

West County

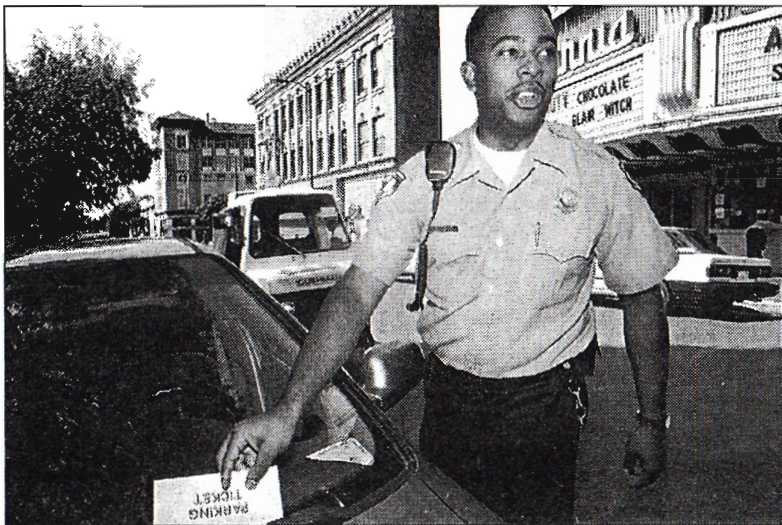
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Berkeley eyes mercy at the meter



HERMAN BUSTAMANTE JR./TIMES

OTIS SANGESTER III, a Berkeley parking enforcement officer, slides a ticket on a car illegally parked on Kittredge Street. A policy proposal may ease face-to-face confrontations with drivers.

■ A councilwoman's plan would forgive drivers for parking fines if they show up while being written up

By David Ferris
TIMES STAFF WRITER

BERKELEY — It's a common tale of urban horror: the blue-shirted parking officer, bent over your fender and scribbling a ticket. When you protest, he slaps it on your windshield, mounts a buggy and puts off.

But soon in Berkeley, he might just smile and rip it up.

That would be the new rule under a plan coming before the Berkeley City Council on Tuesday. Councilwoman Polly Armstrong has proposed a policy that would absolve anyone lucky enough to show up while a parking ticket is being written.

The policy would apply equally to the \$22 fine for an expired parking meter and the \$275 hit for blocking a wheelchair ramp.

"That's a pretty good idea," said Bryan Batts, 21, who recalls a time his pleas to repeal a parking ticket fell on deaf ears in Walnut Creek, where he lives. "That's a great idea, actually."

The idea resounds in Berkeley, where congested curbs have made parking an emotional issue.

Just last year, poachers destroyed two-thirds of the city's parking meters. This month, two people were charged with misdemeanors for violent outbursts against city ticketers — one for throwing a rock at a parking vehicle, the other for landing a punch on a parking officer's cheek, said Berkeley police Lt. Stan Muller.

"People say our meter maids are over-enthusiastic. People stop us on

the street all the time and tell us their sad stories," said Joan Collignon, aide to Armstrong. "(The proposal) is a good PR thing. It wouldn't cost the city very much. It would lessen the potential conflict of people screaming at our city employees."

Police said they are fine with the proposed policy as long as it is clear about when a ticket is final. Dismissing tickets if the victim arrives on time is already an informal policy, Muller said.

"We don't want people chasing down parking representatives three or four blocks because they know this policy," Muller said. "Where do they stop it? Do they wait until the parking rep comes in from work at four o'clock?"

Jerry Cook, a Berkeley parking officer, said dismissing tickets for

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Meter

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everyone who shows up in time might result in him writing 15 to 20 fewer tickets a day. Then again, he added, there are so many parking scofflaws in town, he could easily make up the difference. If he gives a ticket to a person, Cook said, "then I got to go into a long, drawn-out speech. If I took 15 minutes to explain to these citizens, that's 15 minutes I lost giving tickets."

City parking officers write 17,000 to 18,000 tickets a month, Muller said. The city is expected to net \$5.6 million this fiscal year from parking enforcement, city finance officials said.

Local parking policies in the East

Bay vary. Some cities, such as Martinez, will put the ticket on a windshield unless there's a compelling reason to the contrary, said Police Chief Dave Cutaia.

Walnut Creek, like Berkeley, claims an informal policy to let tickets slide if the offender arrives in time. Some Berkeley drivers said the informal policy must be awfully informal. "Some of them are very inhuman," said Berkeley taxi driver Gary Jafaru about his experience with ticketers.

Several Berkeley residents said that from a driver's-eye view, the plan is a winner. "You're moving your car, and that's the point," said Penny Plunkert, a secretary who works in Berkeley. "It's OK to give that gray area to the consumer. It's not like they don't make enough money from parking tickets that they have to take a hard line."