

Parking kiosk, fee proposals get mixed reaction from merchants, residents

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Updated: 6:25 a.m. Friday, Sept. 23, 2011

Posted: 7:25 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 22, 2011

Merchants and residents were divided at Wednesday's Town Council committee meeting over whether the town should install kiosks in its three commercial districts.

A show of hands at the well-attended meeting showed there were plenty of people on both sides of the issue.

But most who spoke said they were concerned it would hurt businesses already struggling with a weak national economy.

Lori Jayne, of Lori Jayne Monogramming and More at 305 S. County Road, said the town shouldn't expect elderly shoppers to walk half a block to a kiosk, then back to their vehicles, before going into stores.

"It's absolutely absurd," she said. "We should be friendly to our customers."

Town resident Robert Andrew Roddy said kiosks are unsightly and inconvenient to use, and would discourage customers from shopping in town.

In response to Councilman Robert Wildrick's assertion that the town needs additional parking revenue to help pay for coastal protection costs, Roddy said the town should look elsewhere, such as charging filmmakers to shoot movies in town.

He also said the town should curtail the amount of money it devotes to fighting beach erosion.

Local attorney and businessman Leslie Evans said the town owns vacant properties that it could sell to raise money for the beaches. Getting those properties into private hands would also boost the town's tax roll, he said.

Christopher Kaufman, of Kaufman Jewelry at 232 Worth Ave., said the town should arrange for valet parking on the high-end street. That would address the problem of store employees taking the parking spaces that customers want, he said.

He also opposed a town staff proposal to hike parking ticket fines from \$35 to \$60, saying that would have a chilling effect on business.

"The retail health is very important to the community," Kaufman said.

About 90 percent of the letters Town Council members received were from people opposed to the kiosks, Wildrick said.

But the Worth Avenue Association and the Palm Beach Chamber of Commerce are in favor of installing them on Worth Avenue. Burt Handelsman, a major property owner on the Avenue, is also reportedly in favor of kiosks on the street, provided parking penalties aren't increased.

Greg Beletsky, general manager of Ralph Lauren Palm Beach at 300 Worth Ave., said customers expect to pay for premium parking in luxury areas such as Aspen, the Hamptons and Palm Beach.

Worth Avenue could promote its businesses by using a share of the kiosk revenue for marketing and special events.

"You also could free up spaces now being taken by employees, who aren't spending," he said.

The Worth Avenue Association is opposed to hiking parking ticket fines to \$60, saying it will anger customers, who may not return to the Avenue to shop.

Laurel Baker, executive director of the Palm Beach Chamber of Commerce, said Thursday that it supports kiosks on Worth Avenue, but not the other two districts.

"We have reservations about Poinciana and South County because they are depressed as it is," she said. "For Worth Avenue, because it is a desirable destination, we stand behind the Urban Land Institute's position that the most desirable spaces should cost the most, and the further away from the shops, it should be less expensive."