

LESSON ONE

ACTIVITY 1

CITY COUNCIL, FREE MARKET COLLIDE

by Mary Heartman

St. Louis may have gotten its football team from Los Angeles, but it has also inherited many of the same parking problems that L.A. struggled with for years. Indeed, mayors and city councilmen nationwide have experienced the same headaches.

Yesterday, metro councilwoman Delia Watts, asked the Metro Legal Department to draft an ordinance which would 'regulate' fluctuating parking rates in privately owned lots in the central business district, and near the newly built dome football stadium. "I'm not quite sure what should be in this ordinance," stated Mrs. Watts, "I will just ask them to draw it up and handle the legal aspects . . . it may not even be legal, but the city council is going to settle this issue. Too many people, and especially tourists, are being 'gouged' by private parking lot owners. Even locals who work on weekends are being abused!!"

In a phone conversation, the councilwoman elaborated . . .

"If downtown employees are being forced to find parking in privately owned lots, they should at least be charged a fair and consistent rate . . . but what is happening is that their owners are charging one rate for normal times, and then raising their rates when there is a football game or some big event in town. There are no set rates!! One day they charge 75 cents per car, then its 10 dollars per car." She added, "if these rates are controlled, they would be enforced by the Traffic and Parking Commission." Further, Watts stated, "It has cost the city enough in attracting major events and to have lot owners profiteer from such events is not fair!

Leo Banderas, Jr., President of the St. Louis Parking Association was also contacted by phone. Members of this organization, operate over 70 percent of the private lots in and around the central business district. "These people get elected and they get like dictators . . . this is America, and I can't see any kind of law or legislation that could be fair to us and be equitable . . . we are business people who believe in the free market." When asked to explain, Banderas added, "Look, our Parking prices are based on demand . . . our location is key to what prices we can charge . . . we provide a service and it ain't free, we got expenses. If people don't want to pay our prices they can find cheaper ways to get to events . . . we advertise our prices in clear view of the street!"

Banderas did admit that some owners might be charging rates that he felt were a bit high, but added that if it is a free country, "What can I do? The city should have thought about these kinds of problems before they paid millions for this team. During the baseball strike nobody came around to pay my bills . . . and it wasn't just me that suffered then!!"

Other lot owners were contacted and most admitted to being aware of some public complaints, but all vowed to fight any attempt at governmental control of their businesses. One stated that because he owned his lot, he could do anything he wanted to and he didn't need Mrs. Watts permission!!

Thus far no resolution to this problem has been found. When contacted, Robert Stevens, Councilman 4th Ward, reflected council sentiment when he said, "the city government had interests to protect."