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## Business

*By Sophie Braccini*

As Edna Russell enjoyed a cup of coffee with her friend at Papillion in La Fiesta Square last week, she noticed the blinking light on the meter in front of her car shift from green to red. "Time to go," she said before rushing to her car, on the lookout for parking enforcement officers.

Since the meters have been activated on the Square, the parking situation has changed quite dramatically. It is now possible to find an empty spot, where it was a struggle before, but patrons need to dole out 25 cents per 10 minutes for the luxury. As La Fiesta Square owner Steve Cortese puts it, the meters are solving a parking problem he had no other way to solve.

The response is mixed among business owners operating on the Square. Some owners say clients are happy to always find a place to park, while others have noticed a decrease in patronage and are concerned that shoppers will go elsewhere, where parking is still free.

Cortese explains that the parking situation had to change. "The parking is here to first serve the Square's customers, then the employees working here, and third, customers of other businesses in the area," he says. "But what we were seeing were BART (riders), carpoolers, and employees of other businesses (parking here). We were overwhelmed, we got a lot of complaints from our customers, and from our tenants." He states that the 245 stalls in La Fiesta Square are sufficient for its customers and employees, but that the lack of downtown parking has added congestion unrelated to the Square. When he started looking into the issue and met with his tenants, a strong majority supported the idea of the meters.

Amy Human, manager of the upscale apparel store Specialtees Boutique, says, "I don't want to sound negative, because it's good that customers are finding parking, but from the standpoint of a high-end retailer, it's all about that feeling of being rushed, worrying that your meter is going to run out." Human explains that some women can come to re-do their spring wardrobes and spend six hours in the store. The store manager says that her staff has been rushing out and feeding clients' meters. "It can take the enjoyment out of the shopping excursion," she says.

Cortese agrees that the system needs some fine-tuning. "We are going to make changes once we get all the feedback," he says. Ideas include changing the time periods when payment is required, or offering gift cards for parking that merchants could give to customers who stay a long time in the store.

Other retailers on the Square, who asked not to be named, didn't think the meters were a good idea and say they noticed a decline in their business since metered parking started at the end of January. But Wendy Tamis, co-owner of Clocks Etc. is a supporter.

"Customers find parking now and they are not frustrated," says Tamis. The average time they stay in her store is 15 to 20 minutes and she offers customers quarters if they are afraid they'll run out of time.

Tamis says the parking conditions had been degrading over the past 20 years, and they were losing business when people could not find a parking space. "When the Cooperage opened it really impacted us; but in a good way, too, because there was more foot traffic," she says. Tamis thinks that overall, the meters have been a good thing, even if the store may have lost some foot traffic. "What we can't measure is how many people are not walking around the shopping center because they have a meter," she says. "Warnings did not work previously and no one wants to be towed, so the landlord didn't have much choice."

Open Sesame operates under a similar paradigm as Clock's Etc., with customers coming in for a limited amount of time to do their grocery shopping. For some, spending an additional quarter or two for parking is a reasonable price to be sure to be able to park every time close to the store. Paying for parking in Lafayette may be the wave of the future. Cortese says that both the owners of the Cooperage development area and of the Baja Fresh, Pizza Antica and Panda Express building are also looking into parking meters, not for whatever revenue it might generate (most of it goes to Park Smart, the company that manages the meters and tickets offenders), but to make sure that

patrons get a parking spot.

"When I asked the city of Lafayette to pass an ordinance to allow private parking owners to ticket offenders, they did it for all of us," he says.

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