

City takes first step to sweep panhandlers away from arena

By JACQUELYN WEINER

Panhandling near the AmericanAirlines Arena would be banned if Miami commissioners extend a downtown-panhandling ban down Biscayne Boulevard.

Commissioners initially approved the extension last week 4-0, with Francis Suarez absent.

A ban would push the no-panhandling district north to Northeast 12th Street east of Miami Avenue. This would include Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus and the area west of the AmericanAirlines Arena.

The original downtown panhandling ordinance, approved in 2008, makes panhandling — asking for money or food — illegal in much of the downtown core and near Mary Brickell Village.

First-time violators get a warning. After that, it's a misdemeanor, resulting in fines or jail time.

Commissioners must OK the change again to make it law.

Discussing the existing panhandling ordinance at last week's meeting, Jay Solowsky, Miami Downtown Development Authority outside counsel, said the measure has "proven to be a very successful, very viable tool for law enforcement. And it has certainly diminished the problems in those areas."

Since then, Mr. Solowsky said, thousands more residents have moved into the area.

And more people are coming downtown, he said, drawn by events at the Arsht Center and AmericanAirlines Arena.

But along the way, some are finding themselves accosted by aggressive panhandling.

Problematic examples include cornering game-goers near the crowded arena or camping out at the entrance to I-395, hindering traffic.

To combat this, the authority is hoping commissioners



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will OK expanding the No handling boundaries.

Several who spoke in favor of curbing aggressive panhandling included area business owners and Miami Dade College students, who said they're being harassed on campus.



'What I heard today was from many people — including students, our future — about the aggressiveness. That they're scared going to class. And that's unacceptable.'

Frank Carollo

'We understand that we are an urban campus, but at the same time I hate to see my students uncomfortable as they're walking from class to class.'

Mercy Quiroga

"Students complain they're being asked for food and money while walking between classes," said Mercy Quiroga, president of Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus.

"We understand that we are an urban campus, but at the same time I hate to see my students uncomfortable as they're walking from class to class."

Downtown business owner and Downtown Development Authority board member Jose Goyanes said the aggressive panhandling puts his stores and restaurants at a disadvantage, as customers have to "go through the gauntlet."

Josie Legido Correa, longtime executive director of the Downtown Miami Partnership, said "the situation is getting completely out of control."

"It's getting more and more aggressive."

Some complained of being approached in groups or being asked repeatedly for money after saying "no."

While the majority of those who spoke favored expansion of the no-panhandling zone, homeless advocates asked commissioners not to discriminate against the homeless.

Mayor Tomás Regalado made it a point to differentiate the homeless from those targeted by the ordinance, saying the two had nothing to do with each other.

"Panhandling is not about being homeless," he said.

Mr. Regalado said he'd had problem panhandlers in his



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Marc Sarnoff

district who resided in an adult living facility when he was a city commissioner. They had a home, medical care and meals but used the income for

extra spending money.

Commissioner Frank Carollo said he worried about spillover of panhandlers into his district but supported the measure to protect residents.

It sounds like "it isn't someone that is poor or that is needy that is reaching out their hands for help," he said. "What I heard today was from many people — including students, our future — Commissioner Richard P. Dunn II lent his support after confirming violators wouldn't be punished with a felony."

Commission Chairman Marc Sarnoff said it's "absolutely government's role" to protect residents and businesses from being molested by panhandlers, using outdoor cafes in sunny Miami as an example.

"Nobody wants to be outside and be asked for money from anyone."