

PARKING AT SDMG, BALBOA PARK AND THE ZOO

by LuAnn Benton, SDMG President

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Beginning January 5, 2026, a paid parking system will be enforced in and around Balboa Park. It includes Spanish Village and the SDMG building. The rollout has been rushed and communicated poorly to the public. Messaging on the new rules has been a patchwork of information posted on the government website at the URL below.

<https://www.sandiego.gov/parking/balboapark>

The parking policy appears to be evolving in real time only days ahead of launch, with updates posted to the website on a nearly daily basis. Visitors to Balboa Park are encouraged to check the website frequently for new and current information. There appears to be no phone number to call.

At this writing important details are lacking. For example, the start and end times during the day when paid parking is in force have not been posted or what, if any, accommodations are planned for the many volunteers and members of museums and other non-profit organizations such as SDMG in and around the park.

Among the significant changes to access and parking near the SDMG building and Spanish Village, take note of the following:

- Students may not park in the lot behind SDMG.
- The middle parking spots will become loading-only spots for everyone, including students. They will be marked by yellow lines.
- The area behind the SDMG building will be parking by permit only.
- The 12 spaces on the north side of the lot against the fence will be parking by permit only. Spanish Village was given nine of those permitted spaces and SDMG was given three.
- SDMG will make a decision on allocating permits for those three spaces during the forthcoming holiday hiatus (December 26 – January 4). Board members, meeting chairs, and instructors, keep an eye on your email Inbox for further information regarding these parking permits.
- The two handicapped spots will be parking by permit only and excludes handicapped access by the general public. I do not know how this will work yet, so stay tuned.

Don't run afoul of the City Council's new rules. Additional considerations:

1. If you plan to unload your items in one of the loading spaces in the back parking lot, after unloading your gear, drive to a free parking lot and catch a tram. (Check the website at the URL above for updated new tram paths. Scroll to the bottom of the web page for a tram map.)
2. An on-call shuttle will be available for park-based employees and volunteers from 7am to 9am and from 6pm to 11pm. A phone number has yet to be posted on the website.
3. If you are a member of SDMG, you may park for free for three hours at Inspiration Point or pay for parking nearer the SDMG building while visiting.
4. Plan ahead and calculate what's more cost-effective for you -- parking at the Zoo lot for an annual fee or Balboa Park's metered parking system. Parking at the Zoo lot for an annual fee may be more economical if you come to SDMG frequently (several days per week versus once weekly or less often).

Get news & updates – Join SDMG's mailing list:

<https://bit.ly/sdmg-signup>

Annual Zoo Membership with Parking Pass

<https://zoo.sandiegozoo.org/parking>

All zoo memberships have an emblem labeled **San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance**. According to the Zoo's website, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance members receive complimentary parking at the San Diego Zoo but must register their vehicle online.

Not all Zoo memberships are the same. Review and select carefully to avoid parking restrictions on **Blockout Dates**. For example, the least expensive membership for **San Diego Resident** allows you to park at the Zoo weekdays BUT not on weekends or on holidays.

The next best deal is **San Diego Resident Premium**. It's available exclusively to San Diego County residents:

\$134.00/yr. for Adults 18 – 64

\$120.00/yr. for Seniors 65+ (no blockout dates for parking)

Implications of Fee-Based Parking at Balboa Park

As currently conceived and implemented, the fee-based parking system threatens to undermine visitorship and volunteer programs that serve the public.

It penalizes volunteers who donate their time to non-profits in and around the park, including SDMG.

San Diego Mineral and Gem Society is a 501(c)(3) organization. We have served the San Diego community since 1934. Currently, SDMG has approximately 700 dues-paying members. The new paid parking system at Balboa Park may curtail all of our non-profit, volunteer and educational programs, effectively shutting down all of our Society's programs, which are available to the community at low or no cost.

What we do and who we serve, thanks to our volunteers –

- Approx. 35 instructors volunteer their time to teach 26 classes per week.
- Approx. 300 students, including seniors, kids, handicapped, and low-income individuals, carry tools and equipment for their classes from their cars.
- Our classes are priced to support seniors, kids, handicapped, and low income individuals. Prices barely cover our overhead to operate classes.

San Diego Union-Tribune article

Read about the City Council's "chaotic effort" to create a paid parking system at Balboa Park and elsewhere in SD County.

In November 2026, San Diego residents may get the opportunity to register their opinion on fee-based parking in Balboa Park.

However, it must first qualify as a ballot initiative. Stay tuned...

- SDMG hosts at least two educational meetings or presentations per month. They start at 7pm and are open to the public free of charge.
- We operate an educational museum that is open 363 days per year. It is free of charge and attracts thousands of visitors every year, including during our December Nights open house.
- People visit our museum from all over the world. We are a member of SMMP Society of Mineral Museum Professionals.
- SDMG supports two scholarships for San Diego State University students per year from funds raised by special events -- all with volunteers.