

# Pay parking banks pulled by Capitola

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CAPITOLA — The controversial pay-parking bank program in Capitola Village has been scrapped in a stunning about-face by the City Council Thursday night.

Council members voted 3-2 to install traditional parking meters downtown, preferring to absorb a \$90,000-plus loss from the innovative parking banks.

Ecstatic downtown merchants — and even council members themselves — were at a loss afterward to explain the sudden reversal.

Several merchants told The Sentinel they were "totally surprised." Councilwoman Stephanie Harlan, who has been adamantly against the banks since their installation in October, said her "biggest hope" coming into the meeting was that fellow council members might be convinced to fund a public survey on the banks. "I'm overjoyed," she said later.

The so-called "pay-and-display" system that was scrapped involved the use of nine computerized parking banks — purchased at \$10,000 apiece. The banks were originally selected by the council over traditional meters for aesthetic reasons.

From the beginning, however, visitors complained the system was confusing and inconvenient. The system required motorists to walk to the parking banks, purchase a ticket, then walk back to their cars to place the ticket on the dashboard.

The council's about-face was even more surprising because only four weeks ago council members voted 4-1 to buy four more parking banks in an attempt to improve the system. In Thursday's action, the council directed City Manager Steve Burrell to cancel that order and to return next month with cost estimates of buying and installing traditional parking meters.

The per-hour rate, 50 cents an hour, won't change.

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## Pay-parking banks

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Voting against scrapping the system was Mayor Michael Routh and Councilman Dennis Beltram. They maintained the banks never were really given a chance to work, having been in operation only for 45 days before the council placed a moratorium on the system to study how it could be improved.

That moratorium had been scheduled to end on Jan. 2. Now, free parking will continue until traditional meters can be installed. Burrell would not guess how long that might take.

The city's \$90,000-plus investment in the banks may not be lost either. There was discussion about utilizing the system along parking areas on Cliff Drive and in the parking lot planned for Pacific Cove Mobile Home Park.

The three-hour-plus public hearing featured a steady stream of downtown merchants marching to the podium in angry, demanding, and often emotional pleas.

Beltram, who was the most outspoken for the banks, accused Councilmen Bob Bucher and Jerry Clarke of being "yo-yos" for changing their minds. "If I was convinced it (the parking bank system) wouldn't work, I would reverse myself," said Beltram. "But, I can't be a yo-yo."

Bucher and Clarke responded by saying it wasn't a matter of being "yo-yos," but admitting they made a mistake.

Bucher said the parking banks could work, "but the signing needed to make it work isn't worth the price." He said the signs, banners and street markings "are worse than looking at parking meters."

Clarke said he was "hell-bent" on making the bank system work, but changed his mind when he realized his responsibility to the community.

Routh, however, had Bucher hedging when he maintained the city may have to sacrifice such planned community projects as the community center at Jade Street Park and the gymnasium at New Brighton Middle School without the revenue from the banks.

Bucher pointed to the many residents who spoke last year against parking meters, saying he wanted to hear from them before making up his mind. He switched again, though, after hearing Burrell say those projects wouldn't be in jeopardy if the

same fee and hours were placed on parking meters. Both Beltram and Routh also urged a decision be made, with Beltram advocating "not to prolong the agony."

Village merchants accused the council of a little of everything during their turn at the podium.

Ben Dworsky, owner of Palm Court Jewelers, maintained the parking bank system was "dishonest" in that it tricked first-time visitors. He also said it was "inconsiderate" to the elderly, handicapped and those with small children, who had to walk back and forth to purchase a ticket. "It does not reflect the will of the people," he said.

Wayne Hansen, owner of The Bandstand restaurant, compared the council's plans of buying four more banks to "gambling with our businesses." He said it was a "big gamble" to sink another \$50,000 into a program that may not work.

Resident Jill Taber accused the council of "sitting here with hands over your ears." Paula Pinsoneault, owner of the Little Old Framemaker, asked, "Are we in the education business to teach people how to use the banks? Let them go to Europe to learn."

Her comment was in reference to the parking bank system being used commonly in Europe. According to Barry Mason, marketing and sales manager of the banks, 30 cities in 18 states in the U.S. have purchased the banks in the last four years.

Merchants Gary Murphy and Lynn Jackson — while overjoyed — both expressed "total surprise" at the council's reversal. Murphy said it was a matter of the council realizing the gamble they were taking. Jackson added, "Personally, I respect every one of them and applaud the ones who made the change. It really took guts."

Routh noted that even though he didn't vote for the change, he was pleased with "the democracy in action."

"I'm not apologizing for what the council has done," he added. "I still think we have embarked on the right path toward alleviating our parking problem."

The pay-parking is seen as a method of paying off the debt-service the city has incurred for buying Pacific Cove Mobile Home Park for \$1.6 million. The park will eventually be partially converted into a 250-space parking lot.