

Montclair weighs options on new parking meters



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Broken meters, like the one pictured above, cause trouble for residents and Code Enforcement alike.

No one on the Township Council remembers exactly when Montclair last experienced a massive turnover of parking meter technology. While that failure to recall might speak volumes as to how long it has been, the wide variance of years offered by municipal officials may reveal that the life expectancy of new meters is very much a guess.

Councilmember-At-Large Rich McMahon said it might have been 40 years since the last change, but Deputy Mayor Bob Russo was less conservative with his estimate.

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Mayor Robert Jackson stands in the parking lot of the Walnut Street Train Station two years ago.

Jackson claims that new parking meters would quickly generate enough revenue to pay for themselves.

"I was thinking maybe 15 years, back to when I was mayor," Russo said. "The real old ones, where you turn a knob and hear it register ... Those predate me. [My wife and I] lived in Montclair, but I wasn't on the council."

"I have no idea," said Mayor Robert Jackson, who added that however long it has been, it is time for an upgrade.

The most prevailing argument for the turnover is that an inordinate number of Montclair's meters are in disrepair.

Russo estimates that a third of Montclair's parking meters are malfunctioning in some form.

"It's embarrassing," said Jackson, "you come into town and every other meter isn't working."

As 3rd Ward Township Councilmember Sean Spiller explained at a recent 3rd Ward community meeting, finding a broken meter can be a confusing ordeal.

"The meter's broken, you go there and nobody quite knows, does that mean you have to pay, does it mean you don't have to pay?" Spiller asked.

The municipal website's parking utility page states that "if you park at a broken meter, it is considered a parking violation - you need to go find a meter that works ...

However, you may only park at a spot with a broken meter if you are using Parkmobile [pay-by-phone app]."

During his most recent 1st Ward community meeting, councilmember William Hurlock told attendees that not all of the malfunctioning meters are broken. "Some are just full [of coins]," noted Hurlock, who said the municipal government needs to be more responsive about emptying them.

Whatever the cause of unusable meters, even the functioning units need replacing, said the mayor.

Jackson noted that when the township is unable to cannibalize old meters to fix new ones, "we're way overdue."

The township's plan is to purchase muni-meters - centralized payment kiosks - for all parking lots, but retain individual parking meter heads for on-street parking. The new heads would accept credit and debit cards and coins, and be payable through smart phone apps.

With a round figure of 1,700 meters in town, the total replacement of all units could be costly, but the council claims money is not an issue.

McMahon said the council has been quoted prices in the range of \$500 per head. Multiplied by 1,700 meters, this would cost \$850,000.

"My guess is we'll spend a little less because we're buying in bulk, and through a co-op," McMahon said.

The pricing cooperative also allows the town to circumvent the long process of accepting bids from different parking vendors, as the co-op informs a municipality which vendor offers the best product for the best price, according to McMahon.

Since the onset of his decision to replace all meters, Jackson has maintained the township "has the money." Although according to the mayor and others on the council, available funds are also a moot point.

"Asbury Park made over a million dollars in revenue by putting in those new meters," said Russo. "It was an investment that was worth the money they put in. I'm not sure how much they paid, but it paid off."



McMahon said, "The new [meters] maybe don't last as long, but they make more money. So, they pay for themselves in a shorter run."

But a major question still remains: How often should the township replace parking meters, and how long can these digital devices, which spend their entire lifespan outdoors, be reasonably expected to last?

"We have a very jaded experience," observed Jackson. "My understanding is, realistically, you should be changing them every 10 to 15 years as the technology changes."

Jackson said any service contracts with manufacturers will include guarantees "so we can make sure we're not buying a pig and poke."

According to the mayor, one allure of the newer models is that the parking head is a shell, and should the technology change, or the meters produce bugs, the internal operations can be replaced without having to install a whole new meter. The council has been looking at models that accept updates and modifications, even remotely.

"You can add in the ability to program meters in real time. If there's an event like holiday shopping, you can remotely say, 'meters are free,'" said Jackson.

According to the mayor, Parking Utility would be able to effectuate time limits, as well as pricing from a central command post.

However, with the issue of meter longevity at hand, Russo fears the newer the technology, the more temperamental it could be.

"Technology is so sophisticated that it's so sensitive, it breaks down more easily," Russo said. "I'm concerned that if it does get so sophisticated, and so sensitive, [with] variables like weather and power, the meter might not be able to work in a way that consumers need it to."

The deputy mayor added, "I don't want it to just be able to collect a lot of revenue. We have to have a technology that's not only accurate, but also works."

Email: katzban@northjersey.com