

The Miami Herald

Posted on Mon, Nov. 22, 2010

Miami's vibrant downtown

As downtown Miami's condos continue to fill with young professionals, families and empty-nesters and as restaurants and shops remain open later to attract those new residents, safety remains paramount.

That's why the Miami City Commission's push to expand the downtown area's no-panhandling zone makes sense. As Commission Chairman Marc Sarnoff astutely noted during last week's meeting: "If you want to build Miami, it starts at the very core of Miami."

No one wants to waste public resources on arresting homeless men or women for simply begging. At the same time, few people are willing to stroll down Biscayne Boulevard or its side streets at night if they are going to be harassed by panhandlers.

And we do mean harassed.

Drivers stopped at traffic lights downtown to get on to the entrance ramps of I-95 or the Dolphin Expressway can attest to situations where panhandlers stand ominously beside the vehicle's door, pound on the windshield and yell at drivers to cough up money. That's not the kind of experience any great city should allow to happen.

The new expanded zone, which covers only 2 percent of the city, prohibits panhandlers from asking for money around the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts and in blocks north and west of AmericanAirlines Arena. These are areas where people walk to entertainment venues or classes at Miami Dade College or park their cars to attend Heat games.

The city's Downtown Development Authority makes a good case that fines and the threat of jail for begging in the existing no-panhandling areas along Biscayne Boulevard and Flagler Street have helped restore a sense of safety and brought customers. That's crucial because the downtown area accounts for almost one-third of Miami's tax base.

A ban on panhandling in designated areas can be a crime-fighting tool, but it shouldn't be used bluntly either.

Police and activists helping the homeless must continue to work together to find creative ways to steer jobless people and those with substance-abuse problems to programs that can help them. Putting them in jail for even a day is not the solution. It's a wasteful revolving door.

One change should draw the homeless to more services away from downtown. Camillus House has plans to move out of its old downtown headquarters. The new three-acre, 340-bed facility near Jackson Memorial Hospital will offer drug rehabilitation and job training.

The point of the expanded zone should not be to drive the homeless to other parts of the city or county. The focus must continue to be on all stakeholders -- residents, businesses, homeless shelters, police and civic leaders -- working together to help people overcome tough times while ensuring safety for downtown residents, workers and visitors.

© 2010 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>