



Parking Meter Donation Stations

**Evaluation of the utilization of parking
meters as a means to donate funds on behalf
of social service entities**

**City of San Luis Obispo White Paper
Keith Storton, Police Lieutenant
Robert Horch, Parking Services Manager**

12/19/2012

CURRENT SITUATION:

The City of San Luis Obispo has recognized an increase of homelessness in our community over the years. Social service providers in SLO have indicated 50- 60% of their clients come from outside San Luis Obispo County. Existence of a genuine compassion for those in need and willingness to provide meaningful services and money to a segment of this population has been a variable making San Luis Obispo an attractive destination location for homeless individuals. Although several public and private assistance programs are available to those who seek assistance, a segment of this population utilizes solicitation or “panhandling” as a means to produce an income. This population frequently loiters in more populated areas such as shopping centers and the downtown core to solicit funds from passing pedestrians and motorists. Social service providers believe the majority of panhandlers are considered “program resistant”, meaning they are not willing to commit to positive life choices needed to transition out of homelessness. Many in this subset have severe substance dependencies and cash handouts many times support addictions, and consequently have adverse impacts on a community by creating an enabling environment, drawing more program resistant individuals from other areas.

Solicitation can take many forms to include passive verbal requests, the placement of signs requesting money or a more aggressive approach where the panhandler uses intimidating or threatening tactics to obtain money. Some of these panhandlers interfere with traffic, block sidewalks/benches and disrupt the operations of businesses. There are several laws that control the act of panhandling as to specific locations or when conducted in an aggressive manner, however, generally it is a legal act that has limited enforcement options available to the police department.

POLICE CALLS FOR SERVICE AND CONTACTS:

Since March of 2012, the police department has attempted to capture the number of calls for service that are generated pertaining to the act of solicitation or panhandling. During the time period covering March 1, 2012 through November 30, 2012 the police department has responded to approximately 169 complaint calls for panhandling and 103 complaint calls for loitering. Other calls for service may have involved the act of solicitation or panhandling, however, they were not coded as such due to another crime or activity taking place. These are primarily citizen complaint driven calls for service and the problem is much more wide spread than what is reported and captured statistically.

Through numerous contacts and experience the police department has recognized that many of the individuals found panhandling have also been contacted for drug and/or alcohol related crimes or other illegal activities. A successful panhandler can quickly make enough money to purchase more alcohol or drugs as a means to feed their addiction. The act of panhandling alone or coupled with the consumption of alcohol and/or drugs can further the adverse behavior that can disrupt a business, or interfere with citizens and visitors to our city. This disruption can initiate a call for service to the police department resulting in further contacts to include aggressive panhandling, public drunkenness and drug influence.

An unknowing or uninformed public rightfully feels a sense of duty and obligation to help those in need. The act of providing money to a panhandler who appears helpless or “down on their luck” creates a false sense of satisfaction that the money donated will be used by the panhandler to find a meal or better their situation. Frequently, the money is quickly spent to support a drug or alcohol habit.

Many people who choose to donate directly to a panhandler may be unaware they are already receiving benefits from providers in the form of food, money, shelter and other services.

Some panhandlers, recognizing the profit opportunity of soliciting will prey off the sensitivities and kindness of a donor even though they have no social service needs.

PARKING METER DONATION STATIONS:

A number of communities have examined the possibility of using parking meters as “donation stations” for citizens that feel compelled to give money to help others in need. Money collected at these donation stations can be earmarked for specific entities or causes depending on how the program is developed. It’s recognized that the value of a dollar can go much further in the hands of a social services outlet as opposed to directly giving that dollar to a panhandler where there is no accountability to its benefit. This outlet allows a conscientious donor an immediate alternative to provide assistance to a responsible entity that can facilitate adequate services for those with legitimate needs and subsequently reduce the odds that a program resistant panhandler will be able to perpetuate their condition and/or addiction, strain local resources and detract from the quality of life in San Luis Obispo.

CITY OF DENVER - EXAMPLE

Several agencies in the Denver Area have teamed together to initiate and oversee a meter donation station program in their city. These entities included Denver Public Works, Denver’s Road Home (the entity that oversees Denver’s 10 year plan to end homelessness), Denver Leadership (our Leadership SLO equivalent), Mile High United Way and other social service and business entities.

The effort is twofold, to increase awareness about homelessness and make an effort to redirect money that the general population is giving to panhandlers. Like many other cities across the nation, Denver is dealing with an increase of panhandlers and the adverse environment that is associated with that behavior. According to the Denver’s Road Home website many panhandlers in their community are not homeless and 1/3 of their homeless population has jobs. To educate the public and raise money the Denver community has installed 86 donation meters and expects to generate an excess of \$100,000 annually in sponsorships and donations. The funds frequently provided as a hand outs on the street can now be used to provide meals, job training, substance abuse counseling, housing and other programs for those in need.

CITY OF SAN DIEGO - EXAMPLE:

Parking Manager Robert Horch conducted research regarding parking meter donation stations that were installed in the City of San Diego in 2011 and 2012. To date nine of an anticipated twenty five meters have been installed. The City of San Diego has supported and promoted the program, however, the installation, service and collection of the funds are done privately through a non-profit organization known as the Downtown San Diego Partnership. The meters are installed on private property and have a different look as to not be confused with real parking meters in the public right of way.

At this time the nine meters generate approximately \$50.00 a month in income, although program facilitators are currently working to improve their marketing campaign. But, in addition to the tangible donations a desired result is to educate the public and change perceptions about panhandling and the adverse behavior associated with it. The campaign wants thoughtful donors to understand helping the homeless population through a social service provider generates more buying power and service than a direct handout. The public education process has been successful and has highlighted the issue even spurring an increase of direct donations to the sponsoring program.

The donation station meters in San Diego are similar to the exiting IPS (the meter manufacturer) meters in the City of San Luis Obispo. They are capable of accepting coins or credit cards. There is a great deal of community effort in making the program successful. The Downtown San Diego Partnerships' Clean and Safe division manages the program and provides maintenance and collections. Another company completed installations at a reduced cost (approximately \$150.00 per meter). Some businesses welcomed the installation and placed meters on their own property and absorbed some of the costs. IPS donated the 25 meters and waived their monthly fee which earned them the Vic Kops Humanitarian Award in October of 2012. 1st Data, the company that provides merchant credit services, waived their monthly minimum fee and offered lowered merchant fees.

OTHER EXAMPLES:

Currently the City of Macon, GA and City of Athens, AL are considering similar projects. These entities too are looking to non-profit groups that can manage a meter donation program. The locations have like meters and anticipate working with IPS and 1st Data to provide reduced costs or services to help their programs succeed.

As recently as December 10, 2012 an article in the Los Angeles Downtown News revealed that the City Council will be looking into converting old parking meters (they are replacing with electronic meters) into donation stations for the homeless. Under the proposal "the devices would be relabeled to indicate they are for collecting donations that the city would then distribute to homeless service providers. In theory, it could reduce panhandling because fewer pedestrians might give change if they can instead donate to a blanket of services."

The City of Laguna Beach, while developing its program, had local artists paint the outside of the meters to bring more attention to them. The City of San Luis Obispo has had a long standing appreciation for public art projects. A decorative meter concept can encourage community involvement and awareness to the meter, but to the program as a whole.

An internet search revealed there are several cities utilizing donation parking meters (or researching the idea) as a means to collect money for homeless services. These cities include Atlanta, Baltimore, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Little Rock, San Francisco and Seattle.

PUBLIC EDUCATION/ADVERTISING COMPONENT:

The success of a directed giving campaign through meter donation stations would be dependent upon a strong marketing plan. This plan would include an education component about the adverse results of providing money to panhandlers and the benefits of giving on behalf of a social service agency.

Providing business owners, their employees and public service personnel with the knowledge to pass this information on to those who may ask creates an environment that is unified in effort and consistent in the messaging process. Providing literature and flyers in key locations to inform the giving public featuring QR code access and internet links to appropriate websites where a citizen can become further aware, informed and involved would build in an additional layer of success and credibility to the project.

RECOMMENDATION:

A unified directed giving campaign allows a concerned public the ability to give in a manner where those funds can be managed responsibly and productively. This shared message by the public, the city, business owners and the social service agencies that provide services can discourage panhandling and the adverse behaviors associated with that activity. Moreover, such a campaign helps demonstrate that SLO is a compassionate community, yet one that is committed to not perpetuating an enabling culture that is counter to the welfare interests for the individual and community as a whole.

There appear to be numerous meter donation station examples in which the City of San Luis Obispo can model. The concept is worthy of additional research and consideration for implementation. Further discussion needs to take place to identify the proper entities to establish direction, oversight and continuing maintenance should a program be developed. Many meter donation programs are operated through a private entity with supportive roles provided by the city in which the program is located. The facilitating organization could conceptually decide how to disburse donated funds to social service outlets and homeless related causes, providing another opportunity to more effectively address the issue of homelessness and reinforce the benefit of giving to the appropriate agency rather than individual panhandler.

Parking Meter Donation Stations
December 19, 2012



Donation Meter in Denver, Colorado



Donation Meter in San Antonio, Texas



Donation Meter in San Diego, Ca

Parking Meter Donation Stations
December 19, 2012



Donation Meter in Iowa City, Iowa



Donation Meter in Nashville, TN