

City told of Cabinet's stance on parking meters contract

-Robb St businesses up pressure

By

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The Mayor and City Council (M&CC) has been told of Cabinet's recommendation to suspend the parking meters project and will now consider what steps to take even as Robb Street businesses yesterday implored the President to intervene, citing plummeting sales.

Acting Mayor Sherod Duncan related that he had been in communication with both the Minister of Communities, Ronald Bulkan and Town Clerk, Royston King regarding the matter, but noted that the Council is awaiting official correspondence from the Ministry.

Asked what direction he sees the Council leaning in with regard to Cabinet's recommendation, Duncan stated that he does not foresee the Council doing anything contrary to what was recommended by the government as the two bodies share a good relationship.

A decision was made at Tuesday's sitting of Cabinet to request that City Hall have the contract between it and Smart City Solutions (SCS) suspended. A senior government official had related to this newspaper that Minister Bulkan was tasked with making the recommendation to City Hall and an official statement was expected to be released by the government yesterday.

SCS sent out a statement early yesterday informing that they had received no official word from the M&CC that action should be taken to suspend the geoPark project and so they would "continue to operate and enforce the geoPark project in accordance with its obligations under the Georgetown Metered Parking Project contract."

Simon Moshelle, SCS's Managing Director of Operations, told Stabroek News yesterday morning that they had not met with the Town Clerk but had seen reports of the recommendation circulating in the media. Moshelle stated that it was "business as usual for SCS," adding that workers were on the road carrying out their duties.

Duncan last evening stated that King, being the "point person" for SCS, would relay the Council's concerns to the company in the interim and should the need arise for formal and direct engagement, that route will be pursued.

Duncan further stated that the discourse with King will determine whether the matter is urgent enough that an emergency statutory meeting will be called or whether they would await the next scheduled statutory meeting to have the Council vote on the matter.

Meanwhile, the Movement Against Parking Meters also sent out a statement yesterday stating that they were "heartened" by the government's recommendation but remained firm in their position that they will accept nothing less than a revocation of the contract in its entirety.

They cited reasons such as a breach in procurement rules regarding the process, no feasibility or impact study being conducted and the bylaws being oppressive and infringing on the constitutional rights of Guyanese.

Businesses take a stand

Robb Street business owners, convinced that there has been a direct correlation between their recent decline in business and the implementation of the parking meters, yesterday flew black flags on their buildings to represent a death in business activity and to mourn their losses.

This latest development, which saw most of the businesses along Robb Street between Camp and King streets decorated with cloths of mourning, was organized by Suresh Naraine, the proprietor of Naraine's Liquor Store, located at Lot 40 Robb Street.

On the front of the liquor store currently hangs a banner which states that the city is in a state of "Economic distress and decay" and calls on President David Granger to "take a decisive step to stem an imminent tragedy."

"He's the president of all Guyana and if his people are suffering, he needs to pay attention to that and as a leader you need to listen to the voices of the people and see how best you can address the situation. I think they can do much more than just recommend (a suspension of the project)," Naraine expressed.

He explained that he had engaged the majority of the business owners along the stretch and they agreed that their businesses had all been negatively impacted by the implementation of the metered parking project.

Mahendra Boodhoo of Golyn and Sons revealed that since the parking meters have gone into use, he has had to lay off five of his staff, the equivalent of 50% of his work force. He estimated that the store is bringing in 40% of the sales they have received in the past during corresponding periods, and Boodhoo is positive that there is a direct link between the two.

"...it's getting worse every day as it progresses and more so on the days when they're enforcing the parking meter issue and you have people clamping so we have followed a trend where you see on the days where they enforce the parking meters and you have people walking around clamping, our business tends to go down to the bottom. Then some days when they're a little flexible we can do a little business, but overall, our business is horrible and I find that this is, whatever is happening right now, is going so far it's almost a death," Boodhoo stated.

Sue Huang, of Xinfu Fastfood, expressed that business has been considerably slow lately, noting that it is the first time in her 10 years of being in business that it has declined to that pace.

"About five hours I sit down here, nothing ain doing," a woman shouted from behind the counter of the restaurant, adding, "this is all she sell for the day," as she gathered a quantity of empty beer bottles that had been placed on the counter.

Steve Ramcharran, the goldsmith who occupies the lot behind the Chinese restaurant, also spoke of the impact the parking meters have had on his sales.

"Since this parking meter come out it really affecting the business a lot. For the longest while, nobody is really coming, one time they hold up with the parking and when the place start get back lil busy I start getting some customer, but now, for this whole month, last month, nothing ain doing right now," Ramcharran said.

A Robb Street drinks vendor who wished to remain anonymous stated that less persons make casual stops while going about their daily business. He noted his wish that Council would take up the government's recommendation of building parking lots to cater to the citizenry, which he opined would

be less burdensome.

“When x amount of people come into the town they have time to relax, people would park the car, they will go off at the mall, shop and whatever they have to do then they would come down— ‘leh we get a drink boy’—or people will sit down and relax, that’s how Georgetown is all the years. And so parking meters come and just plug a hole into everything. Is everything it affects, everything,” the vendor stated.

Even the Manager of one of Regent Street’s larger retail stores expressed that business has being affected in a major way. Although no flags were placed on the building housing the American Home and Beauty Centre, its Manager Sam Ajouri stated that the parking meters are perhaps the main reason why business has declined, explaining that persons are less likely to park and walk to the store and many who have not purchased the geoPark cards won’t park to risk having their wheel clamped.

He opined that a more serious approach needs to be taken by citizens if any action is to be pursued by government.

Naraine related that more businesses are expected to join in solidarity from as early as today, not only along Robb Street, but in other areas that have been affected by the parking meter placements.

He encouraged persons who are not business owners but are supporters of the Movement Against Parking Meters (MAPM) to wear black ribbons to show their support or have them placed in their cars.

Don Singh, an organizer of the MAPM, noted last evening that they were in support of the move taken by the Robb Street businessmen and women, relating that today MAPM will visit businesses in the affected areas to distribute ribbons before their anti-parking meter protest in front of City Hall.