



February 6, 2026

## Statement on Balboa Park Paid Parking and Affordable Transportation Concepts

Honorable Mayor Todd Gloria and Members of the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System Board & City Councilmembers,

Recent implementation of paid parking at Balboa Park has revived public debate around access, financial transparency, and freedom of movement. Much of the conversation has focused solely on drivers, to the exclusion of the young, the old, the non-licensed, and the car-free. In doing so, a critical question remains largely unaddressed: **How can the City ensure dignity and freedom of choice for all San Diegans who want to access Balboa Park - regardless of transit method?**

Our coalition represents thousands of local San Diegans who care about the health, safety, and financial wellbeing of those who call this fine city home. We are united behind a simple belief: **paid parking without better choices is just a fee. Paid parking with better choices is a public service.** This moment can either become a culture war about meters - or it can be the start of making Balboa Park reachable for everyone.

Balboa Park is served by a strong foundation of transportation options. Five bus routes, including a high-frequency service, means a bus is passing through or near the park *every few minutes*. Three of the five bus routes are in the top ten for weekly ridership. Dedicated bike infrastructure on **Fifth Avenue, Sixth Avenue, Park Boulevard, and Pershing Drive** provides direct access for cyclists year round. For visitors arriving by rail, the **City College Trolley Station** is a walk made attractive with clear wayfinding and a comfortable pedestrian route. These assets represent an opportunity - not a limitation.

Yet current public messaging and media coverage push residents to be wary, or even fearful, of a public service used by 80 million annually. The narrative has centered almost exclusively on the inconvenience faced by drivers, ignoring the dwindling revenue from gas taxes and record post-pandemic ridership recovery trends. Alternative transport options are mentioned mainly to explain why they're "not good enough," while refusing to acknowledge that San Diego has a farebox recovery rate higher than those of New York City, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. More than 40 percent of current park visitors who drive live in Council District 3 - the area already best connected to Balboa Park by transit, bike, and pedestrian infrastructure<sup>[1]</sup>.

The introduction of paid parking presents a unique opportunity for the City of San Diego and MTS to actively promote and invest in alternatives that advance goals the City has already committed to: **Vision Zero, affordability, and climate action**. Accessing a public park shouldn't require San Diegans to risk their safety, drain their budget, or default to the highest-emissions option because the alternatives feel confusing, slow, or hard to find. What can the City and MTS Board do to ensure public funds are used in pursuit of dignity and freedom of movement for all?

First, the City and MTS should launch a "Go San Diego" campaign, focusing on clear communication and wayfinding to make it easy to choose bus, bike, and walking. Information should be easily accessible - online, on-site, and in the same places people currently go for parking information. If someone can find the parking rules in 30 seconds, they should be able to find the best car-free route in 30 seconds, too.

Second, we urge the City and MTS to commit to practical, long-term improvements that make transit feel like a first choice, not an afterthought - **it should be reliable, frequent, and fast enough to compete**. This means prioritizing speed and reliability upgrades on routes that serve the park. Proven tools such as **targeted bus lanes in delay-prone segments, transit signal priority at key intersections, and faster boarding (including all-door boarding where appropriate)** can reduce travel time and make service dependable for everyday riders and first-time visitors alike.

Balboa Park is regarded as the crown jewel of San Diego. Freedom of choice, or the ability to *choose* one's preferred travel method, would not only reduce congestion and parking demand - it would make the park more accessible, more equitable, safer, and more enjoyable for all.

Respectfully,

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<sup>[1]</sup>City of San Diego Comprehensive Parking Study,  
<https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/2025-03/bpcagenda20250306-item5a.pdf>