

Charge for parking? At the beach? How dare they?

Mayor Jerry Sanders visited with the U-T editorial board on Wednesday. While continuing to say he was strongly against new taxes, he did say he thought it wouldn't be an unreasonable hardship for patrons of city beaches -- many of whom were from out of town -- to pay for parking.

Whoa. Be careful what you mess with, Mr. Mayor. San Diego likes its free beach parking very, very, very much, as this interesting, thorough 1993 Union-Tribune story makes plain:

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An inalienable right | Free parking sacred to San Diegans

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Thomas Jefferson listed three inalienable rights of Americans -- "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Franklin D. Roosevelt identified four freedoms: "freedom of speech and expression," "freedom of every person to worship God in his own way," "freedom from want" and "freedom from fear."

Last month San Diegans stormed meeting halls and City Council chambers to defend just one "sacred right": free parking at beaches and parks.

Ann Merrill of Sherman Heights summarized for many the reasons for the outrage:

"The parks and beaches are for everyone. They're for our soul. The beauty of the park, the beauty of the sunset, walking on the beach is part of what makes life worthwhile. These are our areas and we shouldn't make a cash cow out of them. When you try to generate money out of the people's property, the people's land, it really makes us upset. . . . you're taking something that was God's gift to us."

Eileen Hister of Ocean Beach spoke of the Declaration of Rights, San Diego Edition: "(San Diegans) should be able to come to the beach with their kids, dogs, coolers, surfboards and lunches and cool off and have a good time for free. This is our last free entertainment."

At the root of the debate was something less noble -- San Diegans don't like taxes, especially the nickel-and-dime type that hit them at every corner in a hundred ways. And given an opportunity, they'll protest against them.

San Diego City Manager Jack McGrory had estimated that parking fees at Balboa Park and area beaches would raise about \$10 million in 12 months.

The parking fee also seemed in line with a taxation philosophy that has taken hold since the 1978 passage of Proposition 13 -- you play, you pay user fees. And, as Councilman Juan Vargas noted, the extra money would save a wide variety of projects and services in Balboa Park and Mission Beach.

When nobody piped up in opposition at the first discussion of the issue in June, the City Council approved it and bids went out to private parking-lot operators to get paid parking in operation by Labor Day.

After six hearings and threats of referendum, recall and bodily harm, the council relented, apologized and rescinded the fees.

Those who violate parking regulations now will pay a \$10 surcharge on top of the regular fee. For most parking tickets, that will mean a \$30 hit. Fifteen years ago, the fine was \$2.

What's important?

In the world of Realpolitik, the public had just expended an enormous amount of energy fighting what, in a \$1.3 billion city budget, amounted to pennies.

But the debate was enlightening for what it said about the public's and the City Council's priorities.

Is free parking really the essence of America's Finest City? Is maintaining free parking more important than maintaining parks and beaches? What good is it to park for free at the beach and park if the beach is polluted or the park's museums are closed?

Representatives of the Hall of Champions, Miniature Railroad Museum, USA Volleyball team and Torrey Pines Soaring Council warned that their institutions would die if free parking disappeared. And yet, the same budget that preserved free parking cut services and subsidies for these programs.

This week marks the 100th anniversary of the world's first parking regulation. The Paris Police Ordinance of Aug. 14, 1893, banned parking "on the public way except when absolutely necessary."

It's been war ever since.

The San Diego Public Library newspaper index first mentions parking as a separate subject in 1937 when San Diego's state senator, Ed Fletcher, introduced legislation allowing police to ticket overtime and double-parking offenders.

On Oct. 6, 1941, two months before Pearl Harbor, San Diego's first parking meters went into operation -- newfangled devices that had been invented five years before to prompt turnover of parking spaces in congested downtowns. The cost was 5 cents per hour -- and the city reaped a \$181,000 windfall the first 12 months.

The public didn't like meters, but adopted the practice of "meter-feeding" -- adding coins whenever their time expired so they could park for hours.

In 1949, the city retaliated by chalking tires of cars parked too long. When the police became too busy to stop and chalk, the council established a corps of "meter maids" in 1959 to do the snooping. (They became "parking control officers" when the first "meter man" was hired in 1972.)

To pay for stricter enforcement, the council doubled meter rates. San Diegans revolted.

Commercial districts petitioned to remove parking meters. Voters collected more than 31,000 signatures on a referendum to ban parking meters altogether. The petition was ruled unconstitutional.

Rising doubts

It wasn't until 1974 that 10-cent hourly parking became politically safe. It rose to 25 cents in 1980, 50 cents in 1983, 75 cents in 1989 and \$1 in 1992.

Paid parking lots also saw their share of controversy.

From 1952 to 1959, downtown merchants, North Park storekeepers and businesses in other commercial districts complained that customers couldn't get to their shops because there wasn't enough parking.

When the city failed to institute a downtown parking district to fund public garages as other cities had done, property owners found they could make more money leveling old buildings and charging for cars than renting space for business. That's why so much of Centre City resembles a sea of asphalt and so much of its architectural heritage has disappeared.

At Balboa Park, the fountains and landscaping in the Palisades area near Starlight Bowl gave way to parking, and the city briefly allowed paid parking lots during bowl performances.

In 1972, port district commissioners began discouraging all-day parking along the waterfront. "We're not making the best utilization of our tidelands if we use 75 percent of the property for parking lots," commissioner Milton Fredman said at the time.

Most communities experienced similar pressures.

The Del Mar city manager said the lack of parking was driving shoppers out of town. Ocean Beach businesses demanded more parking lots after a new pier opened and drew fishing enthusiasts and sunset worshippers. Shelter Island businesses were equally upset that their patrons couldn't park nearby.

The state began charging for parking at its beaches, as did Oceanside, Imperial Beach and other seaside communities. The National Parks Service did the same at Cabrillo National Monument. Sea World now charges for parking, as does the Wild Animal Park.

Parking backlash

When the city beach and park fees were proposed, San Diegans turned out in droves to vent their wrath at being quartered and dollored to death (no pennies, dimes or nickels accepted).

Scott Jones, chief executive officer of Ace Parking Co., said he submitted a bid to operate the proposed parking lots at the beaches and Balboa Park, but welcomed the council's action to kill the plan.

"I totally agree with it," Jones said. "It would've been impossible to implement something like this where the citizens were up in arms. They would have spray-painted and done other things."

However, Don Wood, former president of Citizens Coordinate for Century 3, an environmental group, said the issue demonstrates that San Diegans' love affair with the automobile continues, no matter what the consequences are in terms of air pollution, traffic congestion and city budgets.

"To me, preservation and protection of the parks would be far above free parking," Wood said. "It's weird what the public decides is a critical value."

Many of the recent objections to paid parking revolved around the details. What about frequent users, nearby residents, volunteers, the poor, the disabled, the overhead costs of operations? Officials began speaking of residential permits, volunteer permits, exemptions, subsidies, free days, patrols and vandalism.

Residents also worried what changes might follow if they let this charge get through. City Manager McGrory had the answer. At the council's request, he pulled a lengthy list of other possible taxes from his bureaucrat's black bag of revenue enhancers.

They included a \$5 library card fee, \$330-per-car annual rental car fee, 10 percent tax on parking fees, entertainment tax, a new property tax to pay for city pension funds and repeal of the granddaddy of all sacred tax cows in the city -- the 1919 ban on charging for trash pickup at single-family homes.

Tighten up

The San Diego Taxpayers Association argues that government budgets should be tightened before adding taxes. Executive director Steve Frates said millions could be saved by contracting out services, such as park maintenance and data processing, to private companies.

But even if such reforms occur, spending priorities must be made. As city employees

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argue, one person's "waste" is another person's paycheck, and if that person isn't on the job, the job won't get done.

The ultimate question is an age-old one: What should be kept or cut -- beach maintenance or free beach parking? On this day, at least, parking won hands down.