

Ordinance banning panhandlers takes step forward in PBC

Rule prohibits panhandling from medians, roads

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - Palm Beach County leaders taking the first step toward pushing panhandlers out of roads and medians.

Tuesday, commissioners gave approval to schedule a public hearing on a new ordinance making it illegal to ask for money, or hand out flyers, while standing on medians, exit ramps, or roads.

The push comes as commissioners hear about more and more panhandlers flooding intersections in the unincorporated parts of the county.

Commissioners say safety is the main reason for the new rule. Saying the number of panhandlers putting themselves and drivers in danger is getting out of control.

"It's immediately apparent that this is a public safety issue, that something had to be done about it," says Vice Mayor Mary Lou Berger. She represents West Boca Raton and Delray Beach, where many panhandlers line up along 441.

Eric Rich is one of the panhandlers. Tuesday he's on an exit ramp at I-95 and 45th Street.

He says he just got out of the hospital, has no job and no place to stay.

"I tried my family, and they turned their back on me, and won't help me, so I'm out here right now trying to get some money together," he explains.

He says some drivers donate money, but most don't. Soon he may not be allowed to ask for money from his go-to spot.

"We're ready to tell them Palm Beach County roads and state roads are no longer available for this type of activity," Berger says.

The proposal discussed Tuesday applies to county and state roads and ramps off and on to the highways.

Anyone caught on the median, or in the road, would get a notice to appear before a judge, who would decide whether to fine them anything up to \$500, or send them to jail for up to 60 days, or both, according to the county attorney's office.

The ordinance allows you to stand on sidewalks and shoulders when panhandling, or fundraising.

Opponents say that defeats the purpose. And they doubt beggars will actually pay a fine.

But Berger believes having the rules in place will keep people from even trying to panhandle. Explaining there will be an educational period notifying panhandlers of the change and pointing them to different agencies which provide help to the homeless.

Rich says he spent 17 days in jail for panhandling in Tampa. He admits if it becomes illegal in Palm Beach County, he would stop doing it.

"Because I am not trying to get a ticket, and I am not trying to go to jail," he says.

The ordinance would also prohibit firefighters from walking down intersections during their annual "Fill the Boot" campaign to raise money for the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

A coordinator of the fundraiser for Palm Beach County Fire-Rescue says the agency understands why commissioners want the ordinance and isn't fighting it. Right now, firefighters are looking at other ways to raise money.

County leaders are expected to make a final decision on the ordinance June 23 after a public hearing.