

# 'It was inevitable': Surf City visitors, business owners react to first day of paid parking

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A man drives through Surf City's island roundabout on Thursday, the first day the town began charging for island parking spaces. A new town ordinance enforced paid parking for non-visitors from April through October. (Port City Daily/Mark Darrough)

**SURF CITY** — Jeff Allsbrook, a retired Wilmington Police captain, was standing on the boardwalk next to the Surf City Welcome Center late Thursday morning checking out the waves, like he had done many times before. On this morning, the avid surfer had to first go to a makeshift plywood shack, set up next to the old town hall, which was halfway demolished. He was there to purchase a \$250 annual parking pass (\$225 for senior citizens, military veterans, and extraterritorial residents) from Pivot Parking.

“Nobody’s happy about having to pay another fee,” he said. “It’s just a sign of the times. I think people saw it coming, and you just pony up and go on.”

During a Feb. 19 work session, town council members decided to forgo Surf City's status as one of the few remaining coastal towns along the state's southeastern coast to offer free beach parking to visitors. A new ordinance to enforce paid parking — created to fill a \$700,000 annual deficit in its beach nourishment fund, according to Town Manager Kyle Breuer — for visitors on the island side of the town passed on a 4-to-1 vote.

Councilman Dwight Torres, who cast the lone dissenting vote, previously suggested the town should first increase parking capacity to meet a growing number of visitors and residents entering the island during spring and summer months. The town should only establish a paid parking model after more spaces were added, he told fellow council members.

On Thursday, Torres said he suspected an initial decline in visitors who are accustomed to free parking, as experienced from other beach towns that have adopted paid-parking programs.

“These visitors will likely go to the next available beach town not charging to park. Unfortunately, free-to-park beaches are starting to become a rare commodity in our particular area. . . . However, I do hope the program succeeds and achieves the intended goals,” Torres said.

No other other council members replied to a request for comment on the new ordinance.



A sign at the Surf City Welcome Center shows instructions to visitors on how to pay for a parking space. (Port City Daily/Mark Darrough)

The new ordinance will give Pivot Parking the authority to enforce the following rates, between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., for non-residents: \$3 an hour, \$20 a day, \$60 a week, and seasonal passes at \$250. The paid-parking period will last each year from April 1 to October 31.

The town has signed a contract with Pivot Parking to provide a text-to-park function, “citizen portal” and hurricane re-entry process. Visitors can pay via text or call a number. They can also use a smartphone to scan a sign at the lot, which will take them to a simple payment website.

The company’s “ambassadors” will monitor and enforce parking on the island.

Before council approved the ordinance, the town published a detailed explanation of the main factors influencing the upcoming decision. It was largely based on its shortfall of beach nourishment funds. As part of a total \$237-million U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project to rebuild the dunes and beaches of Surf City and North Topsail Beach over a 50-year life span, the town’s share of initial construction costs is estimated at \$24.9 million. Additionally, the town will face between \$1.97 to \$2.6 million annually over the project’s life span.

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The town also hopes paid parking will control the massive numbers of vehicles entering the island in the warm spring and summer months.

“[T]he Town has seen a consistent increase in the need for parking enforcement as a surge in visitors has led to people parking anywhere they can throughout Town, including rights of ways, private property, and in areas that cannot fit a vehicle,” according to the town. “This has led to increased conflicts with pedestrians and bicyclists and creating potentially hazardous situations.”



A Pivot Parking employee organizes her desk at a makeshift shack used by the company to sell season passes and register residents for free parking. (Port City Daily/Mark Darrough)

Vinita Gass, manager of the Surf City Pier, said the town has allowed her business to continue offering free parking to its customers. But all in all, she said her customers have expressed many concerns about the town’s new law — although she believes it will not affect the number of tourists who flock to the island when it’s warm.

“For every one that it is going to deter, there’s going to be another one who will probably show up in their place. It’s just the way the world works. . . . I don’t want to sound calice about that, but the beach is always going to be in demand,” Gass said after selling some fishing supplies to a family of four.

Gass said she has hired several local people to begin policing her lot to prevent freeloaders looking to avoid paid lots on each side of the pier. Ultimately, she believes parking enforcement won’t alleviate the true issue: not enough parking spaces on the island.

“There’s not enough parking and there never has been enough parking,” Gass said. “Now that you’re having to pay for it doesn’t make it any better. It’s supply and demand. You still have a lot of people who demand to be on the island or come to the beach, whether for the day or week. They’re still going to want to be here. There are some new parking situations being created, but they still won’t be enough. It never will be.”

In 2015, the town identified seven to eight lots to fulfill certain requirements for the federal beach nourishment project. In 2020, the town purchased four of those lots.

“These four parking areas must be utilized for public parking in order to move forward with the USACE storm damage reduction project,” according to the town’s explainer piece.

The launching of the paid-parking program came during a cold spell, perhaps one of the spring’s last before hotter weather arrives.

At the makeshift shack located on the corner of North Topsail Drive and Goldsboro Avenue, Pivot Parking manager Tina Reed said people were lined up outside early Thursday morning to purchase passes or register as non-paying residents. She said a few had asked if it was an April Fool’s joke, laughing at the suggestion.

According to Breuer, the town manager, the town saw \$261 in daily parking sales on Thursday, in addition to 139 annual passes sold, pulling in \$32,450 for the town. He said 94 others have applied for the passes. He acknowledged the cold weather may have impacted sales.

Ultimately, the town knows there will be some backlash as visitors adjust to the new reality of paying for island parking spaces, but such adjustment is necessary for growth.

“We understand that growth is not easy, but in order to preserve our paradise we must grow together,” the town stated.

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