

Palm Beach County leaders drafting panhandling ban

New law could impact firefighter's fundraiser By: Charlie Keegan

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WEST BOCA RATON - Panhandlers could be forced off Palm Beach County roads. County leaders have put the wheels in motion to ban beggars, but a new law could have a broader impact.

Irwin Weinberg sees it everyday on the roads of West Boca Raton.

"They always try to get your attention," he said while pulling up to State Road 7 and Palmetto Park Road.

Panhandlers, often homeless people, dot major intersections asking for money.

"This is a health issue, it's a safety issue," Weinberg said. "Not only for the people who are driving, but the people who are begging." He'd like county leaders to make panhandling illegal and he's not alone.

Palm Beach County Vice Mayor Mary Lou Berger said emails complaining about the situation, particularly in West Boca Raton, are coming in non-stop.

"Do something, do something. I'm afraid, my wife is afraid, they scare the kids, they knock on the windows," Berger summarized the emails.

On December 16, she got support of other county commissioners to ask county attorneys to draft a new law keeping people out of medians and out of intersections.

"That's a public safety issue, somebody could get killed," she explained. The problem is the new law would almost certainly apply to more than just homeless people. It would keep sports teams and other groups out of the streets when they collect money.

Commissioners voted down similar proposals in the past because they would have banned firefighters from collecting donations on the street during their Fill the Boot campaign. In Palm Beach County, firefighters have spent the past 30 Labor Day weekends at intersections collecting money in their boots for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. On average, the group gets \$100,000 per year.

Berger admitted the newest law is still in the works, but it will likely keep firefighters out of the streets for their fundraiser.

"We talked about alternatives, maybe private property," Berger said of talking with firefighter leaders.

A representative from the firefighter's union told NewsChannel 5 the group is still holding out hope any new law would grant it an exception for the campaign. Weinberg argued keeping the firefighters off the roads is a small price to pay to clean up the streets in his neighborhood. He suggested firefighters could find safer options to meet their goals.

"There are so many different ways to raise money and funds that they can make the same amount or more without endangering themselves," he said.

Berger expects the county attorney to bring a rough draft of an ordinance to commissioners early next year.