

Police to take on illegal parking lots, but merchants say it is not enough

By JACQUELYN WEINER

The Miami Police Department plans a crackdown on illegal parking lots downtown but will take up to five years to do it to avoid causing a parking shortage.

Illegal parking lots have drawn merchants' complaints for years. In response, police ultimately hope to shut down all illegal lots and have all the legal ones brought up to code, said Wanda Mendez, a downtown neighborhood resource officer, at last week's Downtown Development Authority board meeting.

Part of that includes identifying illegal lots and fixing "the craziness that's going on and has been going on until now," such as lot workers flagging down drivers on clogged, one-way streets, she said.

Downtown parking has been a headache for the police for years, said Jeff Glasko, also a downtown neighborhood officer, at the meeting.

In 2007, police received more than 16,000 calls for assistance associated with downtown parking lots at a cost of \$500,000, Mr. Glasko said.

Under the police department's five-year plan to shape up downtown parking, safety issues such as the fencing, lighting and signage of lots will be addressed, Ms. Mendez said.

This includes removal of chain link fences and the development of clear, uniform signs, she said.

Unclear signage has been a problem for both police officers trying to locate lots and patrons who can't remember where they parked, Ms. Mendez said.

One by one, each parking lot downtown will be inspected and given a list of improvements that must be made, she said.

"Unfortunately, if we were to make them come into compliance immediately they would all have to be shut down," Ms. Mendez said.

There are also plans to crack down on the A-frame signs and flagging some parking lots use to attract customers, she said.

Commissioner Joe Sanchez, chairman of the Downtown Development Authority's board, applauded the police department's efforts.

"This is something we need to get on top of right now," Mr. Sanchez said at the meeting. "Parking is the first impression our visitors have of this city."

Not everyone at the meeting, however, was satisfied with the solution.

Jose Goyanes, a board member who owns several businesses downtown, said at the meeting that not enough was being done by the Miami Parking Authority.

"They need to throw us a bone," Mr. Goyanes said. "We (downtown merchants) are trying to work with them, but the issue is that, you know,



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One of the main problems, Mr. Goyanes said, is the amount of towing the Miami Parking Authority does downtown.

This leaves a distaste for downtown with tourists who accidentally park in tow-away zones and come back to find their car gone.

"It comes back to bite us," Mr. Goyanes said.

Brian Alonso, vice president of downtown's La Epoca Department Store, said he has seen similar problems, particularly with cars parked in loading zones.

After protesting to the parking authority for months, he was able to get signage on the loading zones near La Epoca changed to Monday through Friday, he said.

Towing at other area loading zones is now enforced Monday through Saturday, he said.

"It's been better since we've been yelling and screaming," Mr. Alonso said.

Mr. Alonso also said the signage in downtown towing zones is very unclear and needs to be improved.

In addition, all signs are in English, which many patrons don't understand, he said.

"It's a very inviting spot," Mr. Alonso said. "A number of people have parked there unknowingly and get caught in it."

These complaints, however, are not the norm, said Arthur Noriega, chief executive officer of the Miami Parking Authority.

"What he was describing is not in any way, shape or form our policy," said Mr. Noriega, referring specifically to Mr. Goyanes' complaints. "He has specific complaints that are very detailed."

Mr. Noriega said he is committed to working with downtown business owners and has given Mr. Goyanes his cell phone number to report any future towing issues.

What the parties may be coming to terms with are plans to create parking breaks downtown, Mr. Noriega said.

Mr. Goyanes said he would like some free downtown parking, which many other downtowns offer, he said.

"It provides a stimulus or an incentive to a consumer," Mr. Goyanes said.

The parking authority is willing to meet him halfway, Mr. Noriega said.

A downtown validation program that would offer reduced rates on Sundays' pay-and-display parking is being considered, he said.

That way, if patrons visit certain downtown retailers and spent a minimum amount, they can validate their tickets for free parking, Mr. Noriega said.

It's hoped the program will begin by the end of the summer, but that's only if the downtown business owners cooperate, he said.

In the past, downtown merchants have abused reduced parking programs by allowing employees to use the spots, Mr. Noriega said.

With this validation program, which would place responsibility on both the parking authority and the merchants' ends, Mr. Noriega said he hopes things will work more smoothly.

"Everybody has a stake in it," he said.