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No-panhandling zone widens to keep beggars away

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Miami commissioners nearly doubled the size of the city's no-panhandling zone Thursday, aiming to keep beggars away from Miami Heat games and arts performances that lure tourists and visitors to the heart of downtown.

The expansion, approved unanimously, will prohibit panhandlers from asking for cash around the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts and in blocks north and west of American Airlines Arena, near the lots where people who attend basketball games park their cars.

"This is the very beginning of taking back the streets of Miami," said Commission Chairman Marc Sarnoff, whose district includes downtown. "If you want to build Miami, it starts at the very core of Miami."

The city's Downtown Development Authority, which pushed for the creation of the no-panhandling zone, asked for the expansion. The agency argued that penalizing beggars with fines and the threat of jail time has helped businesses flourish and is necessary to keep people coming to events at downtown venues.

Critics of the zone, including the American Civil Liberties Union of Greater Miami, countered that it is unnecessary because Miami already bans aggressive panhandling citywide. And turning panhandlers -- who are often homeless -- into criminals gives them a record and makes solving long-term poverty and homelessness more difficult.

In the Broward city of Oakland Park, the City Commission has backed off a controversial plan to jail panhandlers, and the Good Samaritans who help them, after threats of lawsuits and a firestorm of outrage

Oakland Park would have been the first city in Broward County to make it illegal to give a beggar money or any "article of value," or buy flowers or a newspaper, on an Oakland Park street. The violator would have faced a fine or up to 90 days in jail.

"Criminalization of those who are homeless and on the streets only creates more obstacles for employment, for housing," said Rita Clark, policy director for the Miami Coalition for the Homeless.

But supporters of the downtown Miami zone, including a contingent of students from Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus and numerous business owners, far outnumbered opponents at a packed City Hall.

"My customers -- whether they come from South Miami, Brickell, Coconut Grove or Coral Gables -- they don't need to be subjected to a gauntlet before they step into my restaurant," said Jose Goyanes, a longtime Downtown Development Authority board member. "Give us our competitive advantage again in this community."

The original zone, which comprised 6.69 miles, or about 1 percent of the city's total area, included portions of downtown's main thoroughfares, Flagler Street and Biscayne Boulevard.

The revised zone, which now stretches for 13.14 miles, or about 2 percent of the city's total area, adds

blocks north and west, including two blocks of North Bayshore Drive by the Arsht Center, five blocks of North Miami Avenue and portions of Northwest First and Second avenues.

The four commissioners on the dais -- Commissioner Francis Suarez was absent at the time of the vote -- portrayed the expansion as vital for the area that accounts for about 30 percent of Miami's tax base.

``Something has to be done to protect the citizens," Commissioner Richard P. Dunn II said. ``There is a difference between homelessness and hustle."

And commissioners said, in the future, they would consider further broadening the zone.

``They're going to be moving to another area," Commissioner Wifredo ``Willy" Gort said of panhandlers. ``The whole Miami-Dade County's got to share this responsibility."

This report was supplemented with material from the Sun Sentinel.

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