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Growing appreciation for parking meters in Beirut



June 28, 2011

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The Daily Star

BEIRUT: As summer begins and Lebanese expatriates and tourists begin flooding the country, securing a parking spot in the capital is becoming an even bigger nightmare than usual.

But according to municipal officials, as well as many drivers, the installation of parking meters throughout Beirut is making a real difference in the search for spots.

“Parking meters gave the street back to the people,” said Rachid Ashkar, from the Municipal Council of Beirut.

Ashkar believes that although parking meters were “unfavorably welcomed” when they were first introduced, residents ended up seeing their “good side.”

“It’s very positive,” Ashkar said, explaining that people recognized the positive side of meters when they saw the “new availability of parking spots.”

Ashkar said that the municipality now receives requests from residents to place meters in their neighborhoods.

“We received letters signed by 200 or 250 residents of a specific area asking us to install parking meters on their streets,” said Ashkar, who believes that those who were first hostile to the idea, especially in residential areas, eventually saw that more spots had been made available by forcing out “boat cars,” which are parked for several weeks or months in the same spot.

Drivers and residents are giving the system a good review, although many said it could still be improved.

“I remember when there was no parking system; it would take hours to find a parking spot. There is definitely a noticeable difference,” said Houssam Mneimneh, a 34-year-old taxi driver.

Ahmad Zabadne, who is a company managing director, said that he sees both pros and cons to the system.

“In terms of organization, the parking system has undoubtedly offered all a chance to park throughout the day,” he said. “In terms of flexibility, it’s a nightmare [because of] the time it takes to park and get change for the meter.”

As a student, Salman Doueihy said the system is of no use for him. “The time limit for parking doesn’t give students the ability to ... park throughout the day,” said the 19-year-old American University of Beirut student, adding that private parking lots were too expensive for him.

The parking meters project began in Beirut in 2009, as part of the Urban Transportation Development Project, sponsored by the Lebanese government and the World Bank.

Since then, some 730 meters have been introduced in the neighborhoods of Hamra, Verdun, Ashrafieh, Corniche al-Mazraa and other commercial and residential areas of the capital. Meters were also installed in the cities of Tripoli, Sidon and Zahle.

Ashkar said that Beirut’s municipality plans to increase the number of meters and extend areas covered, although a timetable has not been set.

“We’re planning to cover all Beirut’s neighborhoods ... we’ll work first on areas that requested parking meters, and then on commercial areas,” he said. “We want ... to give everyone the possibility of finding a parking spot.”

Duncan/Nead Joint Venture is a private company in charge of maintaining parking meters, collecting the money and issuing tickets in Beirut and Burj Hammoud, which saw its first meters at the end of 2010.

The company will also be responsible for Dekwaneh, Ghobeiry, Jal al-Dib and Hadath, where some 200 parking meters will be set up in a near future.

Chafik Sinno, managing director of Duncan/Nead Joint Venture, agreed with Ashkar's assessment of the project.

"People are happy because parking is now distributed fairly," he said. "Before, the 'stronger one' could block a parking spot; now it's different."

As proof of the public's satisfaction, he said that while several hundred thousand fines have been issued, his staff have had very few "incidents" with disgruntled drivers.

"Sometimes drivers who are not happy push or punch our staff, but this happens no more than once or twice a month," he said, stressing that most comply with the system.

"We tell our staff to avoid confrontation and be as polite as possible even though they receive harsh language," he added. But according to a well-informed source who preferred to remain anonymous, drivers are not the biggest problem faced by agents.

"Some [political] factions controlling certain streets and areas sometimes feel they have the upper hand, and sometimes agents end up fighting with them," the source told The Daily Star, adding that all political parties were involved, as well as high-ranking officials. "Their staff refuse to pay for parking and don't allow agents to fine [their cars], claiming they're 'security cars,'" the source said, adding this mainly happened near the residences of political figures.

According to Sinno, between 800 and 1,000 parking tickets are issued every day in the capital, and most are paid. "Some 80 percent of the fines are paid, most of the time when they're first issued," he said, noting that people prefer to pay quickly since, the initial fee of LL10,000 increases to LL40,000 after one month.

Ashkar said that owners of cars with Lebanese license plates usually paid, but foreign cars were not as reliable, and Sinno agreed. "We have several thousand unpaid fines from foreign cars," he said, "but there is nothing we can do about it."

The money collected from the meters is used to reimburse the World Bank loan used to buy the machines, and to maintain traffic lights.

Both Ashkar and Sinno identified valet parking as another major problem faced by the system.

"We have had complaints from people who say they weren't told [about the fine] and most of the time we realize it happened at a time when their cars were handed to valet-parking," said Ashkar, adding that the valets can sometimes be "sneaky." "We always fight with valet parking [attendants] who try not to pay," said Sinno, adding that his staff see valets removing tickets regularly.

But overall, Ashkar is very satisfied. "The final goal was to give everyone the possibility of finding a parking spot for a small amount of money, without needing a valet," he said. "That has been achieved, and we're proud of it."