

Inspired Life

Got a parking ticket? In some cities, you can pay for it with school supplies or cat food.

By [Marisa Iati](#)

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There were too many kittens in the animal shelter, just as there had been last year and the year before that. Like other shelters that swell to capacity during cats' annual breeding season, Muncie Animal Shelter in Indiana was struggling this summer to meet the need.

"One day I was standing by the counter and somebody brought in six kittens," said Officer Chase Winkle, a spokesman for the Muncie Police Department. "And before they could get those checked in, somebody came in with another four."

To ease the pressure, police created a trade-off: For five days in July, people could pay for their parking tickets by [donating to the shelter](#) the equivalent value of cat food or litter. Residents who brought their donations to the police chief's office with a receipt proving the value got their tickets wiped away. A police officer's daughter works at the shelter and had made the department aware of the organization's need.

Muncie is among cities across the country that are opting temporarily to accept charitable donations in lieu of monetary payments for parking infractions. From [Anchorage](#), to [Woodstock, Va.](#), municipalities are writing off tickets in exchange for school supplies or cat litter — a way to fill a community need while lessening the sting of getting a ticket. Some cities offer a discount to people who pay with a donation, while choosing the donation option in other municipalities simply allows the payer to feel good.

In Muncie, about a dozen people made donations to pay for roughly \$600 in parking tickets, Winkle said. Only offenses that didn't pose a safety hazard counted: Donations couldn't resolve a moving violation or a ticket for parking in a handicap spot. Most tickets that people paid with donations were worth about \$25 each and had been issued for parking too long in a certain zone, Winkle said.

The initiative generated buzz beyond people who used the program to pay for their tickets, Winkle said, and it inspired residents without parking infractions to donate. If someone couldn't get to the police

department or the shelter, the department sent a uniformed car to pick up their contribution. People across the country sent supplies, Winkle said, and other cities called Muncie police to ask how they had run their program.

The city's animal shelter has recently been housing about 350 cats and kittens, which causes them to use 50 bags of litter in a week, said Ashley Honeycutt, the shelter's office manager. Female cats and their litters are still coming through the doors, although the shelter usually starts to get fewer kittens by June. Donations from the parking ticket program alleviated some of the burden, Honeycutt said.

"Your resources really just dwindle pretty quickly. ... It was a strain off of our back to not have to worry about it," she said.

Pencils and Post-it Notes are now parking-ticket currency in Las Vegas, where drivers can donate [new, unwrapped school supplies](#) that will go to a nonprofit group associated with the city's education foundation. Drivers have to bring their receipts and make the donations within 30 days of receiving their citations, dated June 19 through July 19.

Although a small percentage of people who got parking tickets in that time frame have chosen to donate, Las Vegas so far has collected \$1,707 in school supplies, city spokesman Jace Radke said.

"Nobody likes to get a parking ticket," Radke said. "But if you can pay it forward and give a donation of school supplies that will help somebody, it kind of makes it less bad."

Like in Muncie, the option to pay a Las Vegas ticket with a donation applies to only citations that do not involve safety threats. A donation can resolve a meter violation, for example, but not a ticket for parking in a fire lane. Public safety violations are more serious than other parking tickets, Radke said, and come with higher fines and the possibility of court proceedings.

People in Las Vegas still have a few days to pay for tickets they received in mid-July, but Radke said so far about 50 people have participated in the donation exchange. One man who had \$100 in tickets brought \$100 in erasers, Radke said.

Las Vegas has been [periodically accepting](#) in-kind donations as payment for parking tickets since 2016, when the city council authorized the occasional programs. The city usually runs one donation initiative each year, Radke said, because the programs cost the municipal government the fines they would otherwise receive.

Two hundred pencils or 100 pens currently will make up for a \$20 parking ticket in Anchorage. The cost of those supplies totals about \$10 and Anchorage subsidizes the remaining \$10 of each ticket, said Demetric Tuggle, the parking director at the city-operated EasyPark Alaska.

As Alaska's government faces [significant budget cuts](#), including to education, Tuggle said EasyPark wanted to make up for lost resources. About 25 people so far have donated supplies to fill four bins, she said.

Greensboro, N.C., typically writes about \$85,000 worth of citations in August and expects to lose an unknown portion of that revenue when some people use school supplies to resolve their tickets this month, said Stephen Carter, the business and parking manager for the city's transportation department. That loss of funds is worth it, Carter said, to pay some of the classroom costs that typically come out of teachers' pockets.

Inspired by Las Vegas's program, [Olathe, Kan.](#), is running an initiative in which school supplies worth half the cost of a parking ticket will wipe away the citation. The colored pencils, glue sticks and other supplies collected through Aug. 16 in exchange for tickets worth up to \$100 per person will go to the city's public schools foundation, city spokeswoman Erin Vader said.

"It's reached people that don't even have a parking ticket to pay," Vader said. "They just want to do good."

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