction from some shoppers and merchants, and consternation among others.

A post announcing the decision on the county's Facebook page had more than 200 likes and two dozen comments, nearly all of which praised the decision, as of Tuesday afternoon.

Many criticized the meters for being difficult to use and a deterrent to visiting the historic district.

"While the meters MAY have been a good way to limit parking times, in practice they were not user friendly," commented Katherine Taylor, an attorney and Ellicott City resident. "They were way too confusing, even to a frequent Main Street visitor. Each time I tried to use one, it took too long to figure out."

The affected meters are on Main Street, Maryland Avenue and in Parking Lot B. Payment kiosks have been covered by black bags, and new signs will soon be installed with the updated parking rules, according to county spokesman Andy Barth.

A two-hour parking limit will still be enforced for spaces on Main Street and Maryland Avenue, officials said. Until signs with the new rules are installed, however, violators will be issued warnings, rather than tickets, according to Barth.

The meters have proven controversial since they were installed in late 2012 under former County Executive Ken Ulman.

Some business owners complained tickets and confusion over the parking system were driving customers away, while others insist the meters have helped keep prime spaces clear of employees who used to park in them.

Kittleman said in February he was considering removing the meters, which are actually electronic kiosks requiring



STAFF PHOTO BY AMANDA YEAGER

Parking meters along Ellicott City's Main Street, as well as those on Maryland Avenue and in Lot B, have been covered since Howard County Executive Allan Kittleman announced April 2 meters in the historic district would be removed.

visitors to enter a parking space number into the system and pay for a specified amount of time.

On April 2, the county executive said in a statement the cons outweighed the pros for him. He said he had gathered community feedback through a series of walking tours, during which he talked to business owners and customers.

"I have heard complaints from business owners, residents and customers who have brought up issues regarding usability and dependability of the current meters and that they are driving away businesses," he said.

Sara Arditti, the owner of Still Life Gallery on Main Street, was one of the merchants who fought the meters. In an email April 2, she said she was "thrilled" by Kittleman's decision, which she called "a statement of his pro-business policies."

"The merchants of the Ellicott City Historic District are deeply grateful to Allan Kittleman for listening to us, being so responsive and keeping his campaign promise to do what is best for the small businesses by removing the parking meters which have hurt us and our customers for the last two years," Arditti wrote.

But Don Reuwer, a local developer who owns 10 properties in Ellicott City's historic district, said he thought removing the meters could actually hurt business.

As he drove along Main Street last week, he saw several of his employees' trucks parked along the road.

"I think he's very well intentioned," Reuwer said of Kittleman's decision, but, "unfortunately, it's a step backwards." Reuwer said he requires employees at other properties he manages throughout the county to park in specially designated spots farther away.

"It's very convenient to park out front, but if somebody comes in with actual dollars to buy something, you want a space open for them," he said.

A survey of 72 Ellicott City business owners, residents and visitors in November found that 41 percent of those polled wanted to get rid of meters in the historic district entirely, while 57 percent wanted to have some sort of meter system to manage parking, whether it was the current system (24 percent) or another type of system (33 percent). One person had no opinion.

Debra Korb, who serves as executive director of the Ellicott City Partnership, the stakeholders group that conducted the survey, said in an email that the meters kept more "premium" spots available for those who wanted to pay for them.

"In the few days since the meters have been bagged," Korb wrote, "those open spots are no longer as prevalent."

The partnership is set to discuss the discontinuation of the parking meters at its next board meeting, on April 14.

In 2014, the county issued 7,796 tickets and collected \$173,345.68 from citations, according to Barth. The annual cost of maintaining the system outpaced revenues from tickets by nearly \$6,000 last year, he said.

Councilman Jon Weinstein, a Democrat whose district includes Ellicott City, said his impression was that the meters had produced mostly positive results for businesses, despite the current system's technical issues.

"While it's clear that paid parking is gone for the foreseeable future, I am committed to working with the business and property owners on Main Street to find a practical and effective long-term parking solution," he said in an email.

Barth said that while Kittleman did not expect to reinstate parking meters "for now," he would continue to listen to community reaction.

"He's always open to hearing the views of anybody in the county," Barth said.