

Paulette Dickerson
pdickerson@librariesfriend.com
Public Testimony 14 July 2009

When the issue of free parking at the Rockville Library first came up a few years ago it seemed like common sense. There was dedicated parking at the old Rockville Library. There were parking lots at every branch of Montgomery County Public Libraries (MCPL) my family had ever used except the Noyes Library for Young Children.

For many years, the only library lot with parking meters was the Bethesda Library. A generation of development gave the town of Bethesda a densely-travelled, high-population urban core. At one point commuters, shoppers, folks having lunch dates, waiting for car repair appointments or dropping off their vacuum cleaners used the library lot with impunity. Until 2-hour meters were installed. Library patrons were glad to have the spaces back— glad to pay for the privilege. It was a good model for a public library in an urban situation.

There are four reasons for discontinuing the appropriation that subsidizes parking at the Rockville Library. All would apply at any urban library— the new Silver Spring and Wheaton branches and any other current or future MCPL branch.

First, “Smart Growth” policies demand transportation choices that reduce or minimize congestion and pollution while encouraging business and community development. Subsidized parking uses public funds to encourage solo driving instead of the greener alternatives.

Next there is an issue of parity. Those who drive to the Rockville Library are handed the gift of a two dollar bill whenever they choose to park at a Rockville City parking lot. This benefits the City of Rockville but not the citizens of the County as a whole. Those who walk or take mass transit to the library help to subsidize that gift but get little for their tax dollar except more congestion in Rockville Town Center.

The third issue is that of scofflaws. There is no easy way to make sure that only library patrons take advantage of the parking stipend or that patrons use only two hours of “free” parking.

Yesterday I did a count of people who entered the lobby of the Rockville Library Building between eleven and twelve. One hundred thirty-five people went into the library building; eleven used the library “coupon” to get free parking and popped back out.

If the subsidy money that those scofflaws took in that one hour was put into the MCPL materials budget, the department could have purchased a children’s book that would have enriched kids’ lives for years.

Which brings me to my last issue. MCPL, like almost every department in the Montgomery County government, has taken some major cuts over the last year or so. The materials budget is down, staffing is down, maintenance is down. Unless magic happens, the year to come won’t be any better money-wise than the year that just ended. Money spent on “free” parking reduces the revenue available for core county services, not just for libraries.

Access to public libraries doesn’t actually require public parking. It requires a commitment to funding for bricks-and-mortar, staffing and virtual services. Public libraries should be free to all but public parking needn’t be free to any.

There is a Richard Stallman quote that comes to mind. He was talking about free software not free libraries when he said “Think free as in free speech, not free beer.”

So to my fellow patrons I would say libraries are free, parking is not. Pay the two dollars.