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'Homeless meters' to compete with panhandlers in downtown Orlando

By Mark Schlueb, Orlando Sentinel

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Panhandlers in downtown Orlando may soon have some mechanical competition for spare change.

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City Hall is set to roll out a plan to install "homeless meters" near spots where panhandling is grudgingly allowed. People could deposit their coins in the repurposed parking meters — painted a different color and set back from the street — instead of giving spare change to panhandlers. The city would collect the money and give it to a nonprofit group to help the homeless.

Thomas Chatmon, director of the city's Downtown Development Board, said some people are reluctant to give to panhandlers.

"This gives them an option," Chatmon said. "It is a very easy way to donate to the cause of eradicating homelessness. They can give to a good cause, and they don't feel threatened."

Mayor Buddy Dyer got the idea after visiting Indianapolis, which has curbside donation boxes. In recent years, brightly colored parking meters have gone up to discourage panhandling in a growing number of cities, including San Francisco, Atlanta, Cleveland, Baltimore, Denver and Las Vegas.

Orlando for years has had a tense relationship with the homeless — and panhandlers in particular.

Courts have held that panhandling can't be banned outright. But in 2000, Orlando passed an ordinance that allows downtown begging only in "panhandling zones" — small blue boxes painted on the sidewalk. In 2007, the city tightened the rules further, banning panhandling after dark. In the coming weeks, the city plans to reduce the number of blue boxes from 36 to 27.

Last year, the city's efforts to restrict feeding the homeless in public parks earned it third place on a list of "meanest cities" issued by national homeless advocacy groups.

But Orlando officials insist the new meters aren't meant to discourage people from giving to panhandlers. Rather, they say, they're simply an alternative.

Still, the meters will be placed close to the blue boxes where panhandlers are allowed. The list of locations isn't final, but they'll go in areas with the heaviest foot traffic, such as Orange Avenue, Church Street, Thornton Park and around the new Amway Center arena. These are areas that also attract the most panhandlers.

Keith, a homeless panhandler who asked that his last name not be used, said many people beg for change because area shelters charge as much as \$8 a night.

"You've got to ask for it, but it's against the law to ask for help," he said.

If approved by the City Council, the city will spend about \$10,000 for 20 used parking meters. Fifteen will be installed, and five will serve as spares. Parking enforcement officers would collect the money from the meters on their regular routes.

Dyer said he expects to reach an agreement that would donate the money to the Central Florida Commission on Homelessness, a nonprofit group partially funded by the city that has a mission of ending homelessness within 10 years.

"The proceeds from the donation meters will go to direct outreach to the homeless on the streets downtown," said Ray Larsen, the commission's executive director.

Still, there's deep-seated mistrust of the city among some grassroots homeless advocacy groups — and skepticism about its motives.

"It sounds like just another tactic they're using to eliminate people at that socioeconomic level completely from the city," said Eric Montanez, an activist who was arrested and later acquitted for violating the city's restrictions on feeding the homeless.

PJ Charles, executive director of another group that feeds the homeless called Straight Street Orlando, said the program may cost more than it brings in.

"It's just another effort to seem like they're making an effort," he said.

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