

Parking Meters That Don't Give You a Break

December 11, 2005, Sunday

By BRENDAN I. KOERNER (NYT); Magazine

Late Edition

Pulling up to an overfed parking meter, and thus saving a quarter or two, is one of life's small pleasures. So the elders of Pacific Grove, Calif., seem like major killjoys for installing 100 high-tech meters that deprive motorists of this karmic reward. A wire grid beneath each parking space senses the magnetic disruption caused by a vehicle's departure, causing the meter's time to reset to zero.



Innovapark

The Smart Meter resets after a car leaves, registering the departure through a sensor set in the parking space.

"We're making parking more democratic," insists Kirby Andrews, a managing director of the Connecticut-based InnovaPark, which designed Pacific Grove's stingy meters. He points out that the digital meters can be programmed to help free up spaces more frequently, either by refusing additional coins until a new car arrives or by increasing rates over time - \$1 for the first hour, \$2 for the second, \$4 for the third.

Parking democracy may or may not be on the march, but "dumb" meters are definitely headed for extinction, replaced by more efficient, more draconian alternatives. In Montreal, for example, drivers punch their parking space number into a solar-powered curbside machine that accepts both credit cards and coins. When time runs out, the machine registers that fact, and P.D.A.-toting parking agents can see the violator's space flash red on an on-screen map.

Cities love these new technologies because they make it easier to ticket scofflaws, turn over spaces and generally stick it to motorists a wee bit more. The financial results are hard to argue with: InnovaPark, for example, estimates that by simply resetting to zero when a car pulls out of a space, its meters rake in 20 to 40 percent more revenue than dumb meters.

But at what cost to human happiness? The next generation, alas, will most likely never know the elation of finding a meter with 50 minutes left, or of discovering a ticket-free windshield despite having parked for three hours instead of two. Revamped parking meters, like DNA testing and surveillance cameras, are making it that much harder to foil the Man.