

Downtown Area Citizen Advisory Council Comments to the DDA—October 6, 2010

The Downtown Area CAC is very pleased that-- through the initiative of Council Member Sabra Briere--the City Council has unanimously passed a resolution to appoint 12 members to a Downtown Street Outreach Task Force. The Task Force has six months "to address the larger issue of unmet outreach and service needs in the downtown area and ways of enforcing the existing panhandling ordinance." They will be building on the knowledge and improvements developed as a result of three years work of an earlier task force appointed in May, 2003 that recommended neighborhood patrols in the downtown business districts, encouraged increased outreach by social service agencies and got City Council to approve an ordinance placing limits on solicitation for money. (J. Lowenstein)

The goal is to identify the problem, perhaps its causes, and to suggest potential solutions that may involve the community, the service sectors and safety services. The Task Force has not met yet, but its appointment has already encouraged discussion on various levels that will help to develop workable solutions to what many perceive as a problem. At a recent meeting of the Downtown Marketing Task Force, as well as at last night's CAC meeting useful information as well as directions for action have already been suggested.

We want to identify the problem and provide solutions—not start out with the idea that we have a problem and the only solution is to have more downtown beat cops. Perhaps problems can be identified and handled by better response systems and periodic, but regular targeted police action in problem areas.

We need to re-examine limits on panhandling. Has the State law changed so that some Michigan cities have now banned panhandling entirely? UM bans soliciting on campus. How does this impact our downtown?

Does anyone have to go hungry in Ann Arbor? One of our CAC members who works in the food program at the shelter insists that our current food programs can provide breakfast, lunch, and an evening meal to anyone who needs it.—If anyone falsely solicits money-- claiming hunger--we may be able to handle that through information programs. Can we improve community awareness of where food is available?

We know that most panhandlers are not hungry but are often seeking money for alcohol, drugs, etc. Can we ban laying or sitting on the sidewalk? Can we work with downtown businesses to get panhandlers out of unattended tables? What outreach is possible?

What can we do with a public campaign that makes everyone, including offenders, more aware of the problem? What are the ways of changing behavior? Don't give money. Circulate information. Make that a part of the duty of downtown parking ticket givers?

There are solutions. The sky is not falling. But we are going to be proactive and avoid the situation getting any worse.