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City considers panhandling law

Bruce Matthews talks about his life experiences and his effort to turn things around for himself Thursday at the Acadiana Outreach Center.

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Loss of revenue concerns local business owners

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Panhandlers in Lafayette soon could be in the crosshairs of law enforcement if a new ordinance against soliciting for money is passed by the

Inside today

Lafayette isn't the first city to try to outlaw panhandling. See what steps other cities have taken. **Page 8A**

City-Parish Council.

The ordinance comes on the heels of complaints from some business owners and employees who work in the Jefferson Street area, who are concerned about panhandling in down-

TALK BACK

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town Lafayette and how it could affect business and possibly drive away patrons.

"I think there is a panhandling problem here," said Judy

See **PANHANDLING** on Page 8A

Continued from Page 1A

Panhandling

Gros, a receptionist at a law firm on Jefferson Street. "All I see are those guys who walk down the street and ask people for money."

The anti-panhandling ordinance proposed by the Lafayette Police Department to the council, would effectively outlaw panhandling across the city.

The ordinance, known as 120-2007, was introduced to the council last week, and the council is expected to vote on the ordinance Tuesday.

Lafayette Police Chief Jim Craft said the ordinance targets panhandling across the city of Lafayette — but admits that a high percentage of soliciting for money does occur in the area of downtown Lafayette.



Craft

"Lafayette is a very charitable city and very giving, and some people take advantage of that," said Lafayette Police Chief Jim Craft. "A lot of panhandling is happening in Lafayette, but mostly in the downtown area is where it's happening. We'll be able to use this ordinance to address complaints regarding panhandling downtown."

The problem

Several people working downtown tell similar stories about panhandling and how it affects their businesses.

Many say panhandlers situated in downtown Lafayette down keep their practice to the streets, but instead, will enter into a business and solicit patrons and employees for money.

"They hassle the customers," said Joshua Fazio, an employee of Mello Joy coffee shop on Jefferson Street. "Panhandlers come in twice a week and, yeah, it's a problem sometimes. When they come in panhandling, it makes customers feel uncomfortable. People start to leave because these guys ask for money."

Catherine Webre, executive director of Lafayette's Downtown Development Authority, said while she has received some complaints from local businesses in downtown

Lafayette regarding panhandlers, she contends the area is safe for customers and business owners.

"They have complained about it. Businesses around here have noticed an upswing in panhandling," Webre said. "It's on the rise, yes, but I don't think it will keep people away from what downtown Lafayette has to offer."

Craft said some panhandlers have even gone as far as nearly assaulting some citizens in downtown Lafayette.

"We've received numerous reports from people who have said panhandlers insisted to get money started grabbing people and asking for money," Craft said. "It borders on basic robbery."



Webre

A bigger problem

According to Craft, some of those who panhandle may be begging for money to use for more dubious purposes, and not for food, shelter or other means as some panhandlers say.

He said drug use and alcohol consumption are the primary reasons for most panhandlers to beg for money.

"When they beg for money, they're probably using the money to buy drugs and alcohol," Craft said. "So when you think you're going to give them money to help them, you're actually enabling their addiction."

Valerie Keller, executive chief officer for Acadiana Outreach Center, said most times panhandlers use the money they solicit to purchase drugs and alcohol.

"This is a bigger issue than just homeless people," Keller said. "This is about panhandling. If you really want to address the problem, you have to address the root cause, and in most cases, it could be drugs or alcohol. They're using the money to get drugs and they're lying to get the money."

Bruce Matthews agreed. Matthews was homeless and, at one point, he was a panhandler, soliciting people for money on the streets.

Matthews, 47, a native of Baton Rouge, slept in boxes and ate from trash cans years ago to sustain himself and admits he panhandled to get money for drugs and alcohol.

"It became a way a life for

How other cities have confronted panhandling

In recent years, other U.S. cities have passed similar ordinances to ban panhandling:

■ **Indianapolis** made panhandling a misdemeanor

■ The Port Authority of **New York and New Jersey** banned panhandling in subway stations and bus terminals.

■ Mayor Maynard Jackson of **Atlanta** proposed a policy of licensing panhandlers, but it was not adopted.

■ In 2004, **Orlando, Fla.**, passed ordinance 43.86, requiring panhandlers to obtain a permit from the municipal police department.

■ In **Orlando**, it is also a crime to panhandle in the commercial core of downtown Orlando, as well as within 50 feet of any

bank or automated teller machine. It is also a crime in Orlando for panhandlers to make false or untrue statements, or to disguise themselves.

■ In **Chicago**, peddling/panhandling has been banned, and there are signs throughout the city reminding people of the ordinance.

In other countries:

■ In **Canada**, the province of Ontario introduced the Safe Streets Act in 1999 to restrict panhandling and other specific types of begging.

■ **British Columbia** enacted its own Safe Streets Act in 2004, which resembles the Ontario law; both regulate aggressive panhandling.

me. Every day, sleeping in cardboard boxes and eating out of garbage cans behind McDonald's. Asking people for money — it was how I lived," Matthews said, who is now in recovery at the Acadiana Outreach Center.

Matthews confirmed that a majority of those who panhandle are suffering from either some type of illness or a drug problem — and lying to get money is just another part of the illness.

Cherlyn Hebert, co-owner of the Old Vogue Costume Shop on Jefferson Street, said that in the parking lot next to Marley's Bar in the 400 block of Jefferson Street, panhandlers will tell customers who park there that they have to pay to park.

"Every once in a while, they'll say you have to give them so much money to park," Hebert said. "Some of our customers get scared because these guys insist on getting money. And it is scary, because you don't know what they'll do next."

Keeping Downtown safe

The ordinance to make panhandling illegal is already drawing support from local occupants of businesses in downtown Lafayette, who say they think the measure will put an end to panhandling, and keep the downtown area safe.

Among those in support of the ordinance also are the Downtown Development Authority and the Acadiana Outreach Center.

"The police feel they need an appropriate legal means to

address this problem," Webre said. "We will probably be supporting the ordinance."

City Parish Councilman Chris Williams, who represents the downtown area of Lafayette, said he will support the ordinance, because he has heard concerns from his constituency that there is a panhandling problem.



Williams

"I will support any ordinance where we can balance an individual's right to exist but stops someone from harassing and reducing the quality of life in downtown Lafayette.

While Matthews, a former panhandler now participating in the rehabilitative Job Opportunity and Training Center at Acadiana Outreach, said that a ban on panhandling would be good — but that may not single-handedly stop panhandling from occurring in downtown Lafayette or across the city limits.

"Panhandling would be hard to stop," Matthews said. "It's in every city you go to. They do it for survival and as far as survival, I don't think it would be right to ban it, but it might help."

Craft said the ordinance is not just about limiting the harassment of citizens, but assuring a peace of mind for those who patronize the city of Lafayette.

"Many of these transients and panhandlers are part of the crime element downtown," Craft said. "We just want to keep the downtown area safe and problem-free."