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SUNDAY PARKING CHARGES ON WAY

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Motorists now face charges on Sunday in the town's car parks.

From September drivers will have to pay weekday prices between 10am and 4pm instead of enjoying free parking. It will cost £4.60 for six hours at the car park next to Royal Victoria Place shopping centre during the eight month pilot scheme.

Tory chiefs at Tunbridge Wells Borough Council want to generate £142,000 this year through Sunday tariffs and introducing parking attendant patrols. They now consider Sunday a trading day and claim "charging is the norm", despite free parking in Tonbridge, Sevenoaks and Bluewater.

The decision to press ahead with the pilot in the seven car parks has angered traders and the council's own report states RVP and Fenwick bosses have raised concerns about shoppers going elsewhere.

Lib Dem Councillor David Neve warned shoppers, traders, workers, church congregations and Assembly Hall theatre-goers would be hit. "Charging full rates on Sunday is against the spirit of promoting a diverse and thriving local economy, which is one of the council's own corporate priorities. This council aligns itself as a partner with Tonbridge and Sevenoaks, so by charging on Sundays we will be out of line with them. We will drive away our customers to other areas and we will be in danger of clogging up residential streets." He said the council should have introduced a "£1 flat rate" as an experiment.

The council said yesterday Cllr Neve's 'flat rate' proposals would not meet the revenue target but his report would be "further considered". Council portfolio holder for environment and street scene Cllr Paul Barrington-King said the pilot's impact needed to be "carefully monitored".

Many of the 1,200 congregation of St Augustine's Catholic Church use the Crescent Road car park. Father Peter Stodart said: "We would very much prefer they were not charging on Sundays. I hope they take into account the not inconsiderable number of people who use the car park for going to church."

Jon Wright, owner of Classic Lighting in Camden Road and chairman of Camden Road Traders' Association representing 130 mostly independent businesses, said: "Parking in Tunbridge Wells is difficult, it always has been and I think we have to be very competitive with other major shopping centres like Maidstone, Bluewater and Lakeside. I think the council is small minded if it takes this attitude because ultimately revenue from the town will go down which will have the reverse effect."

Cllr Barrington-King added: "Cabinet, in taking this decision, had recognised the importance of this issue to residents, businesses and visitors and has sought only for a pilot study at this stage." When asked if widespread public objection could see the council think again, he said: "Any representations received will be carefully considered at a future meeting of the cabinet."

In response to Cllr Neve's claims that Sunday charging went against the council's priority for a thriving economy, Cllr Barrington-King said: "The proposals support a number of the council's priorities; care for our environment, promoting and maintaining a thriving and diverse local economy and ensuring that we are well managed, proactive and deliver value for money services."

The cabinet also voted to increase hourly charges by 10p in all council car parks, with the exception of Torrington.

A 21 day public consultation on Sunday charging will begin in the coming weeks.