

No more free parking, but Pike Place Market Garage simplifies fee structure

By JOHN LIVINGSTON

Free parking reverts to being just another board game space this month, as far as the Pike Place Market parking garage is concerned. The one hour of free parking is discontinued – but some merchants will still offer parking discounts, and the parking rate structure will be vastly simplified.

Parking lot manager Gil Maxey said safety and revenues were the top reasons for eliminating the one-hour of free parking that the five-level garage used to offer.

“The free parking was attracting a lot of illegal activity, especially within the past year,” Maxey said. “We had numerous car prowls, and there were more stolen cars in the past three years than I experienced in 15 years. And we had complaints of prostitutes and drug activity.”

So what does that have to do with an hour’s free parking?

“People would pull into the parking lot and sit there for just under an hour smoking crack, or they would watch to see who pulled in and see if they put their belongings in the trunk,” Maxey said. He said it is just as easy for a thief to pop open a trunk as it is to break a window and reach into the car.

To eliminate the illegal activity, Maxey wants to install video cameras in the parking lot, and that costs money – money that is not coming in when the majority of parking garage customers leave without paying for it.

“On the first shift, attendants were reporting that 70 to 80 percent of the people leaving were either Early Bird or free parking,” Maxey said. “About 85,000 people were parking free, and that is a tremendous cost.”

The Early Bird program allows people to park all day for a low fee – between \$6 and \$8. The market will retain the Early Bird program, but it will be structured in a way to free up more parking spaces for Pike Place Market visitors on weekdays during the summer.

One thing won’t change – on Sundays, the parking rate will remain at \$5 all day, no matter how long a person parks.

Maxey said the initial reason for offering up to an hour of free parking was to bring more customers to the Pike Place Market, and the free parking succeeded – but with some unexpected side effects.

He said when free parking was instituted officials wanted to make it easy for people to do some quick shopping, but in the past few months merchants have complained that people’s shopping trips are a little bit too quick.

“Some of the merchants felt that customers were darting in and going right back out,” Maxey said.

Customers were cutting short their shopping



and not visiting as many merchants because they were worried about getting back to their cars and out of the parking lot within an hour.

He added that merchants will be offering discount coupons that could still save several dollars on the parking charges, which will be simplified to \$3 per hour when the free parking is eliminated.

“Merchants would purchase these stamps, and customers can collect the stamps at participating stores and stalls,” he said. “They could collect up to \$4 or \$5 worth of free parking.”

The simplified parking rates also should make it easier and less intimidating to park at the Pike Place Market garage.

No more trying do the arithmetic of “hmm, that is \$3.25 for 1 to 1.5 hours plus \$1.75 for each additional half times so many hours.”

The rate is \$3 per hour – with a \$15 maximum. So if a person parks for more than five hours, the parking bill is still \$15 – (only \$5 on Sundays) and that still is lower than many of the private lots in the area charge.

The early bird rate is currently \$6 all day if a car comes into the garage before 9:30 a.m. Maxey plans to raise the fee to \$7, \$8 or \$9 during the summer and then lower it back to \$5 after the peak season.

The objective is not to “soak” visitors using the parking lot.

“We want to make sure that more stalls are available for Market customers. So as activity builds, we will increase the early bird rate to \$7 in July, and if volumes pick up and spaces fill up, it could go higher,” Maxey said. “I have done this before, but I have never raised it to \$9, and I hope to lower it back down to \$5 all day after the season.”

People might ask what Pike Place Market customers will get for the extra revenue, and Maxey’s answer is a cleaner, safer garage.

“I would like to install eight security cameras and see if they don’t cut the level of [illegal] activity. The walls need painting, and we need to replace our [exit] booths,” Maxey said. “Some of the loops which detect cars approaching the gates need to be replaced, and we have water leaking down the walls on one level.” The bottom line is that the Pike Place Market can’t maintain its parking lots if it is giving away free parking spaces.

Maxey wants you to continue to park in the Pike Place Market Garage between Western Avenue and Alaska Way. Perhaps after you park there, stroll over to First or Second Avenue and you may find that \$3 per hour (\$5 all day Sundays) is still quite a bargain.

For more information – including evening specials at Market area dining establishments, visit the Pike Place Market parking web page at

<http://www.pikeplacemarket.org/site.asp?p=parking> or call 206-621-0469.

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