

METRO

High-tech meters spare the change

Holiday shoppers like convenience

By Megha Satyanarayana

Free Press Staff Writer

Holiday shopping by car often means hunting for spots in crowded lots and on busy streets, but once drivers have pulled in, some communities are giving them high-tech payment options to ease the pain.

"The No. 1 complaint is paying for parking. They comment how they have gotten a ticket and they won't come back," said Peggy Winfield of Tis Country in downtown Mt. Clemens. For 18 years, she has helmed the Christmas rush at her store, where folks sometimes grumble about having to park at a meter and walk half a block — before rushing off to the mall to park in a space and walk at least the equivalent of half a block.

During the summer, Mt. Clemens toyed with the idea of pay stations, following the examples of Royal Oak and Ferndale in revamping parking to end the hunt for spare change. But the City Commission was concerned about the cost.

Royal Oak tested credit card devices installed on meters last December before installing them en masse in September. Even with the new credit-accepting meters in front of Lost and Found on S. Washington, people still come into the store and ask for change.

"They seem to think it's our responsibility to tell them about how to use the credit cards, but I don't know how to do it," said employee Leslie Gauthier.



JARRAD HENDERSON/DETROIT FREE PRESS

Zoe Ciapala, 20, of Farmington pays at a parking meter Wednesday in Royal Oak. The box on top of the meter takes credit cards.

Ellen and Jim Zimmer didn't realize at first, as they dug for quarters to feed a Royal Oak meter, that the box on top of the meter was for credit cards.

"It's an excuse to come back" to the community, said Ellen Zimmer.

Ferndale took a similar tack, going with a smartphone operated system on its roughly 1,200 meters that were unveiled, by design, just before Black Friday. After downloading an app and storing payment information, drivers can punch in the meter number and walk away with the full amount of time allowed. When they return, they tell the app to stop, and the meter turns off. The charge is whatever time they were at the meter, plus a 35-cent service fee.

The Ferndale Downtown De-

velopment Authority wants to keep people in the shops, rather than running back to their cars, or getting mad because they got a ticket, said Christine Decius-Sheppard, director of the authority.

"What we're hearing from businesses is that the meters have sparked attention to downtown Ferndale," said Decius-Sheppard. "They know customers will be happy when they come and when they leave."

Shopping at Fairlane, Lindsay Case and Elaina Rodriguez said the high-tech meters sound cool, but the mall is easier.

"It's more fun. It's an experience," Rodriguez said of shopping in community downtowns. But, she added, "This is a big mall. It's easier to get lots of things, and there's a broad amount of stuff."