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Placard Problems in Lamorinda?

By Cathy Tyson

Spurred by the news of flagrant abuse of disabled person parking placards in San Francisco, and the three arrests that were recently made, Lamorinda Weekly set out to see if there was a placard parking problem in our little corner of suburbia.

Suspects were arrested in connection with disabled person placard fraud in San Francisco July 12. A recent study found that over 40 percent of parking spaces in downtown San Francisco were being used by people with disabled person placards. San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency spokesman Paul Rose estimates that the city is losing more than \$20 million per year from unpaid parking due to disabled placards.

Department of Motor Vehicles director Jean Shiomoto said in a press release that, "The DMV is stepping up Disabled Placard enforcement in a different, more aggressive way by catching the perpetrators at the beginning stages. Operation Blue Zone has been very successful in catching fraudulent placard applications in the Bay Area."

Police chiefs from all three Lamorinda communities report that there hasn't been a problem with disabled parking in Lafayette, Moraga and Orinda. Chief Mark Nagel of Orinda hasn't heard of a single issue in Orinda since he started in February of this year. "In Lafayette, I am unaware of any significant issues related to the use of fraudulently obtained placards," said Chief Eric Christensen. "We have not had any complaints about parking spaces being unavailable to handicapped persons." And in Moraga, Chief Robert Priebe reports that he's not aware of any issues. "We find unauthorized use cases infrequently," said Priebe.

The DMV's most recent data from 2013 breaks down the number of placards issued by zip code. Moraga's 94556 zip code has a total of 1,084 permanent placards issued along with 74 temporary ones. Orinda's 94563 has 1,323 permanent and 81 temporary. Lafayette's 94549 has 1,821 permanent and 118 temporary. In addition, placards can be issued to organizations that transport handicapped people. All of our cities had eight or fewer of this type.

Comparing our local numbers to the statewide ratio shows that Lamorinda is very close to average. California has a population of roughly 38 million people and has 2.6 million placards issued in 2013, according to the DMV. That works out to 6.8 percent of the population.

Our three towns are in the ballpark, with 6.5 percent of Moraga's population having a placard, 7.2 percent in Orinda and 7.4 percent in Lafayette. The average age of Lamorindans is slightly older than the state average.

DMV spokesperson Artemio Armenta is quick to point out that placards can be issued to children with disabilities as well as adults and seniors. He said that tickets for misuse can run from \$300 to \$1,000 depending on the jurisdiction.

Required qualifications for a placard include having impaired mobility or a diagnosed disease that substantially impairs or interferes with mobility or being severely disabled, certain visual problems count as well. A licensed physician or similar professional who has knowledge of the disease and/or disability must sign a doctor's certification.

Disabled veterans with a 100 percent disability rating may be eligible for disabled veterans license plates, which exempt the veteran from payment of car registration and license fees.

Temporary disabled parking placards are valid for six months and can't be renewed more than six consecutive times. Thinking of using grandma's parking placard to get a choice parking spot for a Giant's game? Think twice, because enforcement professionals are out there and can confiscate the placard and write an expensive ticket.

Reach the reporter at: cathy@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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