



New parking system downtown lets drivers pay by phone

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COLUMBIA — There is a new way to pay for parking in downtown Columbia.

Across several blocks on Broadway and South Ninth Street, meters with bright green stickers are part of a program that allows drivers to use their smartphones to pay for parking, remotely add extra time to meters and receive reminders when their time is almost up. The program was launched as a partnership with Parkmobile, a company based in Atlanta, Georgia.

Each transaction will cost an additional 35 cents, on top of the normal parking fees.

To pay via phone, users download the Parkmobile app and provide personal information — email, license plate number and credit card information — before receiving a message that their data will be “securely transmitted to the Parkmobile servers for safekeeping.” After registering and parking, users input a "parking zone number" and choose how much time they expect to use.

The city spent about a year working on the contract with Parkmobile, in part to ensure that the information collected would stay private, said Steven Sapp, a spokesperson for the Columbia Public Works Department.

The new payment option follows the city's earlier efforts to expand parking downtown by allowing payment with debit and credit cards. Cards and coins are still accepted on smartphone-enabled meters. In June, the city launched another program with Parkmobile to sell more 10-hour parking permits, in order to direct employees at downtown businesses away from spots with two-hour limits.

There are 1,400 Parkmobile locations in the United States, according to the company's website. But the service is still novel; five people interviewed by the Missourian Monday in St. Louis, Kansas City and Columbia who worked near Parkmobile meters had either never heard of them or never used them.

The city's initial use of Parkmobile meters in 2012 “had a lot of popularity,” Sapp said. The Public Works Department will consider expanding the number of smartphone-enabled meters, according to a news release.

Supervising editors are John Schneller and William Schmitt.