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Dallas' parking pilot program will steer Zipcars into downtown, allow drivers to find open spots with an app



By Robert Wilonsky

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The future of parking in Dallas is *now* ... well, actually, a couple of months from now ... and it won't be permanent. Still. It's got to be better than what we've had since November 1935, [when traffic engineer C.G. Beckenbach led the installation of Dallas' first 1,000 parking meters](#). There hasn't exactly been a lot of progress since then — unless you count the ability to feed the meter with a smartphone, which began way, way back in ... [November 2013](#).

But come summer, you'll be able to hop in a [Zipcar](#) in downtown Dallas, Mockingbird Station, the Arts District, Oak Lawn and Uptown. You'll be able to feed the meter using a credit or debit card in Deep Ellum, downtown, the West End or along Jefferson Boulevard. You might find some single-spot meters removed and replaced with multi-space boxes. And folks looking for spots downtown will be able to use an app that allows you to find, reserve and pay for parking in advance thanks to, among other things, [sensors like the ones planted in San Francisco](#).

"All of it's pretty cool and exciting, especially as it relates to [Downtown Dallas 360](#)," says Dustin Bullard, Downtown Dallas Inc.'s cityscape and urban design manager. "A lot of these recommendations were from 360. The city is taking all these different companies and trying to figure out which combination will work long-term."

Donzell Gipson, the Dallas Police Department staffer who oversees the city's parking meters, will brief the city council's Transportation and Trinity River Corridor Committee on the parking pilot program Monday morning. And as you can see from the presentation below, it's a lot to absorb — everything from new ways of finding spaces to paying for them to labeling them. There's even talk of changing time limits on some spots to creating "parking meters as temporary and permanent public art."

"We realize not only is technology changing, but so is how the consumer views it — as economic development, as a matter of personal mobility," he says. "Cities are finding you have to be nimble, mobile and have the ability to transform. This is trying to understand what parking needs we have and what the parkers like to use and what works well, then offer a menu of what you could use in a neighborhood. If a block changes, we can go to this or that if it works better."

The pilot, he says, "is a bridge to the future. As we move to the future with vehicles that talk to meters or that are [autonomous like the Google car](#), our parking infrastructure has to match up with the future. We missed one of the parking growth periods. We got on the board a lot later with the multi-space meters, which you'll find at Klyde Warren Park. But we're now ready to make changes, and this will be a bridge that allows us to make smart decisions."

It wasn't so long ago council member [Dwaine Caraway demanded the city hood all the downtown meters](#); he insisted they're "running businesses away" from the city center. But the parking study conducted in 2011, as part of the 360 plan, actually said that downtown has plenty of empty spots during daytime hours: 7,000 empties amongst the 69,000 spaces in the CBD alone. [Yet everyone still insists](#): Downtown Dallas needs more parking. Look only at [the debate over Pacific Plaza](#) — park or parking lot or both? — as proof.

That 2011 study suggested the city step into the future when it comes to parking cars; apps and credit-card meters were among the recommendations. But only now is Dallas putting its pedal to the metal. Gipson says the app alone is the path toward the future.

"Let's say you live in Plano," he says. "You want to go to a Mavericks or a Stars game. You punch in the app and say, 'I want to park near the American Airlines Center.' Starting today you're going to get the exact location of the meters, how much it will cost and how long you can park there. Once you get there it will allow you to toggle over into the PayByPhone system. Your smartphone becomes your meter."

Bullard is looking forward to being able to rent out Zipcars downtown. They're available on the SMU and UT Dallas campuses, and on their way to Dallas Love Field, but so far nowhere near the city center. Zipcar's spokesperson Jen Mathews in Boston says the company is "pleased to have been selected as a potential partner to help bring our sustainable and cost effective transportation option for residents, businesses and visitors to Dallas," but adds that it's too soon to say where the cars will be parked for those who want to reserve and ride in the shared vehicles during the pilot program.

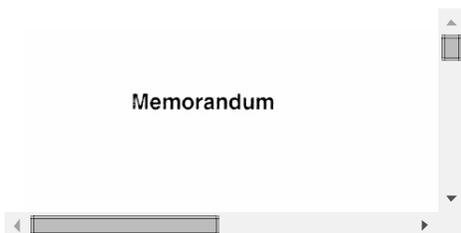
Bullard says they're likely to wind up in city-owned lots, like the one beneath Woodall Rodgers. Gipson says they may go near hotels, so a tourist can reserve and rent a Zipcar to better explore the city in short, sharp bursts. Or they may wind up being driven by downtown dwellers who need a car to get to, oh, the Greenville Avenue Trader Joe's. Says Wendy Nalls, contract portfolio manager for the Dallas Police Department and the person rolling out the pilot with Gipson, Dallas will likely see about 10 Zipcars within the next few months, and the company will decide where they need to go.

"It provides an alternative form of transportation that allows downtown folks to get rid of their car and function within car-centric Dallas without having to own a car," Bullard says. "It reduces individual car ownership and car dependency and allows us to reduce parking demands. It allows urban folks not to maintain and park and car. It frees up that urban lifestyle we're trying to create down here by breaking the dependency on the automobile, finally. We may never get there, but we're making inroads."

The pilot should be in place by the end of June, Nalls says, and city officials hope to know what works and what doesn't by the end of September at the earliest. She says the city is also going to partner with the University of Texas' Data-Supported Transportation Operations and Planning Center (or D-STOP), which is funded with a \$1.7-million United States Department of Transportation grant. Its purpose is to "use 'big data' and innovative wireless technologies to address traffic congestion," says [last year's release](#). Dallas will be among its first laboratories.

"This won't produce 3,000 more spaces," says Gipson. "We're not building a garage. We're not increasing our supply. But we want to make better, higher use of what we have available by making it more convenient to park. It's about convenience and using extra tools without building new spaces. We're using what we have better."

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