



## **SANTA CRUZ COUNTY Civil Grand Jury**

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# **Problematic Parking at the County Building**

## **Free means Free**

### **Summary**

In 2025, the County of Santa Cruz set up a new system for parking at the 701 Ocean Street County Offices and Courthouse. The 2025-26 Santa Cruz Civil Grand Jury analyzed this system—specifically the ParkMobile application—to evaluate its accessibility, data privacy implications, and overall usability for residents visiting County offices.

The Grand Jury asserts a fundamental proposition regarding public access: Parking at the County office buildings, specifically *free* parking, should facilitate the business a resident has with the county in a simple manner. Parking should not create a barrier to conducting that business. Furthermore, the Grand Jury concludes that "free" parking for civic access should not necessitate the surrender of personal digital data or create undue barriers for vulnerable populations.

## Background

In 2025, the County instituted a new parking system – ParkMobile - for visitors to the County Office buildings and the Courthouse located at 701 Ocean Street, Santa Cruz. The County Office building and Courthouse have a variety of parking needs:

- short-term free parking for conducting business at the county offices
- longer-term paid parking
- day-long employee parking and county vehicle short-term parking
- variable period Courthouse parking (jury members, attorneys, witnesses, and court officers)

The Grand Jury investigated the selection and implementation of the new parking system with an eye toward data privacy, accessibility, convenience and types of use.

The new ParkMobile system requires drivers to scan a QR code on a parking lot sign using a smartphone. The app requires the user's email address, license plate number, phone number and credit card information, in order to charge a fee if the 2-hour free limit is exceeded as part of the user registration. A lot attendant enforces time limits on cars with dashboard slips and via license plate scanning.

## Scope

The Grand Jury investigation is limited to the 701 Ocean Street County Office Building and Courthouse. The parking vendor chosen for that area (ParkMobile) is used more widely in Santa Cruz City, but "street parking" in the city was not investigated. The scope of this investigation is the deployment of a digitized parking system on the County premises, which introduces accessibility and privacy concerns.

## Methodology

The Grand Jury investigated the parking system at 701 Ocean Street largely through interviews with county staff, documentation provided by the General Services Department (GSD) staff, and online examination of offerings from other parking vendors. In addition, the Grand Jury reviewed news reports of pending lawsuits about data privacy for Californians.

## Investigation

The parking lot at 701 Ocean Street is used for a wide variety of purposes by different populations in Santa Cruz on a regular basis.

**Employees** of the building park in designated areas of the lot. Employees have come-and-go privileges, and employee parking space is limited and marked.

**Visitors** who have business with the county. Visitors have “free” parking for 1 or 2 hours (signs designate the different areas) to facilitate their business with the county offices of tax assessor, Permitting, Courthouse, Registrar of Voters, etc.

**Attendees of the Courthouse** also use the 701 Ocean Street lot. This need includes officers of the court and court employees, but also non-employees such as defendants, witnesses, litigants, their representatives and family members who may be attending hearings, and summoned jurors.

Trial jurors summoned to the Courthouse have dashboard slips included in their summons, and do not need to use the ParkMobile app. Trial jurors for the Courthouse are instructed to park in the “2 hours free” parking zone, even though they may expect to be at the Courthouse all day. The other attendees at the Courthouse need to use the ParkMobile app or initiate one of the workarounds described below to secure their parking for the day.

The Grand Jury attempted to review the parking from the perspective of these different groups and consider their different needs. It should be noted that Civil Grand Jury members themselves utilized the same parking lot throughout their tenure, and they observed some of the issues firsthand.

## Decision-Making and Implementation

Prior to the ParkMobile system, the county relied on:

- parking slips issued with the jury summons, or
- persons voluntarily going to the General Services Department (GSD) window on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor for a parking pass, or
- “tire chalking” in the 1 and 2 hour lot, with the issuance of citations after the time period.

When asked, GSD could not find a formal requirements document outlining the project's parameters discussing the needs of the community. The Grand Jury was provided with several other documents, but none that discussed pros and cons of alternate parking systems or the needs specific to 701 Ocean Street.

By GSD’s own admission, the implementation of ParkMobile was rushed and incomplete, waiting on additional signage and functionality from the vendor. The contract with ParkMobile was signed on 6/5/2025 and shortly after that date, the initial (English only) signage was installed. Additional signage (including Spanish and workaround instructions) was installed in March 2026 to resolve certain shortcomings.

### ***Part of the confusion***

One significant source of confusion is the lack of clarity between “number of hours free” parking and longer term or all-day parking. The signs read “1 hour free” or “2 hours free”. There is no signage that reads “All day parking” or even “Term parking.” Apparently, drivers are supposed to make the mental leap between paid parking (with some free time built in) versus time-limited parking after which they leave, as the signs suggest.

### **Parking Process with the New System**

1. The ParkMobile system requires a driver to scan a QR code, located on parking lot signs, with their smartphone, which then opens the ParkMobile App. The app asks for the location of the vehicle (area numbers are found on the parking lot signs), asks for the email address of the driver, the license plate, and asks for a credit card number, to charge a fee in case the driver parks longer than the free limit.
2. Drivers can obtain a dashboard slip from the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor to use instead of the app.
3. Trial jurors summoned to the Courthouse have dashboard slips mailed to them, and do not need to use the app or travel to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor.

A lot attendant then walks the lot to monitor parking and checks which cars are “over the time limit” via license plate scan, tire chalk marks, or review of the dashboard slips. The attendant may then issue a ticket. A lot attendant is still required for the enforcement step within the parking lot.

### **Problems noted:**

1. In the initial roll-out of the ParkMobile system, parking fees were un-published and parking limits were unclear. For example, the Grand Jury was told parking fees are not required after 3 p.m. and that parking limits and fees are not enforced on days when the Board of Supervisors meets. However, because these exceptions were not publicized anywhere on the lot’s signage, they were impossible to know unless a visitor was a county insider.
  - a. The 3 p.m. cut-off is codified in GSD’s parking rules, originally only listed on the third floor for administrative review but not available generally. (As of March 2026, this cut-off is now listed on the lot signage.)
  - b. The Board of Supervisors’ meeting exception is not listed at all.
  - c. Consequently, an everyday citizen who is simply trying to handle their civic business or attend a Board of Supervisors’ meeting might unknowingly pay for parking when they do not need to. This lack of transparency turns a routine visit into a confusing and potentially costly experience for members of the public.
2. In March 2026, additional signage was added to the parking lots. There are benefits to the new signs:
  - The new signs elaborate the parking cut-off time of 3 p.m.
  - The new signs clarify the third floor parking pass option.
  - The new signs are translated into Spanish.

However, these signs also fail on several fronts:

- The signs are located away from parking areas and are only viewable after one has parked (and presumably followed the instructions on the first set of signs actually within the parking areas.)
  - Parking is a “point of sale” type of transaction. One reads a sign as they park and follows the directions. Secondary, ‘extra’ directions, badly placed can lead to additional confusion rather than clarification.
  - The signs are located parallel to the *foot* traffic and are not easily viewed when parking. People may pass by without viewing them at all.
  - Due to multiple entrances to County and the Courthouse, people may never actually pass the added signage.
3. Apparently, the ParkMobile system does not factor math to benefit the user. It charges inconsistent amounts depending on the time of day and the amount of time requested. One Grand Juror noted at 10:30 a.m. that they could log in to the ParkMobile system and request an ‘all day’ pass or request 4 ½ hours of parking. Both of these requests allowed the Juror’s car to park legally until 3 p.m., which is supposedly “end of day.” The charges thru ParkMobile were different for these two scenarios even though the actual amount of time was the same: The 4 ½ hour request cost \$8.40. The “all day” request cost \$10.40.

## **Two Larger Concerns with the New System for ‘Free’ Parking**

### ***Concern One: Data Harvesting***

One goal of the County is to provide short-term free parking for residents of the County who have reason to visit the County Building periodically.

ParkMobile is an application utilized in other areas of the city and county, making it a logical candidate for the County lot. However, requiring residents to adopt a commercial platform that collects personal information simply to freely access a public facility imposes an unnecessary privacy burden. In our modern digital age, people of all ages are frequently and rightfully advised to minimize their exposure to such intrusive data gathering.

The Grand Jury explicitly states that it is not accusing ParkMobile of fraud, questionable data sales, or malicious advertising. The Grand Jury’s concern would be the same regardless of private vendor. This concern is rooted in the broader reality of digital security. The public has learned that third-party “convenience” applications are vulnerable targets for data theft, and that collected data is frequently leveraged for targeted advertising. ParkMobile, like many other digital systems, has been hacked in the past.

The Grand Jury noted this warning (see Figure 1) from January 2026.

Warning from the ParkMobile webpage:

1/17/26:

[Be aware of fraudulent text messages impersonating ParkMobile.](#)

Figure 1, text of the top line message on the first page of the ParkMobile website <sup>i</sup>

Another recent local incident underscores exactly why residents are cautious about sharing personal information with civic-adjacent systems. In February 2026, the Santa Cruz Superior Court was forced to post multiple scam alerts warning citizens about fraudulent text messages and phone calls impersonating the court to extort money. The scammers harvested phone numbers from a local, court-oriented system.

**ATTENTION**

Scam Alert: The Superior Court of Santa Cruz has been notified that individuals are receiving a text message from DMV indicating that they owe money for outstanding tickets. If you receive a text of this nature, please contact the court directly at 831-420-2200 to verify. Do not click on any links provided in the text message.

**ATTENTION**

Scam Alert: The Superior Court of Santa Cruz has been notified that an individual posing as a deputy/court security is calling court customers stating that they owe money for failing to appear. If you receive a call of this nature, please contact the court directly at 831-420-2200 to receive accurate information.

Figure 2, text from the Superior Court home page. <sup>ii</sup>

These incidents illustrate the Grand Jury's core concern: when personal data is collected—even for legitimate local purposes—it becomes a potential target for misuse. Therefore, forcing residents to surrender personal data for a nominally "free" parking space exposes them to unnecessary risk.

These risks are not limited to Santa Cruz County. See Appendix A which contains examples of lawsuits and risk incidents that resulted from misuse/unintended use of private data.

## Concern Two: Under-served Populations

Beyond the inherent risks of data harvesting, mandating the use of a third-party digital platform transforms "free" parking into an exclusionary system. When civic access requires specific technology, financial tools, and the surrender of personal information, it ceases to facilitate government business and instead creates significant hurdles. This digital-first approach under-serves several distinct populations within our community:

- **Seniors and the Digitally Disconnected:** Persons who do not own, carry, or use a smartphone. It is estimated that 17% of seniors do not regularly use such a device.<sup>iii</sup>
- **The Unbanked:** Persons who do not have a credit card, representing approximately 19% of the population.<sup>iv</sup>
- **Non-English Speakers:** Persons who do not speak or read English signage. This creates a massive barrier to access, as an estimated 34% of Santa Cruz County speaks Spanish, and 18% of residents are foreign-born.<sup>v</sup>
- **Residents with Data Constraints:** Persons who have a smartphone but do not want to use their privately-purchased data plan in this manner, or who are unclear on how the ParkMobile app uses their data.
- **Privacy-Conscious Citizens:** Persons who simply intend to park for "free" and do not want to provide their email address or credit card number to a third-party vendor. This includes individuals who do not want their physical location tracked to the county Courthouse, as well as those generally concerned about fraud, questionable data sale, or intrusive advertising.

## Current Parking Workarounds at 701 Ocean Street

Returning to the question of parking at 701 Ocean Street: The County offers two workarounds for visitors unable or unwilling to use the ParkMobile smartphone app. Both options present significant barriers:

**Phone-In Workaround (ParkMobile)** Signage in the lot suggests users can call ParkMobile directly from a standard cell phone. However, this option is highly problematic:

- **Currently Inactive:** During this investigation, the phone-in feature was disabled for several weeks. ParkMobile temporarily suspended the service to address fraudulent phishing texts impersonating the company, highlighting the persistent security risks of relying on third-party systems.
- **Continued Data Collection:** Even when active, this method still requires users to surrender personal information to a commercial vendor simply to park for free.

- **Language Concerns:** Because the system was inactive, the Grand Jury could not verify if the phone service accommodates non-English speakers.

**Physical Dashboard Slip (GSD Office)** Visitors can also opt to obtain a physical dashboard parking slip from the General Services Department (GSD). This approach is functionally inadequate:

- **Physically Burdensome:** Retrieving the slip requires parking, traveling to the 3rd-floor GSD office, returning to the car to display the slip, and then finally re-entering the building to conduct business. This can be a severe hurdle for elderly visitors, parents with young children, or those with mobility issues.
- **Time-Consuming:** A Grand Jury test run revealed that this retrieval process consumed 20 minutes of the visitor's allotted "1 hour free" parking limit.

## Parking Enforcement at 701 Ocean Street

The county employs a parking lot attendant whose job it is to monitor the parking in the "free" 1-hour and 2-hour zones. This employee functions similarly now to the way they did in the past. The attendant used to note, via chalk marks on tires or dashboard slips, which cars had overstayed their allowed parking, and issued subsequent citations. Now, the attendant uses an electronic scan of license plates, chalk marks, and/or checking for dashboard parking slips, to note which cars have overstayed their allowed parking. The county is not saving money on lot attendant salaries by utilizing ParkMobile. The Grand Jury feels that the parking attendant can continue their monitoring function in future just as they did in the past, without a great deal of time/effort or training expenditure. Falling back to the chalk-mark method could reduce drivers' exposure to data harvesting and targeted advertising without incurring additional costs at the County level. This fall back would also simplify the parking attendant's job from three screening mechanisms back down to two (chalk marks and dashboard slips).

## Other Methods Available

Other methods for managing parking exist throughout California that could be examined by GSD in an effort to choose a method more accessible to county residents: one that provides convenience but also doesn't make residents vulnerable to data breaches, unwelcomed advertising, and spam. Most of these systems are in wide enough use that drivers who don't speak English can still utilize the systems.

**Pay and Display** - Parking machines, located within the lot, that provide dashboard slips. (This was the system we were told was in use at 701 Ocean Street some time before ParkMobile). A similar system is in place at the Santa Cruz Harbor.

**Gated Parking** - Parking machines with lot gates and/or an attendant are used in a variety of retail and business locations and are well understood by persons who speak various languages. This type of parking system requires the driver to obtain a ticket on entry and charges the driver upon exit (free for the first 2 hours or a fee charged for subsequent hours). This would probably require some capital expenditure to reconfigure the visitor parking area.

**Human Management** - A system manned by a human being has the greatest flexibility. For example, this system accommodates the exceptions of Board of Supervisor's meeting days (when there is no charge for parking). Since the County has determined it needs to keep a part-time lot-walker at any rate, it makes sense to have that person manage the parking, via tire chalk marks, from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

## Cure

According to the ParkMobile contract, the County of Santa Cruz may terminate for any reason with 60 days' notice. ParkMobile generously waived the bulk of the set-up fees for the county parking lot, and thus there are few 'sunk costs' in abandoning this system. The County is therefore free to fall back to their prior system or to research other parking methodologies and to install a different system entirely.

## Conclusion

The 2025-2026 Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury recognizes the complexity of managing the diverse, high-demand parking needs at 701 Ocean Street. However, simply digitizing a flawed system does not equate to modernization or improved public service.

The rushed implementation of the ParkMobile system, executed without a formal requirements document, has resulted in a framework that disproportionately serves able-bodied, financially privileged, and technologically savvy individuals. By requiring smartphones and credit cards, the County has inadvertently erected barriers to basic civic access. Some of this shortfall has been addressed with additional signage nine months later, but issues remain. Furthermore, the alternative workarounds are functionally inadequate: the phone-in option has proven vulnerable to security-related outages, and the physical dashboard slip requires a burdensome detour to the third floor.

Various populations in the county are not well served by this system. Users who are digitally disconnected, unbanked, non-English speaking, or privacy-conscious face a barrier to access of a public government building.

Further, the system introduces unacceptable data privacy risks. Mandating the use of a third-party commercial application to access "free" public parking unnecessarily exposes residents to data harvesting and potential data breaches. The County risks alienating its residents and exposing itself to potential liability by forcing the surrender of personal data for a nominally low-risk civic activity.

The Grand Jury concludes that public access to government facilities should not come at the cost of personal privacy, equipment requirements or physical hardship. "Free" parking must genuinely mean free of interference, user imposition, and data misappropriation. The County of Santa Cruz must immediately reevaluate its parking

methodology, prioritize data security, and implement inclusive, user-friendly alternatives that serve all residents equitably.

## Findings

- F1. Santa Cruz County's June 2025 implementation of the ParkMobile app in its parking lot at 701 Ocean Street did not include adequate signage concerning paid parking hours, options for people without smartphones, language translations, and ADA placard exemptions. This created confusion and frustration for visitors trying to engage in County business.
- F2. Poorly located new signage (in March 2026), has resulted in more confusion, not less.
- F3. People who park for free in the visitor area are directed to engage with a third-party vendor (ParkMobile app) resulting in unnecessary exposure of private data and inconsistent fees.
- F4. Those wishing to bypass the use of the ParkMobile app are penalized with the inconvenience of a trip to the third floor of the County Building. This workaround of ParkMobile is particularly onerous for people with mobility issues or small children.
- F5. ParkMobile has recently experienced a data breach to their system resulting in the unnecessary exposure of private user data to hackers.
- F6. Recent lawsuits naming local governments for lack of security and unintended use of private data have raised issues of governmental obligations and liability with regard to same, resulting in potential exposure of the County of Santa Cruz to lawsuits. (Appendix A).

## Recommendations

- R1. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors instruct the General Services Division to adopt a simpler methodology for all parking at 701 Ocean Street. The new requirements document should take into account the following:
  - A. When a driver parks for 1 or 2 hours, the parking should be free of any data gathering.
  - B. Beyond the free period, an alternative payment method needs to be devised to pay for parking that does not result in storage of personal data (license plate, credit card, email, or phone number) either at the county or a third-party vendor.
  - C. Payment should not require the use of personal technology devices.
  - D. Drivers should not have to enter the buildings in order to secure their parking.
  - E. The rules about parking charges (for example, exemption for Board of Supervisors Meetings) should be posted publicly in the lot.
  - F. Signage in appropriate languages other than English for any population segment above 10% of the total population.

The requirements document should be completed by December 31, 2026 with a new system implemented by July 1, 2027. (F1, F2, F3, F4, F5)

- R2. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors instruct the General Services Division to review contractual arrangements for any parking system, ensuring adequate security of personal information is in place to reduce County exposure to potential lawsuits. GSD to provide a written report back to the Board of Supervisors by December 31, 2027. (F2, F3, F4, F5)

**Required Responses**

<i><b>Respondent</b></i>	<i><b>Findings</b></i>	<i><b>Recommendations</b></i>	<i><b>Respond Within/ Respond By</b></i>
Board Of Supervisors	F1, F2, F3, F4, F5, F6	R1, R2	90 Days

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## Citations:

<sup>i</sup> <https://parkmobile.io/> access date Jan 22, 2026 and 5/17/2026.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.santacruz.courts.ca.gov/> access date Jan 22, 2026.

<sup>iii</sup> Dorman, Aaron; February 6, 2024. [Tech Tools News](https://www.mcknightsseniorliving.com/news/seniors-smartphone-dependency-rising-faster-than-for-younger-age-groups-new-data-shows/) as part of McKnights Senior Living <https://www.mcknightsseniorliving.com/news/seniors-smartphone-dependency-rising-faster-than-for-younger-age-groups-new-data-shows/> access date Jan 22, 2026.

<sup>iv</sup> Caporal, Jack. Motley Fool website, December 2, 2025. <https://www.fool.com/money/research/credit-card-ownership-statistics/#:~:text=Eighteen%20percent%20have%20one%20credit,age%2C%20income%2C%20and%20race> access date Jan 22, 2026.

<sup>v</sup> U.S. Census Data website <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/santacruzcountycalifornia/POP815224#POP815224> access date Jan 22, 2026.

## Appendix A: Data Harvesting Risks

Concerns about data harvesting and vendor security standards are not unfounded. App users are frequently reminded through classes, through their businesses and media contacts, through password resets and internal electronic communication itself NOT to share personal information over online apps. Bad or greedy companies may sell off user data. And even upright, careful companies can be hacked.

### **Vendor Insecurity**

Residents of Santa Cruz merely need to pick up a newspaper<sup>vi</sup> to find various stories about the misuse of user data. Data fraud is everywhere, and customers of all stripes are warned time and again not to share emails, phone numbers, personal data, credit cards, passwords, etc., over WiFi and the internet. When one requests a password reset on virtually any website, the two-factor authentication code sent to one's phone inevitably contains warning language about not sharing the code and reminds the user not to speak to any phone call purporting to be from that agency.

Data may have been originally gathered for useful, sensible reasons. But too often the use of the data is twisted beyond the original purpose. Once a resident provides their personal data, they lose control of its use.

These misuses are not benign. Nor do they fall only on the shoulders of individual users. The cases below involve municipalities whose unintended use of personal data is being questioned.

**In Mountain View, CA**, license plate reader cameras were in use by the police department to solve crimes. In January of 2026, the system was turned off in because the police chief "no longer has confidence in the vendor." Allegedly, the local cameras, designed for local police work, were accessed without appropriate authorization by ATF (Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) in Kentucky and Tennessee, as well as by the Inspector General's office of the U.S. General Services Administration.<sup>vii</sup>

**The State of California** is suing the city of El Cajon over misuse of license plate record use as well. In El Cajon, among other access, the system has been used over 550 times to search on immigration-related matters in 2025 which the California State Attorney General says is a violation of California's Sanctuary State laws. This case has not yet been heard by a judge.<sup>viii</sup>

**In San Jose**, a lawsuit was filed in November of 2025, alleging misuse of license plate data as "warrantless searches".<sup>ix</sup>

**A California appeals court** has found that drivers can sue for license plate harvesting by third party vendors, whether or not the data is shared beyond the purposes of parking.<sup>x</sup> The fine would run up to \$2500 per car/driver/license plate. Will Santa Cruz's own general administration office and Courthouse be next to face a lawsuit for gathering and sharing unnecessary data?

## Data Harvesting: Example in our own back yard

<https://www.ivankuria.com/slugmeter/about>

A UCSC student has developed a parking citation website that shows, in near real time, parking citations issued in the city of Santa Cruz. This effort was a relatively benign class project on data use and organization. The data is sourced from the online AIMS (Automated Issuance Management System) a publicly viewable data source and is fed into mapping software to show where parking citations are occurring. Practicing good data hygiene, this UCSC student has scrubbed personal VIN numbers and license plate details from his Slugmeter map due to privacy concerns, unlike the source public reporting system that apparently allows open access to that information regardless of privacy concerns or actual utility.

This interesting website also has an “about” page that makes 5 excellent suggestions about increased data security from an Information Technology point of view that the County should consider. These suggestions include (1) requiring proof of ownership to look up data and (2) sequestering private data from the public view, such as license plate numbers and VIN numbers. <sup>xi</sup>

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<sup>vi</sup> AARP Bulletin March/April 2026. Edition covers all types of cyber crime exposure. Access Date April 3, 2026

<sup>vii</sup> KTVU Fox2 News February 4, 2026, "Mountain View Turns Off License Plate Readers Because of 'Unauthorized' Federal Use." <https://www.ktvu.com/news/mountain-view-turns-off-license-plate-readers-because-unauthorized-federal-use> access date April 3, 2026.

<sup>viii</sup> KNSD Channel 7 News, San Diego. February 8, 2026 "State taking El Cajon to court over automatic license plate readers". <https://www.nbcsandiego.com/video/videos/state-taking-el-cajon-to-court-over-automatic-license-plate-readers/3975746/> access date April 3, 2026.

<sup>ix</sup> Richman, Josh and King, Carmen. November 18, 2025; Electronic Frontier Foundation website: <https://www.eff.org/press/releases/lawsuit-challenges-san-joses-warrantless-alpr-mass-surveillance> access date April 3, 2026.

<sup>x</sup> Egelko, Bob. San Francisco Chronicle, Feb 5, 2026. <https://www.sfchronicle.com/politics/article/california-parking-alprs-21336721.php> access date April 11, 2026.

<sup>xi</sup> Kuria, Ivan. Slugmeter website <https://www.ivankuria.com/slugmeter/about> access date April 11, 2026.