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**BILL MCGRAW**

## Parking department director aims to make tickets customer friendly

BY BILL MCGRAW • FREE PRESS COLUMNIST • JUNE 12, 2008

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People lined up in a west-side office Wednesday to pay up in the city of Detroit's weeklong parking-ticket amnesty.

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One floor above, Shawny DeBerry was asked how she feels when she sees a ticket on her windshield.

"Excited," DeBerry responded.

She was not kidding.

For most people, parking tickets are not exciting. They are the paper equivalent of visiting the dentist. They make the blood boil. And they are seemingly ubiquitous.

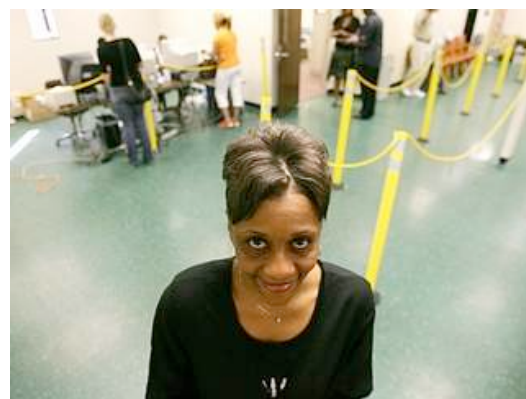
But DeBerry is excited by parking tickets because she is the director of Detroit's Municipal Parking Department, the boss of the blue-uniformed parking enforcement officers who skulk around in those little white cars.

"I'm excited because they're doing their job," she said.

She was laughing when she said that.

DeBerry heads a department that is simultaneously disliked by many people, yet begrudgingly recognized for the Prussian-like efficiency with which it distributes tickets and collects payments. She understands that many people believe parking department employees are sadists who enjoy writing tickets.

It sounds like a tall order, but DeBerry, who is upbeat and outgoing, is seeking to create a new image for the department -- public service,



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"Some people think we're just out to get you," says Shawny DeBerry, director of Detroit's parking department. "No, we're not out to get you." With two outstanding tickets, DeBerry plans to take advantage of the department's amnesty program, too.



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On Wednesday, Tracy Ross, 36, of Detroit visited a parking department office and paid off a \$30 no-standing ticket. But, she said, the officer never put the ticket on her windshield -- and she was sitting in the car. "I didn't know I had one until I got this in the mail," she said. "That's not right."



with a smile.

"Some people think we're just out to get you," she said. "No, we're not out to get you at all. We're actually trying to be more customer friendly, have customer service that makes people feel good about

having to come pay their tickets."

Seriously.

DeBerry points to such innovations as the pay stations on heavily traveled streets that allow motorists to pay for parking with a credit card, department-issued smart card or, amazingly, nickels, dimes and quarters.

For years Detroit meters only accepted quarters. But the department is changing that, too: In addition to the pay stations, it's slowly introducing meters that will take all three coins.

Why?

"Customer service," DeBerry said.

She said she is trying to persuade the city's 48 enforcement officers that they can do their job without being mean.

But politeness is a two-way street. Drivers sometimes spit on officers, swear at them and even slug them. One officer suffered a broken jaw last month.

"It's difficult for me to tell them to have a smile on and be polite when someone is punching you," DeBerry said.

She added: "People get angry about parking tickets, and parking tickets are self-imposed. You don't have to get them."

DeBerry, 40, is a Detroit native who received a degree in finance and an MBA from the University of Detroit Mercy. She is completing work on a PhD. She became deputy director of the department in 2002 and took over the top job in August.

In addition to parking tickets, DeBerry also oversees the city's 10 large parking garages, and she plans to start promoting them as clean, safe and cheap alternatives to private lots -- \$10 at Grand Circus Park for baseball and football games.

On an average day, about 1,500 cars in Detroit receive tickets. Most cost \$20 or \$30, but penalties pile up if they are not paid on time.

Each year, the parking department contributes about \$12 million from ticket payments to the city budget, but there are about 1 million unpaid tickets at the moment, a situation the amnesty -- only Detroit's second one in the 21st Century -- is designed to correct.

People who ignore six Detroit tickets become eligible to have their car immobilized by crews who travel the city, searching for guilty vehicles and booting them. DeBerry said about 4,200 cars get the boot every year, but only after their owners receive up to 30 notices.

Of the thousands of people who owe money for Detroit parking tickets, records indicate the No. 1 scofflaw is Michele Marlo-Klimes, whose current address is in San Diego. She owes \$11,690. She could not be reached for comment.

On Wednesday, a steady stream of people lined up to pay their back tickets in the parking department office at 10th and West Lafayette. Most seemed unhappy, perfect candidates for the parking department's image do-over.



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**AMNESTY PROGRAM**

The amnesty program will continue through Friday.

People with outstanding parking tickets can pay half of the amount owed to clear their parking-ticket history. The amnesty does not include parking tickets that are already included in a payment agreement or tickets issued after May 29.

Drivers will need to provide their driver's license number and/or all license plate numbers for vehicles that have received tickets.

Settle via the telephone at 313-424-1240 or 313-963-9630, or via **the city's Web site** or by visiting the payment center at 10th Street and West Lafayette. Payments can be made with cash, check, MasterCard or Visa.

**DETROIT'S TOP 10 PARKING-TICKET SCOFFLAW**

- **Michele Marlo-Klimes**...San Diego...154...\$11,690
- **Tanja Lashawn Cross**...Southgate...142...\$10,051
- **Thomas Julius Matthews**...Detroit...131...\$9,890
- **Crystal Nicole McLain**...Roseville...137...\$9,636
- **Blair Dell Mahone**...Detroit...110...\$8,690
- **Glenda Marie Murray**...Carson City, Nev....126...\$8,620
- **Jason Riggs**...Sterling Heights...154...\$8,530
- **Cevonia Chirese McClure**...Detroit...137...\$8,520
- **John Christian Robinson\***...Detroit...134...\$8,460
- **Dante Thomas-Garcia Demiro**...Royal Oak...108...\$7,680

**Source: City of Detroit Municipal Parking Department**

**\*Robinson, an attorney, was the only fatality in the Feb. 6 fire that destroyed the Forest Arms apartments near Wayne State University. Arson investigators said the blaze, of uncertain origins, began in his apartment.**

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Like Tracy Ross, a 36-year-old Detroit resident who said she received a \$30 no-standing ticket, but the officer never put the ticket on her windshield -- and she was sitting in the car.

"I didn't know I had one until I got this in the mail," she said. "That's not right."

Bill Frank, a Canadian from Tecumseh, outside Windsor, said he was paying for a \$20 ticket from 2003, but he didn't learn about the ticket until he recently received a notice. The ticket now cost \$70.

"It's a bit of a money grab," Frank said.

DeBerry said officers do not have daily quotas, and they are not ordered to refrain from writing tickets for certain cars, including hers. In fact, she has two outstanding tickets. She said: "I'm getting ready to take advantage of the amnesty."

Contact **BILL MCGRAW** at [bmcgraw@freepress.com](mailto:bmcgraw@freepress.com).

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