05-20 Meeting: Community Parking District Policy Changes and Advocacy Strategies

Date: May 20, 2025 at 5:32 PM

Overview

This document summarizes an emergency meeting of a community group convened to address proposed changes to council policy impacting community parking districts. The meeting, held prior to May 20, 2025, focused on the implications of increased restrictions, financial management, exclusion of community input, and the process for drafting a response letter to city officials. The group voiced significant concern over the loss of local control, lack of transparency, and negative impacts on both businesses and residents. Action items are consolidated at the end, reflecting the group's coordinated efforts to address these challenges and advocate for their interests.

Community Parking Districts and Council Policy Draft

1. The meeting was called as an emergency to discuss the new council policy draft affecting community parking districts. Initially, there was no quorum, but one was achieved as more members arrived, allowing for official discussion and motions.
2. The main agenda item was the review and discussion of the red line version of the draft council policy, which is scheduled to be heard by the city council in June.
3. All community parking districts have previously met to review the draft and have communicated shared concerns regarding the proposed changes, including through joint discussions.
4. Executive Director Sunny Lee emphasized that, due to the initial lack of quorum, the group could not vote on submitting a letter at first, but members would be provided with a draft letter and instructions for individual submissions. Once quorum was reached, the group discussed and approved a process for editing and submitting a collective letter.

Increased Restrictions and Loss of Flexibility

- Members noted that the new draft policy imposes significant limitations on the flexibility of community parking districts, reducing their ability to manage programming as they had in the past.
- There is a perception that many of the projects now being assigned to the districts are typically the city's responsibility, shifting the burden without adequate resources or funding.
- The group observed that the new policy appears to restrict the types of projects districts can undertake, and that the city is requiring districts to take on more administrative and operational tasks.

Restriction of Parking Funds

- Several speakers expressed strong opposition to further restrictions on parking funds, stating that funds are already tightly controlled and the new policy would exacerbate this.
    - "Our hands are already cuffed; this only makes it harder."
    - Concern was raised that these changes could be a step toward dissolving the districts entirely, especially if future budget years are challenging.
- Comparisons were made to other cities (e.g., Boston), where similar administrative hurdles have been used to undermine local organizations by making compliance intentionally difficult, such as through complex yearly budget plans.
- The group discussed the risk that the new policy could make it administratively impossible for districts to function, effectively leading to their dissolution.

Budget Cuts and Local Impact

- Members struggled to differentiate between the old and new drafts but noted that additional cuts and restrictions are evident.
- The introduction of parking meters was initially presented as a pilot program, but members feel that the promised benefits have not materialized, and now further cuts threaten local projects.
    - Example: Loss of amenities like fire pits, with concerns that once such features are removed, they may never return.

- The group stressed the importance of local management of funds, especially given the economic challenges faced by the community, including the closure of six businesses this year.
- There was discussion about whether the community could request the removal of parking meters if the restrictions become too severe, and whether the original pilot intent has been honored.

Relationship with the City and Revenue Sharing

- Members expressed frustration that the community is being cut out of decision-making, despite being positioned as potential allies for city parking initiatives.
- The group advocated for a flat revenue share model, where any revenue generated from enforcement or use of public space (e.g., streeteries) would be directly allocated to the community for local benefit.
- Concerns were raised that the current approach feels like an attempt to make the organization ineffective by limiting available funds and requiring communities to "beg" the city for additional resources.
- Members noted that the city's approach undermines the mutually beneficial relationship that was promised when meters were introduced.

Administrative Challenges and Deadlines

- The city initially imposed a very tight deadline for revised budget submissions (one week), which was only extended after significant pushback from the community.
- Members described the process as a "shell game," with shifting requirements and deadlines that make effective planning difficult.
- The group noted that the city's lack of transparency and responsiveness to questions about expenses and deadlines further complicates their ability to operate effectively.

Economic and Resident Impact

- The group highlighted the negative impact on both businesses and residents:
    - Businesses are losing repeat customers due to parking costs and enforcement (e.g., $85 tickets for expired meters).

- Long-standing community members, especially older residents, struggle with new parking technologies (e.g., parking apps).
- The loss of local amenities and the shift in focus away from resident needs were cited as major concerns.
- Business owners reported having to direct customers to free parking to avoid losing business, and noted that many legacy businesses have closed.

Agreements and Sentiments

- There was consensus that the proposed policy changes are detrimental to the community parking districts and local businesses.
- Members agreed on the need to communicate their opposition to the city council and mayor's office, emphasizing the importance of local control and the negative consequences of the proposed restrictions.
- The group expressed a sense of urgency, feeling that this may be their last opportunity to influence city policy before further restrictions are imposed.

Community Involvement and Policy Concerns

Exclusion of Community Input

- Several participants expressed concern that the community has been excluded from recent decisions, particularly regarding parking meters.
    - Speaker 6 voiced support for previous comments, stating, "it feels like the community has been cut out," and suggested leveraging community power to regain influence.
    - Speaker 4 shared frustration about having to face community members after being told repeatedly that funding for parking meters would not materialize, and now having to confirm those doubts.
- Members discussed the challenge of regaining influence and ensuring meaningful input in future decisions, given the city’s unilateral actions.

Policy Changes and Impact

- Speaker 3 noted little difference between the current and proposed policies, but appreciated the new policy's requirement to consider all parts of the community, including housing areas near Main Street, which were previously overlooked.
- There was discussion about whether to escalate concerns to the mayor, with Speaker 3 expressing skepticism about the mayor's support for neighborhoods and suggesting caution in agitating city officials.

Financial Management and Parking Meter Revenue

Restrictions and Legal Oversight

- Speaker 5 reported that the county grand jury has served the City of San Diego, restricting the use of parking meter funds strictly to parking area improvements, as originally intended.
    - Example: There was city council discussion about using $9 million from parking meters to support the general fund, but this is now prohibited.
    - The city retains ownership of the streets and can install meters at will; parking districts have no control over meter placement.
    - Reference: Todd Gloria’s first budget considered eliminating parking districts, but this was dropped after the grand jury’s involvement.

Discrepancies in Reported Figures

- Speaker 5 highlighted inconsistencies in the reported budget deficit:
    - City council members have cited figures of $259 million or $300 million, but an internal audit in February found the actual deficit to be $100 million.
    - Explanation: The higher numbers are seen as inflated to justify a potential increase in sales tax.

Parking Meter Revenue Distribution and Transparency

- Speaker 1 relayed comments from Katie regarding the financial implications of city-installed meters without community input:

- Questions raised about whether the community parking district would be responsible for the cost of new meters and how installation costs would be deducted from revenues.
- Past experience: For previous meters, only labor was charged due to surplus parts, but no detailed breakdown of expenses was provided.
- Speaker 1 noted that an expected advance of $250,000 in parking meter revenue ($200,000 to Circuit, $50,000 to Discover PV) was never received, and there is a lack of transparency in administrative expenses.
- Members expressed frustration that the city does not provide detailed reports or answers to specific financial questions.

Examples from Other Districts

- Speaker 1 and 5 discussed the experiences of other parking districts:
  - Gaslamp District used $200,000 of its own funds for promenade management, but the city later deemed these ineligible expenses, leaving the district liable.
  - Gaslamp's bollard program ended due to lack of $400,000 funding; now, bollards are only used for special events.
  - Little Italy previously received $750,000, but current expectations are as low as $158,000.
  - There is a perception that the city is targeting high-revenue areas (beach, Mission Bay, Balboa Park) to bolster city finances.
  - The group noted that the city's refusal to reimburse previously approved expenses in other districts could lead to legal action.

Policy Requirements and Draft Letter Feedback

Policy Analysis and Subsidy Language

- Katie's comments (via Speaker 1) questioned the practicality of requiring detailed analysis for additional fund distribution, noting the city is unlikely to pay for such analysis.
- The policy's subsidy language is considered vague, particularly regarding the demonstration of direct or indirect subsidies being limited to a reasonable amount.

Draft Letter to the City

- Feedback on the draft letter to the city included:
    - Speaker 9 and others felt the letter was not strong or direct enough, suggesting it should convey the urgency and seriousness of the situation.
    - Context: Other districts (Uptown, Downtown) are also submitting letters, often with more experience and stronger positions.
    - There is concern that this may be the last opportunity to influence city policy.
    - Members suggested that the letter should include a more forceful tone, highlight the existential threat to the community, and reference the history of broken promises regarding parking meter funds.

Legal and Regulatory Developments

- The grand jury's involvement is expected to result in a full accounting of parking district funds, as these are restricted funds.
- There is anticipation of potential legal action from the Gaslamp District due to the city's refusal to reimburse previously approved expenses.

Broader Implications and Sentiment

Distrust and Frustration with City Actions

- Multiple speakers expressed distrust toward city officials, citing perceived manipulation of financial figures and disregard for community needs.
- There is a sentiment that the city is seeking to increase revenue from residents through taxes and parking fees, rather than from tourists.
- Members expressed frustration at being promised benefits from parking meters, only to see increased restrictions and little return.

Historical and Regulatory Context

- Reference was made to perpetual permits in Balboa Park, with concerns about the city's intentions to introduce paid parking in traditionally free areas.
- Members noted that the city's actions have eroded trust and made it difficult for the community to support future city initiatives.

Letter Drafting and Approval Process

Process for Editing and Approving the Letter

1. The group discussed the process for strengthening and approving a letter regarding recent changes affecting the community.
2. Speaker 1 clarified that edits can be suggested, and the letter will be circulated via email for final approval.
3. If a significant number of members object to the edits or tone, an emergency meeting will be called to address concerns.
4. The group agreed that the letter can be approved with specified edits during this meeting, avoiding the need for a separate approval session.
5. The process allows for board members to reply via email with their approval or objections after receiving the edited letter.

Motion and Approval

- Speaker 7 made a motion to send an edited version of the letter that is more direct about the dire nature of the changes and opposes the removal of community control.
- The motion was seconded and included adding historical context about the community's experiences.
- The group agreed that if six out of eleven board members (a quorum) approve the letter via email, it will be sent.
- If three or more members object within 24 hours, or if fewer than six approve, another meeting will be convened.
- The group discussed the mechanics of the approval process, including the timeline for responses and the threshold for objections.

Content and Tone of the Letter

Desired Edits and Tone

- Members emphasized the need for a stronger, more urgent tone, describing the changes as existential threats to the community, not just annoyances.
- Suggestions included:

    - Using language that highlights how the changes hinder and plague the community.
    - Mentioning the destruction of CBD autonomy.
    - Including the stress already created by the changes.
    - Stating that the community are constituents and potential allies, but alienating them could create opposition.
    - Referencing the broken promise regarding community funds and the negative impact of not receiving them.
    - Including the history of the community's experience, particularly regarding the parking meter funds and previous collaboration with the city.
- Speaker 2 suggested reordering the letter so that the strongest concerns appear at the beginning, with collaborative language moved to the end or middle.
- Speaker 8 recommended reframing references to the budget, focusing instead on the city's responsibility to support CPDs consistently.
- The group agreed to mention that while the community was not enthusiastic about the parking meter rate increase, they supported it on the condition that the community would still receive its share of the funds.

Historical Context and Collaboration

- The group agreed to include the history of the community's experience, particularly regarding the parking meter funds and previous collaboration with the city.
- It was noted that while the community was not enthusiastic about the parking meter rate increase, they supported it on the condition that the community would still receive its share of the funds.

Voting Mechanics and Timeline

Approval Thresholds and Timeline

- The board consists of eleven voting members; six constitutes a quorum.
- The letter will be sent if six members approve via email.
- If three or more members object within 24 hours, the letter will not be sent, and another meeting will be called.

- The goal is to finalize the letter and responses before the beginning of June, with a possible emergency meeting next week if needed.
- Notice for meetings must be sent out by Saturday, with consideration for the upcoming Monday holiday.

Voting Results

- During the meeting, the following votes were recorded:
    - Jennifer: Support
    - Connor: Support
    - Charlie: Support
    - Gordon: Abstain
    - Ryan: Support
    - Patrick: (Support implied, no explicit objection)
- The motion was to approve a more forceful and poignant letter, incorporating the discussed additions and changes.

Parking Meter Rate Increase and Community Funding

- The group confirmed that the increase in parking meter rates has already occurred and was previously supported by the board.
- The board's support was conditional on the community continuing to receive its share of the increased revenue.
- There was concern that the city initially intended to exempt the increased rate from the community's share, which the board opposed.
- The letter will mention the board's willingness to collaborate and their expectation that the community's share of funds be maintained.