Denton council bans panhandling

By Cliff Despres
Staff Writer

Asking for money in public places or roadways is now a crime in Denton.

The City Council on Tuesday unanimously approved a citywide ban on panhandling that makes it a Class C misdemeanor, but council members say the ordinance does not aim to criminalize the homeless.

"There's a difference between people in need and predators. I'm hoping this ordinance gives police a tool to go after predators and not people in need," said council member Raymond Redmon. "I'm not in favor of kicking somebody when they're down."

The ordinance prohibits people who orally or in writing ask for money, rides, jobs or gifts in any public place. It also bans asking people in cars for money or food and repeatedly soliciting a person after that person has refused.

Police will start enforcing the ban on Aug. 4, said Capt. Joanie Housewright.

Officers could issue citations, verbal warnings or written warnings when they catch pan handlers, and a conviction for a violation could bring a fine of up to $500.

Denton police, who will soon undergo training to learn the ordinance, will respond to complaints or address situations while they are on patrol and enforce the ban just as they would noise complaints or a traffic tickets, Housewright said.

See PANHANDLING on 9A

PANHANDLING ORDINANCE

The Denton City Council approved a new ordinance to ban panhandling in the city. Its regulations include:
- Expanding the definition of soliciting to include people who, orally or in writing, ask for a ride, employment, goods, services, financial aid, monetary gifts or any article representing monetary value, for any purpose in any public place.
- Banning pan handlers from soliciting people who are drivers or passengers in a motor vehicle on any public street.
- Banning pan handlers from repeatedly soliciting a person who "informs the solicitor that he does not wish to make a purchase from that solicitor."
- It does not prevent:
- People asking for jobs at the day laborer site on Carroll Boulevard.
- Charitable organizations from soliciting on public roadways, as long as they have a permit. Such agencies are not required to pay for the permit.
- The Denton Fire Department's annual Fill the Boot campaign, in which firefighters stand on street corners and try to raise money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. An ordinance is already in place that allows this.

SOURCES: City of Denton and Denton police Capt. Joanie Housewright
Panhandling

"Our intent is not to put people in jail. Our intent is to eliminate the behavior that's been disruptive in certain parts of the city," Housewright said.

The number of panhandlers in Denton increased sharply recently, police say, as bans in other North Texas cities have pushed panhandlers to other areas.

At peak eating or shopping times, panhandlers ask people for handouts at major intersections, the Fry Street area near the University of North Texas campus, and the downtown Square—an eclectic mix of restaurants, dessert havens, antique shops, loft apartments, bars and nightclubs.

"Some of these incidents escalate to the point of near violence. Some are so aggressive that it gets to the point of touching or grabbing an arm," said Robb Bertelsen, co-owner of The Candy Store on the Square and president of the Main Street Association.

Ken Willis, owner of Ruby's Diner on the Square, said aggressive panhandlers are driving away customers from downtown.

"As far as predators go, we need to have something to fight them," Willis said.

Some say the ban criminalizes homeless people who have to beg for money or food to survive. Others say they are worried that the ban may relegate homeless people to the outskirts of town, away from social service agencies that could help them.

Denton is home to several such agencies and churches dedicated to helping the homeless.

"We need to get the word out that there are meals out there. No one needs to be hungry in Denton," said George Gibson of the Our Daily Bread Soup Kitchen in Denton.

Annette Pemberton, a volunteer at the soup kitchen, agreed.

"They [people] want to give them [panhandlers] a handout. We want to give them a hand up."

— Annette Pemberton, Our Daily Bread Soup Kitchen volunteer

Mayor Euline Brock agreed, saying the ban seeks to battle such "professionals."

"At North Texas Boulevard [and Interstate 35E] there's a group of people who are professional beggars who aren't homeless and they work that corner," Brock said. "A lot of students are compassionate, and I commend them for that, but they are enablers."

The council on Tuesday added a mechanism to the ban to evaluate it in six months.

Until then, City Council member Jack Thomson said he hopes police officers will have sympathy when enforcing the panhandling ban.

"This is something that an officer could have in his hip pocket if he's warned a person a time or two already," he said. "I hope there would be compassion."

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