Parking Roulette in the City of San Diego

SUMMARY

The daily scavenger hunt for affordable public parking in the City of San Diego is a familiar, often frustrating contest for employees¹, residents² and visitors³ who face a confusing array of rules, meters, apps and signage. It's about to get worse. The City, prompted by revenue concerns, commissioned a parking study completed in January 2025 which recommended adding more meters, raising meter rates and extending metered hours, imposing charges at currently-free public lots near Mission Beach and Balboa Park, and introducing dynamic pricing.⁴ It also suggested increasing special event parking rates. The City moved quickly to immediately double all parking meter fees.⁵ While these increases are billed as a means to address the budget deficit⁶, it is important to note the City Attorney's repeated reminders to the City Council that parking meter funds cannot be levied for general revenue purposes and must be expended for traffic related purposes.⁷

The policies related to parking are very much in flux. In February 2025 the Mayor announced his intent to dissolve the Office of Sustainability and Mobility⁸, which engaged with the Community Parking Districts (CPDs)⁹ established to advise the City on parking and transportation issues.¹⁰ Bids for a new parking meter contract were due by January 8, 2025, but a final provider had not been identified publicly as of March 2025¹¹. More changes to parking operations are expected before the fiscal year ends on June 30, 2025.¹² The Grand Jury feels this is nonetheless the moment to press the City for improved service and transparency.

We recommend that the City of San Diego:

- disband CPDs
- improve and standardize signage related to metered public parking
- require privately-owned commercial parking lots to prominently display their parking fees
- ensure Petco Park complies with special event signage standards regarding parking

 assure that parking meter revenues are properly utilized and publish all parking meter revenue collection and spending

BACKGROUND

The 2009-2010 Grand Jury investigated the Uptown CPD and questioned the utility of CPDs. ¹³ Today, YouTube videos, ¹⁴ community complaints, ¹⁵ business advocacy ¹⁶ and employee feedback ¹⁷ all indicate that parking is a challenge. As the City seeks to recoup more revenue from metered parking, the Grand Jury felt it was timely to revisit parking and the role of CPDs.

The City of San Diego currently manages over 5,300 metered parking spaces, relying either on single-space meters or multi-space meters. ¹⁸ The San Diego Municipal Code establishes a target utilization rate of 85% occupancy for all metered parking spaces and sets a range of hourly parking meter rates from \$0.25 to \$2.50, ¹⁹ although through the end of 2024 the highest cost per hour was \$1.25. ²⁰ On January 27, 2025 the City Council voted to double the hourly rate of all meters to the maximum of \$2.50. ²¹ At that meeting City staff indicated that further changes to parking meter management in the city were under review. ²² In FY2024 parking meters generated a total of \$9.776 million. For FY2025 the City budgeted \$9.6 million in anticipated parking meter revenue; City staff estimated that by doubling meter rates in January 2025 the City could add \$4 million before the end of FY2025 and \$9.8 million per year thereafter. ²³

In accordance with Council Policy 100-18,²⁴ the City collects all parking meter revenue, deducts administrative costs from the gross total (approximately 48 percent of total revenue which includes salaries, meter maintenance, other traffic services, and street-sweeping),²⁵ keeps 55 percent of the remaining funds, and allocates the other 45 percent to each of four CPDs based on the proceeds from meters located in each district. Between October 2020 and August 2023, the City signed 11 agreements covering component organizations which make up the four officially recognized CPDs with parking meters. Each contract authorizes the organization to request reimbursement from parking revenue funds to cover authorized administrative and operational costs. CPDs and their component organizations also help identify and implement projects using parking revenue funds for traffic related purposes. Per the agreements, CPDs are required to

meet monthly and comply with all Brown Act provisions regarding open meetings and transparency. ²⁶

On December 11, 2023 the City Council approved Resolution R-315239 authorizing the creation of additional CPDs in San Ysidro and Kearny Mesa (Convoy),²⁷ but by March 2025 they had not yet been constituted.²⁸ Through 2024 the City Council approved annual spending reports and budgets submitted through the Office of Sustainability and Mobility by the CPDs.²⁹ In February 2025 the Mayor announced the elimination of the Office of Sustainability and Mobility, although its web pages remained active on the City's website through March 2025.³⁰

PROCEDURE

The Grand Jury thanks all those who contributed to this report.

Grand Jury research included:

- Document and website reviews:
 - o City Council Policy 100-18
 - o City Council Policy 200-04
 - o City of San Diego Municipal Code
 - o City of San Diego Special Event Planning Guide
 - o Petco Park Event Transportation and Parking Management Plan
 - 2023 San Ysidro and Convoy Corridor Parking Studies
 - Sustainability and Mobility staff reports to City Council and other City Council documents
 - o 2014 Performance Audit of the Community Parking District Program
 - City of San Diego Parking Meter Location web page
 - o January 2025 City of San Diego Parking Study
 - o City of San Diego Office of Sustainability and Mobility and Treasurer websites
 - Meeting minutes and financial reports for Uptown, Downtown, Mid-City, and Pacific
 Beach Community Parking Districts
 - o Responses to Grand Jury Requests for Documents

- Prior Grand Jury reports
- Interviews:
 - o Representatives of the City of San Diego
 - Members of Community Parking Districts
 - Members of Community Planning Groups
- Site visits:
 - City of San Diego Community Parking Districts

DISCUSSION

City of San Diego policies both encourage and discourage public parking. On the one hand, the City embraces the revenue potential of public parking and works with CPDs to identify parking options. On the other, it eliminates required parking in housing projects constructed near current or future transit centers. City-supported bike lane programs have also affected parking, for example eliminating a reported 300 spaces in the Kearny Mesa (Convoy) area. State law has also affected parking, and in 2024 the City of San Diego was forced to remove almost 100 parking spaces to comply with AB413's prohibitions on parking near intersections. The City's effort to further monetize parking through the placement of additional meters will not necessarily create additional parking spaces. Instead, it will replace currently free parking with metered parking.

Disband CPDs

CPDs were first authorized by City Council Policy 100-18 in 1997 to help advise the City on the uses of parking meter revenues, which are restricted to transportation-related expenses.³⁵ Each CPD has a signed agreement with the City and submits an annual report indicating its portion of parking meter revenues, the past year's expenses and the projected budget for the coming year. While there are officially four CPDs with parking meter revenue, of the City's 11 signed agreements, only one is with an actual CPD (Uptown). For Pacific Beach, the Community Planning Group signed the agreement. The other nine agreements are signed by community planning groups, business improvement districts, or other associations which each claim a

portion of parking meter revenues and, combined, constitute the Downtown and Mid-City CPDs.³⁶

CPD compliance with Brown Act requirements and City-mandated reporting requirements is uneven. In August 2024 the Downtown Parking Management Group (which manages the Downtown CPD) received complaints about failure to post agendas in a timely fashion, provide timely and accurate minutes of meetings, and properly track expenditures.³⁷ There are no minutes or records available online for the Downtown Parking Management Group before March 2024; some of those which have been posted are incomplete.³⁸ The Discover Pacific Beach Community Planning Group website has an incomplete assortment of meeting agendas and minutes for its "Parking Advisory Board" page, some of which have invalid links.³⁹ The Uptown Parking District website is the most comprehensive, yet it too has deficiencies. It provides minutes for Uptown and its component entities of Hillcrest and Bankers Hill, 40 but the International Restaurant Row component entity has only a Facebook page with no minutes or financials related to parking meter revenues. 41 The Mission Hills component entity has a separate web page which references a parking committee but has no records related to parking committee agendas, minutes or financial records for 2024. 42 In the first five months of Fiscal Year 2025 the Uptown CPD cancelled three monthly board meetings for lack of a quorum. 43 The Mid-City Parking District webpage resides on the website of its financial operator, the El Cajon Business Improvement Association (BIA). Nowhere on either the parking webpage or the El Cajon "The Boulevard" website is there a list of members or financial records for the parking committee.44

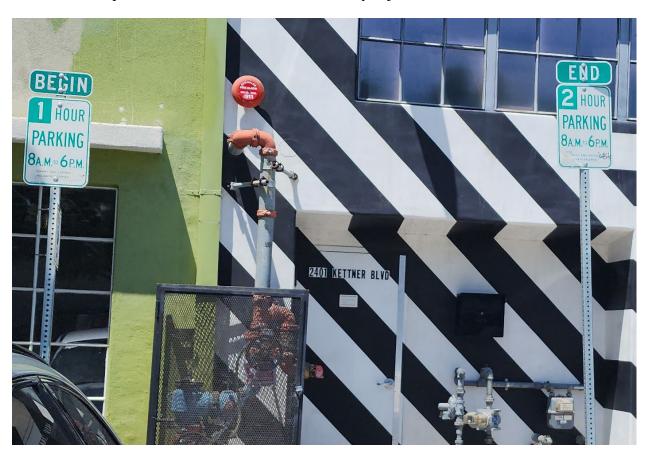
Each year the City calculates the parking meter revenues within each CPD, subtracts its administrative costs, then allocates 45 percent of the remaining to each CPD (while continuing to hold the actual funds in City accounts). CPDs can carry these allocations over from year to year, and in many cases that is what they do. For example, in FY25 the Mid-City CPD budgeted anticipated total revenues of \$86,000 (divided between Greater Mid-City and University Heights) and carried forward funds totaling \$600,000. It reported anticipated personnel, operational and outreach costs of \$59,900, almost 70 percent of annual revenue. The Uptown

CPD in FY25 carried over \$4.7 million from prior years, while anticipating \$523,000 in FY25 revenues, with \$232,500 in personnel, operations and outreach costs (44 percent of revenue).⁴⁷

In January 2025, when the City proposed doubling existing parking meter rates, it included a recommendation that the anticipated additional revenues not be shared with CPDs for the remainder of the fiscal year. The City Council approved this recommendation.⁴⁸

Improve Meter Signage

Our review of parking areas in the City of San Diego revealed multiple opportunities for confusion. Along one block single-space meters featured two different parking durations – one hour for some spaces, two hours for others immediately adjacent.



(Grand Jury photo)

A puzzling green meter offered opportunities to add time – but was actually marking a free 30-minute parking space with no permitted extensions. Around the corner, a multi-space meter (a single pay station covering multiple paid parking spaces) covered a long block, but signs denoting this were only available at either end. ⁴⁹ A recent parking study commissioned by the City recommended improving signage, especially for multi-space pay stations. ⁵⁰ It is only once a driver sees a meter that it is possible to determine what form of payment night be accepted. Meters can accept some or all of the following forms of payment: coin, credit card, phone wallet, or via the Park Smarter app. ⁵¹

Improve Privately Operated Parking Lot Signage

Private parking lots are a key but usually more expensive alternative to public parking. Not all advertise their rates until the customer is already parked and facing a payment machine. A January 2025 parking study contracted by the City noted prices ranged from \$15-\$60 for all-day parking and recommended that privately-owned commercial parking lots be required to display their rates in a manner visible from the street.⁵²

Petco Park Parking Problems

Baseball games and special events such as concerts and other high attendance activities create additional pressures regarding parking and pedestrian safety. As part of the permitting process for special events⁵³, the City requires organizers to post "No Parking" signs curbside along affected streets every 20 feet at least 72 hours before the event. The signs must include the applicable dates and times, a phone number for the organizer and a contact number for the San Diego Police Department (which authorizes towing).⁵⁴

Petco Park, however, is a special case. The City defined Petco Park as a Ballpark Protection Zone and designated the area as a special event venue beginning three hours before any game or event and continuing for one hour after the event concludes. ⁵⁵ The Petco Park Event Transportation and Parking Management Plan, a collaborative effort between City agencies and Padres management, defines street closures and parking prohibitions during events at Petco Park. It does not, however, in any way exempt Petco Park from the signage requirements associated with special events City-wide. ⁵⁶

While City guidance requires visible signage curbside 72 hours before a street area becomes a "No Parking" zone, the situation around Petco Park falls far short of this standard. Instead, signs notifying the public of the enforcement schedule are posted at irregular intervals, on streetlight poles or other sidewalk traffic regulation posts. Usually, but not always, a smaller sign, attached below the "Tow Away" sign, gives the dates and enforcement times for every event scheduled for the current month. None of the signs post the number of the event organizer or the San Diego Police Department, as required by the City's special events guidance. The photographs below show three signs for the month of September 2024. Two list dates and times for thirteen separate events. The middle photograph shows a sign warning against parking during Petco Park events, but without any dates or times listed. None of the signs include contact phone numbers.







(Grand Jury photos)

An unsuspecting driver who parks on these streets may be unaware that there is an impending Petco Park event. Absent the "No Parking" signs placed at curbside normally required for special events, the driver has no readily visible warning that the vehicle is being left in what will become a "No Parking" zone three hours before any event is scheduled to begin. The driver later

returns to find the vehicle gone. As none of the posted signs include the required telephone numbers for the event operator and/or the San Diego Police Department, the driver has no immediate way to find out what has happened, or where the missing vehicle is, or whether it has been stolen.

Publish All Parking Meter Revenues and Expenditures

Through at least the middle of February 2025, the Office of Sustainability and Mobility collated parking meter revenue data by CPD and worked with each district to prepare an annual report of past year expenditures and anticipated projects and costs for the coming year. However, the City did not publish data related to fees it collected from approximately 60 metered parking spaces located outside of the CPDs. The Grand Jury requested this information and was informed that, ". . . the City is only able to generate the data to report total annual revenue in a CPD/Fiscal year basis." The City should take immediate steps to report revenues collected from all parking meters and how it uses those revenues.

FACTS/FINDINGS

Fact: The City of San Diego has signed agreements with 11 distinct entities which constitute the four City-recognized Community Parking Districts which have metered parking. Only the Uptown agreement is signed directly with a Community Parking District.

Fact: The City Council voted on January 27, 2025, to waive the requirement under Council Resolution 100-18 to share increased parking meter revenues resulting from fee increases with Community Parking Districts.

Finding 01: Community Parking Districts generally do not operate as independent and accountable entities, do not meet the stipulated transparency requirements of their agreements with the City of San Diego, spend a significant percentage of allotted revenues on administrative costs, and create unnecessary layers of bureaucracy.

Fact: The City of San Diego uses both single and multi-space parking meters which accept different modes of payment.

Finding 02: As indicated in the January 2025 Parking Demand Management Study as well as Community Parking District meeting notes, parking meter signage could be improved, especially in areas relying on multi-space meters.

Fact: The January 2025 Parking Demand Management Study reported that private parking lot charges vary dramatically across the City.

Finding 03: Not all private parking lots clearly advertise their prices so drivers can see them from the street.

Fact: Parking around Petco Park during special events is subject to a special agreement, the 2015 Petco Park Event Transportation and Parking Management Plan.

Fact: Neither the Municipal Code nor the 2015 Petco Park Event Transportation and Parking Management Plan exempt Petco Park from the signage requirements associated with special events City-wide.

Finding 04: Signage associated with Petco events is not consistent with City standards for special events concerning type, placement, and information displayed.

Fact: In 2017 the City Attorney advised that parking meter fees "cannot be levied for general revenue purposes," referencing California state code.

Finding 05: The City has not been transparent about its own handling of parking meter revenues collected directly by the City outside of the Community Parking Districts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2024/2025 San Diego County Grand Jury recommends that the City of San Diego:

R1: Disband Community Parking Districts and allow Community Planning Groups to fulfill their advisory role and manage funds previously allocated to Community Parking Districts.

R2: Standardize and improve signage related to multi-space parking meters

R3: Require commercial parking lots to display their parking rates.

R4: Modify the Petco Park Event Transportation and Parking Management Plan to reflect City of San Diego standards for special event parking signage.

R5: Publish parking meter revenue and spending data, including for meters operated by the City of San Diego in areas outside of Community Parking Districts.

REQUIREMENTS AND INSTRUCTIONS

The California Penal Code §933(c) requires any public agency which the Grand Jury has reviewed, and about which it has issued a final report, to comment to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court on the findings and recommendations pertaining to matters under the control of the agency. Such comment shall be made *no later than 90 days* after the Grand Jury publishes its report (filed with the Clerk of the Court); except that in the case of a report containing findings and recommendations pertaining to a department or agency headed by an <u>elected County official</u> (e.g. District Attorney, Sheriff, etc.), such comment shall be made *within 60 days* to the Presiding Judge with an information copy sent to the Board of Supervisors. Furthermore, California Penal Code §933.05(a), (b), (c), details, as follows, the manner in which such comment(s) are to be made:

- (a) As to each grand jury finding, the responding person or entity shall indicate one of the following:
 - (1) The respondent agrees with the finding.
 - (2) The respondent disagrees wholly or partially with the finding, in which case the response shall specify the portion of the finding that is disputed and shall include an explanation of the reasons therefor.

- (b) As to each grand jury recommendation, the responding person or entity shall report one of the following actions:
 - (1) The recommendation has been implemented, with a summary regarding the implemented action.
 - (2) The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future, with a time frame for implementation.
 - (3) The recommendation requires further analysis, with an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a time frame for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or head of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This time frame shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the grand jury report.
 - (4) The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable, with an explanation therefor. (c) If a finding or recommendation of the grand jury addresses budgetary or personnel matters of a county agency or department headed by an elected officer, both the agency or department head and the Board of Supervisors shall respond if requested by the grand jury, but the response of the Board of Supervisors shall address only those budgetary or personnel matters over which it has some decision-making authority. The response of the elected agency or department head shall address all aspects of the findings or recommendations affecting his or her agency or department.

Comments to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court in compliance with the Penal Code §933.05 are required from the:

City of San Diego

R1-R5

 $\frac{\text{https://sandiego.hylandcloud.com/211agendaonlinecouncil/Documents/ViewDocument/Attachment\%202-}{\%20Legal\%20Memos\%20on\%20Use\%20of\%20Parking\%20Meter\%20Revenue.pdf?meetingId=5628\&documentType=Agenda&itemId=223289\&publishId=777904\&isSection=false}$

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⁵ City of San Diego, "Parking Meter Rates Increase in City of San Diego," January 30, 2025, https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/2025-01/2025-1-30-parking-meter-rates.pdf

⁶ David Garrick, "No free parking on Sundays? San Diego wants to overhaul how people park and pay to park. Here's how," *San Diego Union Tribune*, February 12, 2025. https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/2025/02/09/no-free-parking-on-sundays-san-diego-wants-to-overhaul-how-people-park-and-pay-to-park-heres-how/

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⁸ City of San Diego, "Mayor Gloria Enacts Operational Efficiencies and Reductions to Save Taxpayer Dollars and Preserve City Services," February 18, 2025, https://www.sandiego.gov/mayor/operational-efficiencies-and-reductions-enacted

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¹⁰ "Council Policy 100-18: Community Parking District," Council of City of San Diego, July 16, 2025, https://docs.sandiego.gov/councilpolicies/cpd 100-18.pdf

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- ⁵⁰ Kellie Dugdale et al, "City of San Diego Parking Demand Management Study," January 2025,
- https://sandiego.hylandcloud.com/211agendaonlinecomm/Documents/ViewDocument/FINAL%20San%20Diego_Parking%20Demand%20Management%20Study_01.21.2025.pdf.pdf?meetingId=6311&documentType=Agenda&itemId=242165&publishId=939139&isSection=false
- ⁵¹ "Parking Meter Operations," City of San Diego, accessed March 5, 2025:
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⁵⁵ City of San Diego, Municipal Code, §59.0302, 2009. muni590101.pdf

 ^{56 &}quot;Petco Park Event Transportation And Parking Management Plan," City of San Diego, accessed March 5, 2025:
 https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/petcopark/pdf/petcoetmp.pdf
 57 City of San Diego, Office of Sustainability and Mobility, "[Grandy Jury] Document Request for Financials

⁵⁷ City of San Diego, Office of Sustainability and Mobility, "[Grandy Jury] Document Request for Financials Related to Parking Meters in the City of San Diego," November 22, 2024.