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State Street Spare Change

Solution for Rampant Menacing and Aggressive Panhandling

Submission for the 2006 Herman Goldstein Problem-Oriented Policing Award

Written by:

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Based on the work of:

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PROBLEM

State Street is an area that runs from the Capitol Square to the Library Mall. Merchants, students, tourists, and retail customers increasingly complained about being aggressively approached for money while they walked on State Street. With the increase in the number of panhandlers, there was an increase in the aggressive nature of panhandling. Merchants received complaints that customers felt threatened and were less likely to patronize State Street businesses. The existing panhandling ordinance was ineffective in reducing panhandling. In 2004 and 2005 there was an increase in complaints to the Madison Police Department and to the downtown alderpersons about panhandling. Police officers were frustrated by the lack of restrictions about the number of panhandlers and location, and felt unable to effectively respond to the valid complaints of State Street stakeholders.

ANALYSIS

Increased complaints about menacing panhandling led to the involvement of business coalitions, citizens and law enforcement. As the State Street Neighborhood Officer, I conducted interviews and a detailed survey of State Street business owners. Neighborhood and district police officers concluded that the current city ordinance did not protect merchants and State Street visitors from aggressive panhandling or the number of panhandlers occupying certain blocks. Officers found a strong connection between panhandling and other calls for service. Meetings included input from local social service organizations providing services to vulnerable populations on State Street, including homeless, mental health consumers, and substance abusers.

RESPONSE

In the 1980s the City of Madison passed an ordinance intended to reduce menacing and aggressive panhandling in the State Street business corridor. The ordinance restricted place and manner by establishing physical restrictions to the activity and disallowing the following of pedestrians or use of intimidating tactics. Since that time, several revisions have been made to the panhandling ordinance. Those revisions were minimally successful, resulting in aggressive and menacing individuals moving to other areas on State Street instead of complying with the ordinance. Patrol officer Meredith York proposed an ordinance change to alderperson Mike Verveer that would restrict location for panhandling activity. The Downtown Coordinating Committee passed the new ordinance on June 28, 2005. Common Council passed the ordinance on July 15, 2005.

ASSESSMENT

Calls for service to police regarding menacing panhandling have dropped significantly since the adoption of the new ordinance. State Street merchants report fewer incidents of customer intimidation. Police are able to effectively enforce the clear boundaries of allowed panhandling as described in the new panhandling ordinance. Neighborhood officers Rodney Wilson, Kip Kellogg, and Meredith York educated known and potential panhandlers about ordinance changes.

Background

Madison is the capital of Wisconsin and was incorporated as a city in 1856. Starting in April of 2006, Madison celebrated its 150th birthday as a city. Part of the uniqueness of Madison is represented in the seven blocks sandwiched in the isthmus between Lake Mendota and Lake Monona — the seven blocks referred to as State Street. State Street is referred to as that area consisting of the 100 block through the 700 block. The 700 block consists of the “Podium,” which is a cement raised platform in which individuals can discuss their viewpoints in a public open forum. From the 700 block leading up to the capitol square, State Street is considered to be an entertainment district. Besides the newly built Overture Center, it has a historical theater and contains retail businesses along with apartment complexes above, facing State Street.

The History of State St.

Always a vital link between the State Capitol and the University of Wisconsin, State Street reached its pinnacle during the Vietnam protests of the late sixties and early seventies. The documentary “War at Home” was filmed about Madison and the events that occurred in the area of the UW campus and State St. Politicians, police, and citizens’ viewpoints were shaped during this time.

Since then, State Street has remained a forum for expression, both artistic and political. State Street has been recognized nationally for events that have occurred here since the sixties — the marijuana rally, Halloween events, Mifflin Block Party, sporting events, and political demonstrations. State Street is a draw for many different reasons. This being the case, the sheer density of the population, which includes not only student population but an increased residential population, has brought to light many issues that for a long time have existed with which the city has never directly dealt. One of these issues is panhandling.

Scanning

The asking for “spare change” has been a problem for many cities around the country and Madison is no exception. Panhandling and menacing or aggressive panhandling have been part of the State Street landscape for many years. Since the first ordinance was written concerning panhandling, there have been complaints by stakeholders within the community.

Through the years the complaints were addressed by attempting to control behavior that the public found menacing or aggressive. However, the ordinance as it was written did not reduce the behavior that the stakeholders and public found to be menacing and or aggressive.

Ongoing complaints were made by businesses and citizens about the aggressive panhandling taking place in the 400 to 600 blocks of State Street. People were feeling threatened by the panhandling that was occurring. Based on the complaints, a block meeting was organized for November 2, 2004. Represented at that meeting were stakeholders for the community. This meeting and subsequent meetings had representation from University of Wisconsin staff, Downtown Management Incorporative (DMI), Business Improvement District (BID), Greater State Street Business Association (GSSBA), citizens, alderpersons, media and police. The initial meeting dealt with ways to handle panhandling and how to reduce the panhandling that was occurring. Subsequent meetings were also held on January 12, 2005; February 16, 2005; and March 23, 2005. At this final meeting, Alders Mike Verveer, Austin King, and media were present. A discussion group was formed for ideas on how to handle the aggressive panhandling.

Defining the problem

The issues involved both the aggressive behavior of the panhandlers, as well as the sheer volume and location of the panhandlers. Even though they weren’t aggressive, their location and number caused people to feel threatened. Business owners, citizens, and law enforcement identified the problem. This problem had been ongoing in the State Street corridor for many years. With the original ordinance written in the 1980s and subsequent revisions not appearing to affect the panhandling, not only were citizens upset by being aggressively panhandled, but the numbers of panhandlers in the area also upset them.

Law Enforcement believed that the money received from panhandling went to the purchase of alcohol. Based on information from other agencies it was believed that the population that panhandled were also chemically dependent. The location of several liquor stores within the corridor of the 400 block provided easy accessibility for purchasing of alcohol. Panhandlers received change throughout the day, walked over to the liquor store, then purchased alcohol and consumed it.

Officers recognized individuals that were involved in panhandling would later be involved in police contact. As the consumption of liquor increased, so did the number of tickets issued for Open Intoxicants, Disorderly Conduct and transports to the detoxification center. Panhandling and its effects drained police resources by increasing calls for service.

Level of diagnosis/Unit of analysis

Crime: Panhandling

Offender Group: Male, homeless, and chemically dependent. Not all homeless panhandled, but the high majority of panhandlers were homeless and chemically dependent. Officers were aware of this status because of personal contact with the core group of panhandlers.

Neighborhood: State Street from the 100 to 700 blocks. Entertainment, retail and residential properties.

Specific premise: Change city ordinance to make panhandling more restrictive.

Analysis

The ordinance as currently written was not restrictive enough to be effective. Local agencies had in the past attempted to reduce the number of panhandlers by educating the public. This education was done with assistance from local stakeholders (GSSBA, BID, DMI, ReachOut Inc., and Law Enforcement)

This involved the posting and distributing of fliers, posters and signs in the State Street area. Citizens were asked not to give change to the panhandlers, but instead to provide them with vouchers and agency information.

The target group included visitors and students. The University of Wisconsin provided a high volume of pedestrian student traffic. Students had a higher degree of tolerance for panhandling. Behavior that stakeholders found unacceptable was encouraged by the donations made by students to panhandlers. This attempt failed because the largest part of the target group, students, did not curb their behavior.

As we looked at the time, place, and manner that panhandling was occurring, restrictions were placed on only manner and place. These restrictions did not address the number of panhandlers per block. It did control panhandling within certain areas, but as time passed, we discovered that the ordinance was not restrictive enough to provide an environment which was suitable and acceptable for citizens and business owners alike.

Officers that worked the area were aware that panhandling supplied money for alcohol and/or drugs, which subsequently increased calls for service within the corridor of State Street. Officers working in the State Street area were familiar with a core group of panhandlers. Staffing foot patrol beats and having two Neighborhood Police Officers on State Street resulted in first-hand knowledge of who the offenders were. Officers observed this group panhandle for change and then purchase alcohol. If officers did not intervene during this cycle, it would be repeated until the panhandlers' behavior caused a police call for service.

Officer intervention was accomplished in two ways. The first was by being present in the problem area and familiar with the offender behavior. In this way the officer could stop the negative behavior before it generated a call for service. The second was by issuing a city ordinance citation to the offender. This was accomplished through officer observation or citizen complaint directly to State Street officer.

Calls for service would increase if the cycle was not disrupted. The result of not intervening would sometimes lead to a police transport to a detoxification center. If no medical assistance was needed, this would require two officers and take approximately one hour to complete.

Officers believed that panhandling was causing other problems for police and citizens. The focus was placed on the panhandling complaints made by stakeholders and citizens. Open discussions occurred at State Street block meetings. The discussions did not include participation from a large sample of business owners with knowledge of what their customers experienced on State Street. I wished to get a better sample of what was being experienced on State Street so I created a survey.

Survey

The survey involved the 500 block and 600 block of State Street and was given to store owners or managers. The survey was collected within two weeks of delivery. All but two businesses responded. The results of the survey indicated the following.

Madison Police Department Survey Spring 2005

The merchants of the 500 and 600 blocks of State Street were asked to answer the following questions:

- 1) Have you witnessed menacing panhandling? Yes/No
- 2) Have you received complaints about panhandling? Yes/No
- 3) Is drinking a problem on public property (sidewalk or park)? Yes/No
- 4) Have you witnessed this? Yes/No
- 5) Have you received complaints about alcohol? Yes/No

The survey also included an opportunity to express general concerns about State Street activity, express complaints made by customers to merchants, and make suggestions for improving the ways in which the Madison Police Department can serve merchants and the community.

Fifty-two surveys were completed. The results of the yes/no questions are as follows:

- 1) 37 (71%) respondents have witnessed menacing panhandling; 12 (23%) have not witnessed menacing panhandling; 3 respondents did not answer this question.
- 2) 30 (57%) respondents have received complaints about panhandling; 17 (32%) have not received complaints; 5 respondents did not answer this question.
- 3) 21 (40%) respondents believe drinking on public property to be a problem on State Street; 30 (57%) do not find public drinking a problem on State Street; 1 respondent did not answer this question.
- 4) 27 (52%) respondents have witnessed drinking on public property; 23 (44%) have not witnessed this; 2 respondents did not answer this question.
- 5) 13 (25%) respondents have received complaints about public drinking; 38 (73%) have not received complaints; 1 respondent did not answer this question.

In the narrative section of this survey, twenty-two respondents were concerned about the physical presence of panhandlers. Ten respondents suggested that the City of Madison should pass an ordinance to prohibit, rather than limit, panhandling. Thirteen respondents were concerned about the physical presence of people using drugs or alcohol. Eleven respondents mentioned verbal harassment to be a problem on State Street for potential customers. Six respondents said that public urination was a problem. Both verbal harassment and public urination were discussed as serious barriers to promoting a safe environment on State Street. Five respondents said that the long-term use of public benches by non-customers on State Street was a problem. Six respondents specifically noted the summer influx of non-customers on State Street. Four respondents wanted an increase in foot patrol from the Madison Police Department, especially during summer and special events. Two respondents wanted to see faster response time for shoplifting incidents.

The survey indicated that panhandling was a concern but so was the related effects of panhandling. Those arrested for panhandling had also been arrested for other city ordinance violations. The panhandling behavior affected the perceived and real quality of life issues on State Street.

Identifying those involved in the problem

In February of 2005 Officer Kellogg compiled a notebook of names and photos of approximately 80 known panhandlers. A large number of those had been arrested for violating the current panhandling ordinance and other city ordinances. Those ordinances included disorderly conduct, open intoxicant violations, and public urination. This notebook was placed in the central district briefing room for officers to use as a reference tool.

Response

The language of the current ordinance was difficult to understand. The ordinance referred to the "glitter poles." These are poles that had numerous round ball light bulbs on them that were encased by a glittery bulb. They lined the 100

block to the 700 blocks of State Street and were used as a guideline from which panhandlers had to stand behind the imaginary line connecting each pole, subsequently leaving a six-foot space open for pedestrian traffic. Officers and other panhandlers would explain this to new panhandlers. Not only was this confusing to panhandlers, it was confusing to officers who worked the area. Citations that could have been written were not due to the confusion. Environmental changes were going to affect this guideline as well.

As construction started in 2005 in the 100 and 200 block, these poles were being eliminated. Subsequently the guideline written in the ordinance was also being eliminated. It was discussed that the ordinance needed to be changed in order to reflect the environmental change.

With State Street becoming more of an entertainment district, restaurants began placing sidewalk cafes in front of their businesses. This reduced available space for panhandlers and caused them to be pushed into smaller areas. It also affected the cafe patrons. As they sat in sidewalk cafe, on the other side of the short partition was a panhandler asking for change from them or passing pedestrians. Officer Meredith York, Kip Kellogg, and I observed citizens being confronted in these situations.

In the spring of 2005, Officer Meredith York and Kip Kellogg outlined a change in the ordinance and presented it to Alder Mike Verveer. The outline of potential changes included a larger restriction on the location of the panhandlers to protect individuals as they sat outside at sidewalk cafés. The suggested ordinance change included restrictions on distances from businesses entrances, corners of buildings, cafés, and intersections.

As the proposal for the new ordinance was being written and then subsequently presented to the city council, the lower State Street block meeting drew in the attention of media. The local media conducted interviews with business owners, citizens, alders, and police. The problem of panhandling on State Street had gained the attention of students, citizens, business owners, alders, and police.

During the State Street block meetings, there was concern that the new ordinance would be too restrictive and limit some of the acceptable and desirable behaviors on State Street. An example of that would be musicians performing for change in the State Street area. Behavior such as musicians, someone selling balloon animals, and other types of expression in which donations were requested, were part of the colorful patchwork of State Street. As discussions occurred reference the ordinance change, it was the viewpoint that the ordinance not restrict this type of entertainment. The ordinance change would not affect those individuals providing entertainment. It affected only those people asking for change.

The ordinance change restricted the place and manner of panhandling but did not eliminate it. The restrictions were written in order to help provide a safe environment for those on State Street. This ordinance change could be applied citywide.

Officer Kip Kellogg and I measured the areas affected by the ordinance change.

The restricted areas:

50 feet from any ATM

25 feet from any intersection

25 feet from any sidewalk cafe

20 feet from any building entrance that contains nonresidential uses

12 feet from any building that contains nonresidential uses

This information was transferred to a scale map and the legal panhandling spots were marked.

Alder Mike Verveer presented the request for the ordinance change. This was passed by city council on June 28, 2005.

Officer York, Kellogg, and I started warning and educating panhandlers about the change. Many were already aware of changes and had received false information from each other that panhandling was illegal. We documented new panhandlers that had been given verbal warning reference the change.

The ordinance required that the panhandler know that the behavior was illegal. That behavior as described in the ordinance was not limited to actions. It recognized that the panhandler needed to know that his/her location was illegal before a citation could be written.

Citations were still being written for panhandling that was found to be aggressive or intimidating, if a reasonable person would be deterred from passing through or remaining near a public space because of fear, concern, or apprehension. The areas that became legal panhandling spaces were too numerous and complicated to explain. Some were one foot from the curb making it hazardous for the panhandlers to stand without risk of being hit by the city bus.

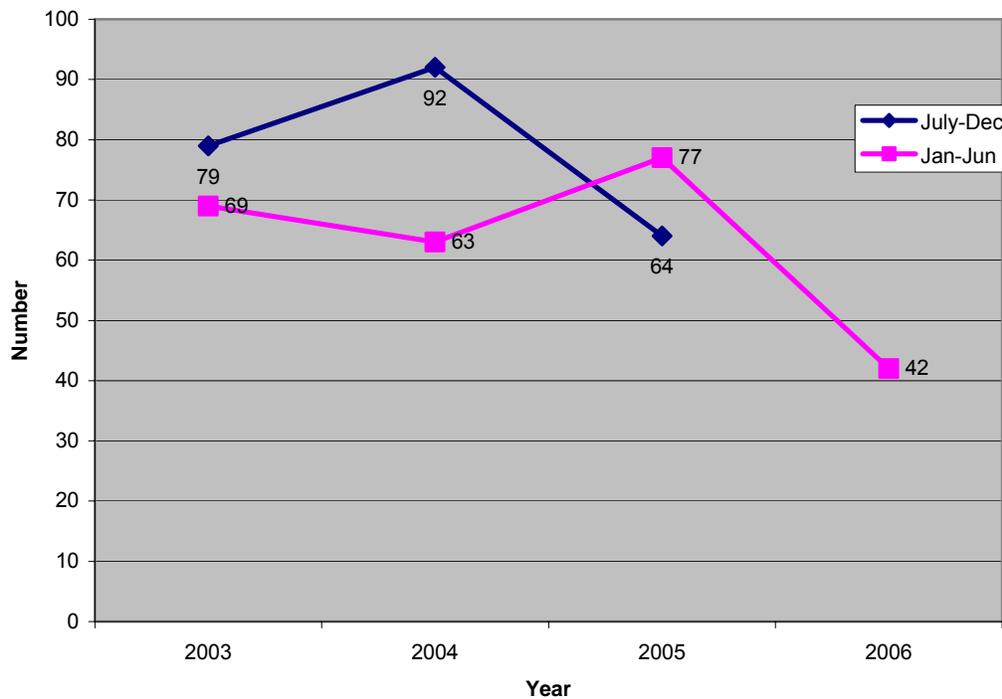
It became obvious that we needed to identify locations that would be permanent and not subject to sidewalk cafe placement. If the weather changed and a cafe was not in place or there was a delay in placement, then a confrontation could take place. Businesses received a permit for the space in front of their store. They have rights governing the use of that space for sidewalk cafe.

With environment and ordinance restrictions, two locations were identified as legal spaces for panhandling. These locations were easily identified and were not subject to seasonal or environmental changes.

Assessment

Officers working State Street felt that there was a noticeable change in the number of panhandlers. After the ordinance change, there appeared to be a change in the number of detoxification transports and related calls for service. The graph shows a measurable decrease in the number of conveyances.

Conveyances for Alcohol Incapacitation from State St. (8 a.m.-11 p.m.)



The time of 8am-11pm was chosen because of the target group that we wished to measure. This group consisted of known panhandlers that were homeless. The shelter for men opens at 8pm and closes at 8am. If a person is intoxicated he will not be allowed to use the shelter. The shelter is one block from State Street. If someone is denied the use of the shelter because of alcohol, he typically finds his way back to State Street.

There is a high density of bars in the State Street area. The 11pm end time was chosen so that conveyances for bar related behavior did not interfere with data for the target group.

The information was broken down by year and then by month. The first unit of measure was from July to December. The second unit of measure was January to June. In this way we were able to see a measurable decrease in the number of conveyances.

In looking at the July to December conveyances, we separated months in which major events occurred on State Street. Sporting and the Halloween event could contribute to an increase in conveyances.

The data for January to June shows a drop of 35 conveyances from last year since the ordinance went into effect. (Data from 2006 reflects data gathered up to the second week of June.)

If we look at the 35 conveyances as it relates to calls for service, we see that it takes two officers one hour to complete a conveyance; that is, if there is no delay in processing. That works out to 35 hours x 2 officers = 70 work hours for just half the year. This has an impact on officer visibility on State St.

Panhandling Data Results

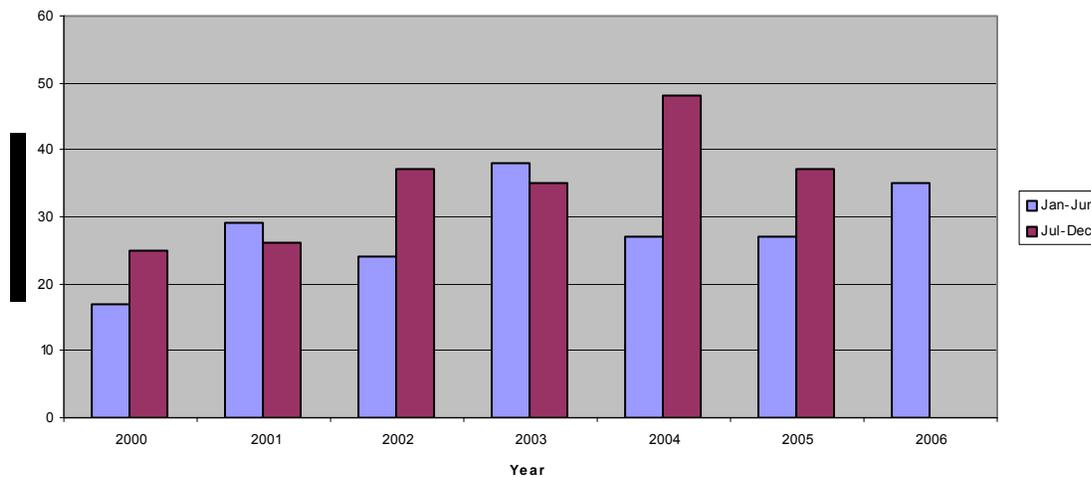
I attended central district in-service in 2006 and educated officers and detectives working all shifts. Educating the officers to the ordinance gave them the tools to deal with illegal panhandling. I also requested that if they were uncomfortable with issuing a citation for panhandling that they forward the name of the individual they warned to me.

Other factors that influence 2006 citations is weather. In the spring and summer more people are out and more panhandling is occurring. Officers are more likely to walk State Street and subsequently observe illegal behavior.

A change in the panhandling population occurs during the summer. New panhandlers arrive from other States. They are advised of the rules, however, many have no plan on staying in the area and frequently violate the ordinance.

What we have noticed is that with only two locations to panhandle there has been a remarkable decrease in the complaints from businesses and citizens. Citizens are aware that there will be only two panhandlers on State Street and that those two will be at a specific location. This seems to provide a level of predictability.

**Enforcement of Panhandling Ordinances
8 a.m. to 11 p.m.**



The data collected for panhandling was measured by months, same as the conveyances, evaluating both January to June and July to December. This data reflects an increase of panhandling citations from January to June (data up to second week of June 2006).

The increase in citations does not indicate an increase in panhandling complaints. We have found that complaints have decreased. Officers are educated to the ordinance and feel more confident issuing citations for the violation.

Any displacement that occurred was not noticed by officers or reported by citizens.

The goal of changing the ordinance was to create a safer environment for all citizens that walk historic State Street. We have found that the ordinance change not only affected the stakeholders, citizens and police. The change affected the panhandlers as well. The number of core panhandlers as observed by officers has decreased. Panhandling was not banned; it was reduced. In doing this we changed the behavior of the target group and reduced its numbers.

We must continue monitoring, educating and enforcing. State Street cannot be neglected because of the ongoing change in our customer and target base.

Agency and Officer Information

The Madison Police Department has been committed to the principles of problem oriented policing. Officers are encouraged to identify problems and respond by using these principles. In 2006 a Problem Solving Award was added to the yearly MPD Awards Recognition ceremony.

Officers are encouraged during yearly goal setting conferences to identify areas, which would benefit from a focused response. Officers are allowed to work on these projects during regular work hours and have available to them written resources.

Special thanks to Captain Mary Schauf, Central District, for her assistance and advice provided; and also to Nicole DeMotto, Police Analyst.

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Media Reports On The Problem

Got Spare Change?

If So, You Should Keep It Away From State Street's Numerous Panhandlers, experts Say The City Of Madison Will Form A Special Work Group To Recommend Solutions to The Problem.

Wisconsin State Journal :: FRONT :: A1

Saturday, September 7, 2002

Dean Mosiman City government reporter

'dig girls in the city, you sure look pretty," crooned Samuel Joseph Pulliam, as he extended a foam cup to passers-by on State Street Friday afternoon.

A block away, a man in his 20s in a worn gray T-shirt and black jeans asked strollers for change, simply holding his hands out. A bit later, at Lisa Link Peace Park, where Pulliam was singing, a 34-year-old homeless man in a wheelchair picked a guitar. A sign in his instrument case read, "Spare change needed for food and living expenses. Any help greatly appreciated. Thank you."

Most who passed them gazed straight ahead and donated nothing, exactly what experts recommend.

The scene has merchants, police and city officials concerned.

"We have seen an increasing number of people who are panhandling, as well as an increase in the number of aggressive contacts," Mayor Sue Bauman said.

"There is more," agreed Police Officer Meredith York, who works State Street. "And definitely more aggression."

Many panhandlers are chronic alcoholics, drug users or transients, and many use change to buy booze, get drunk and cause problems, York said.

In response, Bauman met with police, city officials and business leaders Friday and promised to create a special work group that would offer action.

"I'm hoping we can have some recommendations pretty darn quickly," she said.

Susan Schmitz, president of Downtown Madison Inc., who attended Friday's meeting, said she would like to see a ban on panhandling in retail areas such as State Street.

"It's right in your face," she said.

The city, which banned menacing and aggressive panhandling in 1985, is on track to issue a record number of citations, Lt. Joe Balles said.

The law bans panhandlers from the sidewalk area near businesses, automatic teller machines and sidewalk cafes, and prohibits panhandlers from touching, threatening and intimidating people.

The police have issued 43 tickets through August, near the 10-year high mark of 55 set last year, Balles said.

Some panhandlers are charged with disorderly conduct or other crimes.

"I've received more complaints about panhandling this year than at any time I have been involved in Downtown issues," said Ald. Mike Vermeer, 4th District, who met with Bauman Friday.

"The majority of panhandlers are harmless," he said. The perception is that they are dangerous, scary people."

The panhandler population is a mix of ages, genders and races, he said. There are serious incidents. Some panhandlers have intimidating dogs, York said. And this summer, panhandlers confronted people as they fed parking meters in the Buckeye parking lot on the 200 blocks of Gilman and Gorham streets, just off State Street.

"That borders on robbery," she said.

Tony Bedame, who runs the Sacred Feather hat shop, 417 State St., across from the Peace Park, said the area has long been plagued by panhandling.

About 20 years ago, merchants organized to confront "the gang of 20," a group that appeared en masse and even accosted a storekeeper, Bedame said.

People have a right to ask for change, but not to intimidate, he said, adding that he sometimes must ask panhandlers to leave seating in front of his store.

Kendall Hafferman and Marty Hansen, who work at Spex Eyewear, 440 State St., said panhandling is almost constant in the neighborhood and that the mix of people doing it is changing.

"It was cool when it was street musicians," Hafferman said. "Now it's street kids."

Susan Crowley, Dane County's human services interim director, said panhandlers are a mix of those down on their luck or trying to make an easy buck, transients, and people with substance abuse problems.

"In general, providing monetary support isn't going to help the individual in the long term," Crowley said. "You can't be sure the person isn't going to be using the money for drinking or drugs."

The county and others try to reach panhandlers and connect them to social services, but some people refuse help, she said.

The guitarist in the wheelchair, who said he was hurt by a recent fall and made about \$2 Friday morning, said he has been performing for money on the street off and on for a decade and fallen through the cracks of an inadequate social services system.

He said he had been living on the street for more than three straight days-- mostly without sleep -- by Friday.

"I see people who have good reason to be here. I see people out here to make money," he said. "Out here, it's just a game of survival."

Voucher Program Targets Panhandlers

A UW-Madison Student Proposes A Program That Would Trade Vouchers For Food.

Wisconsin State Journal :: LOCAL/WISCONSIN :: B1

Friday, October 18, 2002

Dean Mosiman City government reporter

A couple of weeks ago, UW-Madison student Adam Busch was showing off State Street to his grandmother Rhea. But aggressive panhandlers spoiled the day.

The experience, however, inspired Busch to propose a "vouchers for food" program for the homeless that's getting attention from the city and the university. The city has struggled with an increase in aggressive panhandlers, many of whom are chronic alcoholics, drug users or transients who use change to buy booze, get drunk and cause problems. Busch, a political science and history major interning in the governor's office, proposes that students and others could buy vouchers from grocery stores or the university that could be given to panhandlers and redeemed for food but not alcohol.

A participating store would accept the coupon for slightly less than the purchase price, giving establishments a small profit on each voucher and incentive to participate, he said.

Busch envisions an effort run by the city and the university, and intends to soon share his idea with the student government, the chancellor's office and the mayor.

"People are tired of aggressive panhandling on State Street," he said.

Busch, the university student representative to the city's Downtown Coordinating Committee, unveiled his proposal to that panel Wednesday night.

Committee members told Busch to consider asking the Greater State Street Business Association and the Downtown Business Improvement District to help out with the effort. The committee will then take up the issue again at its next meeting.

"We're willing to look at any strategies, but we don't think this a viable alternative," said Mayor Sue Bauman's chief of staff, Enis Ragland, who is leading a special work group on panhandling.

The concept has been tried here and elsewhere, but vouchers are often sold on the cheap for cash to buy alcohol or drugs, Ragland said.

But Downtown Ald. Mike Verveer, 4th District, described the proposal as a "cool idea" worth pursuing, especially if Busch could enlist support from the university's Morgridge Center, a community service resource for students.

Lt. Stephanie Bradley Wilson with the Madison Police Department's Central District said the proposal is worth exploring and could be part of a larger effort to curb aggressive panhandling.

Busch said he hopes a program can be created by the end of the school year.

State Street Panhandler Hungers For More Than Food

The Capital Times :: COMMUNITIES :: 1C

Friday, May 9, 2003

Rob Zaleski

The last thing Mike Saunders wants is to spend another night in the slammer.

He claims he's done that at least seven times in the last three years --mostly for aggressive panhandling -- and says it's not something he cares to experience again. But Big Mike, as he's known on the streets, is hungry. He's so hungry that, as we're engaged in conversation on a recent afternoon, he decides to risk yet another arrest by placing a large plastic cup near his feet in the 500 block of State Street. Hoping, of course, that people who stroll by might notice it and toss a few coins his way.

If you've been to State Street, chances are you've seen Big Mike, because he's been a constant presence there since arriving from Chicago in June 2000. He's a beefy guy, 46 years old, with a friendly smile and a white Tommy Bartlett cap tugged firmly over his head. And many days, he readily admits, he smells of alcohol.

You've probably also wondered why guys like Saunders end up on the streets, begging for handouts -- and why, as the age-old expression goes, they don't just pull themselves up by their bootstraps and get a job.

But do you really want to know their stories? Saunders thinks not.

In fact, Saunders notes, the city has clamped down on panhandlers in recent years -- especially on State Street, where their re-emergence each spring is about as welcome as bar brawls and bus fumes.

(Madison banned aggressive panhandling in 1985 and last year issued 114 citations.)

They're such a problem that the University of Wisconsin-Madison recently held a public discussion about them at the Memorial Union and pondered such questions as: What circumstances lead people to panhandle? And, is it really wise to give them your spare change?

Early this week, I decided to seek out a State Street panhandler and see if they might provide some answers to those oft-asked questions.

The first two I approach, both white males, aren't interested in being interviewed.

But Saunders is -- partly, he admits, because he has nothing better to do.

First, however, he wants me to know one thing: He wasn't always like this.

He is, he says, a high school graduate and for 14 years, from 1976 to 1990, was a telecommunications operator for the U.S. Army in Frankfurt, Germany. He was also, he says, married for 10 years to a German woman.

But while serving in Frankfurt, Saunders says, a series of major set backs sent him on a downward spiral from which he's never recovered. His best friend died after falling off the back of an Army truck. His marriage unraveled. And in 1985 -- around the same time his beloved Chicago Bears went on to win the Super Bowl, he says -- he received a call that his mother had died of breast cancer in Chicago.

"They buried her without even telling me -- and I went crazy," he says, his eyes welling with tears. "I've been hurting ever since."

In the midst of all this, Big Mike says, he turned to booze, which just exacerbated his problems. In 1990 he was discharged from the Army, and when he returned to Chicago, "I was a very sick man," he says.

"Breakfast was Jack Daniels, lunch was Jack Daniels, dinner was Jack Daniels."

It didn't help, he says, that he'd also developed back problems and was diagnosed with a bad heart.

He came to Madison, he says, to visit his sister. She tried to help him but became frustrated by his drinking. So he ended up at the men's shelter at Grace Episcopal Church and has been in and out of shelters ever since.

Though he's sought treatment several times, he's still an alcoholic, Saunders says.

"But I can quit if I really want to," he insists. "I can."

Has he ever contemplated getting a job?

All the time, he says. Actually, he did work at the Memorial Union -- helping clean up the terrace -- the summer he moved here, he says, and plans to reapply for that job later this week.

But his most immediate challenge is dinner, says Saunders, staring at his empty cup.

Sure, some days he strikes out. But other days he hits the jackpot -- like last weekend, when a man stopped and asked if there was anything he could do for him.

Saunders says he responded that he'd sure enjoy a Big Mac.

The man said, "Come with me," Saunders says, and bought him not only a Big Mac, "but fries, a big shake and everything."

Saunders breaks into a grin while recalling the moment.

"On that day, God was on my side."

Plan Would Put Tighter Controls On Panhandlers

State Street Businesses Want More Restrictions To Keep Passers-by In Their Comfort Zones.

Wisconsin State Journal :: FRONT :: A1

Wednesday, March 23, 2005

Barry Adams Wisconsin State Journal

Begging for change on State Street may get harder.

Downtown Ald. Mike Verveer wants to introduce changes to Madison's 20-year-old law banning menacing and aggressive panhandling.

One modification would create zones at the entrance to businesses that would be off-limits to panhandlers. The plan would not ban panhandling entirely.

"There's still plenty of places where a person could panhandle," Verveer said. "I'm trying to strike a decent balance."

Representatives of several groups -- including Madison police, State Street businesses and UW-Madison -- were to meet this morning to discuss panhandling and to brainstorm ways to better manage it.

"I hope there's some really good communication there to solve a problem that everyone wants to solve," said Stephanie LaBella, president of the Greater State Street Business Association.

Panhandling is disruptive, intimidating and creates an image that the area is not safe, officials said.

Charlie Rogers, who has worked at the Sacred Feather hat store at 417 State St. for almost 30 years, was active in creating the 1985 panhandling ordinance. He frequently shoos beggars away from the front of his store.

"If you want help, it's here. Believe me, it's here," Rogers said of the homeless shelters, free meals and numerous local agencies that specialize in helping people with alcohol and mental health problems.

The 1985 law bans panhandling on the sidewalk between sparkle light poles -- 1970's era light poles that are being replaced on State Street -- and building facades on State Street and the Capitol Square.

The new proposal would affect the entire city and ban panhandling within 25 feet of any open sidewalk cafe and within 12 feet of a building that contains a business.

It would also ban panhandling within 25 feet of any intersection, meaning those who hold signs asking for money at busy intersections could also be fined. The previous ordinance prohibiting panhandling within 50 feet of automated teller machines in the city would remain in effect.

Verveer said he will introduce the proposal April 19 to the City Council.

State Street neighborhood Police Officer Rodney Wilson said aggressive panhandling has decreased but the proposed ordinance would help address problems associated with chronic panhandlers.

"We want people to feel that they can come down here and not have their defenses up," Wilson said. "We'll have three, four, five, six on one city block. It wears on the store owners and the citizens that pass by."

\ If you go

* What: Forum on State Street panhandling.

* Why: To better understand panhandling on State Street, how it is viewed by the community and how it can be managed.

* When: Today, 10 to 11:30 a.m.

Where: Tripp Commons at Memorial Union, 800 Langdon St.

Panhandling Is Topic At Union Forum

Wisconsin State Journal :: LOCAL/WISCONSIN :: B3

Thursday, March 24, 2005

Prevention was a major theme at a forum held at Memorial Union Wednesday where about 40 people discussed ideas for tackling State Street panhandling, according to 4th District Ald. Mike Verveer.

Many attendees, who included city and university officials, business owners, police officers, service providers and at least one panhandler, advocated for expanded services to address potential panhandlers' addictions, mental health problems, and housing needs.

They also suggested launching campaigns encouraging UW-Madison students who might be inclined to give money to panhandlers to instead give it to organizations that help get people off the street.

Verveer plans to propose changes to the Madison's panhandling ordinance to the City Council on April 19 that would restrict panhandling near intersections, sidewalk cafes and other businesses.

Where Does Being Hit Up Hit You?

Wisconsin State Journal :: FRONT :: A1

Tuesday, May 3, 2005

Susan Lampert Smith

Monday wasn't the best day for panhandling.

It was bleak and windy, with a few snowflakes in the air. I walked the length of State Street and back and saw only two panhandlers working the 500 block near Peace Park. There was the plaid jacket guy and the Green Bay Packers jacket guy who said he needed money to get back home to Alabama.

"I don't like your weather here," he told a man named Bob, who tossed 35 cents in the cup and kept walking toward the Capitol.

I fell in next to Bob and did a little panhandling of my own.

"Are you bothered by the panhandlers?" I asked. I had an e-mail from a State Street visitor who was accosted five times and didn't appreciate it a bit.

Like a lot of us, Bob's feelings about panhandlers are mixed. He likes the pleasant ones, doesn't like the aggressive ones and doesn't believe for a second that a guy in a Packers jacket is really trying to get home to Alabama.

We agreed we're not as bothered by being asked for money as we are by the reminder that so many lives are so much less comfortable than our own.

The community of Madison will soon grapple with its feelings about those who beg for change.

Downtown Ald. Mike Verveer has introduced Madison's first new panhandling rules since the original State Street ordinance went into effect 20 years ago. The rules will come up for debate before the Downtown Coordinating Committee at 5:30 p.m. May 19 in the Municipal Building.

Basically, the new rules would sharply limit where people can panhandle, banning them from doing it near doorways, ATM machines and intersections anywhere in the city. Verveer says he tried to cover situations where people might have their wallets out and feel vulnerable.

"This is an issue that just won't go away," said Verveer, who has represented Downtown for a decade and heard years of complaints from store owners and customers. He hopes the ordinance - which tries to strike a balance between the free speech rights of panhandlers and the rights of the rest of us to feel safe - will get a vigorous debate before becoming law.

With the issue coming up, it's time for a gut-check about your own feelings. Here's my experience:

On a warm April day, I shopped State Street with two teenagers on a mission to find flat shoes embellished with sequins they saw in a catalog. We found them, at Urban Outfitters and at Art Gecko.

We were accosted about four times between the 400 and 600 blocks of State Street. I wasn't bothered, but I did wonder whether we should feel guilty shopping for more shoes when some people have only the ratty pair that they're wearing.

My daughter's 13-year-old friend gave advice about dealing with panhandlers, courtesy of her brother, a State Street barista.

"Give money to the nice ones that tell jokes or play music," she said. "Not the guys who just shake cups in your face." Verveer says people who play music for spare change won't be hit by the ordinance. I'm glad, because the sax player by the Orpheum and the trumpeter near Frances Street are part of what makes State Street more fun than a sterile mall.

I like Verveer's middle course between New York City-style violent ejection of the homeless and a free-for-all with no rules.

Of course, I'm probably more hardened to panhandling than many State Street shoppers. Having penniless, ungrateful, nonworking people hit me up for cash is a daily experience - I'm the mother of teenagers.

Council Handles Lakes, Panhandling, Dejope

In Addition To Approving More Money For Madison's First Public Pool, The City Council Tackled A Host Of Other Issues Tuesday Night. The Council Updated The City's Panhandling Law, Approved A Liquor License For Dejope And Delayed Taking Action On A Report On The City's Beaches. Here's A Rundown On The Actions Taken.

Wisconsin State Journal :: LOCAL/WISCONSIN :: B1

Wednesday, June 8, 2005

\ Tighter panhandling controls

The issue

Many Madisonians want to help people who struggle with poverty, alcoholism and mental health issues, but aggressive and chronic panhandling around State Street is disruptive, intimidating and creates an image that the area is not safe.

What council did

Unanimously updated the city's 20-year-old panhandling law to create zones across the city that ban panhandling within 25 feet of any open sidewalk cafe, 12 feet of a building that contains a business, 20 feet of any business building entrance and 25 feet of any intersection.

What it means

The city already prohibits menacing or panhandling within 50 feet of an Automated Teller Machine anywhere in the city, and panhandling in the area of the sidewalk close to businesses on State Street and Capitol Square. The changes add restrictions around businesses and busy intersections.

New Panhandling Law Is Making Big Change

Wisconsin State Journal :: FRONT :: A1

Monday, August 1, 2005

Aubre Andrus Wisconsin State Journal

It's been only a month since Madison strengthened its panhandling ordinance -- requiring panhandlers to stay farther from businesses, sidewalk cafes and intersections throughout the entire city -- but observers already say a safer and quieter State Street has emerged.

Charlie Rogers, who works at the State Street hat shop Sacred Feather, said the difference is "night and day."

"Come down and see the new State Street," Rogers said, adding that instead of seeing 10 panhandlers a day outside of his store, he'll see four. "The guys have worked out a schedule so they all take turns."

Before the law was changed, panhandlers weren't allowed on sidewalks between the buildings and the light poles.

Now they must be more than 20 feet from business entrances, sidewalk cafes and intersections and at least 12 feet from non-residential buildings.

Since the ordinance was changed, panhandlers don't seem to be using even the areas on State Street where they are allowed, said Ald. Mike Verveer, 4th District, who introduced the amendment in April. "It's really as if panhandling has gone away overnight Downtown even though the law specifically does not do that."

Madison Police Department officers have informed known panhandlers of where they can legally stand, but a lot of information has been passed on between panhandlers by word of mouth, according to Kip Kellogg, State Street neighborhood officer for Madison Police Department.

"It's always been a case of more education than enforcement," Kellogg said.

Panhandlers are allowed one warning but will receive a ticket for about \$150 if caught in an illegal location. The second offense within 12 months is a citation for almost \$300.

Verveer said crimes associated with panhandling have reduced "dramatically," especially the number of arrests and people taken to the alcohol detoxification center.

"The anecdotal belief that most of the panhandlers are chronic alcoholics has proven to be true," Verveer said. "When the source of money and the source of alcohol dries up, they go elsewhere or they don't feed their addiction as much." Kellogg agreed, noting that officers who work on State Street in the afternoon have seen fewer "detox runs."

"The cycle has been broken," said Kellogg, adding that Madison Police plan to conduct a study at the end of September to compare the number of calls to detoxification centers received in July, August and September to the numbers generated during the same period last year.

Kellogg is not aware of any arrests that have been made for violations of the ordinance. Within the past month, he has issued two tickets for menacing panhandling.

"It's only been 3 1/2 weeks, so we have to see what the long-term impact is, but the short term is certainly very nice," Kellogg said.

In the past, stores have received complaints from customers who felt threatened or irritated by panhandlers at store entrances.

Sports World, 510 State St., has a bench in front of the store where many panhandlers would sit, said Emma Walker, an employee.

"It's been a big improvement," Walker said of the amendment. "I think it's actually gone down significantly on State Street overall."

Art Gecko, 507 State St., also has benches outside the store where panhandlers gathered.

"There's definitely fewer panhandlers out but they also started just going around the corner," Andrea Barnes, an employee, said.

Although there are fewer panhandlers near her workplace, Barnes is unsure of how she feels about the amendment. Barnes said she feels people have the right to panhandle wherever they want, but as a woman, she gets harassed a lot.

Verveer said he never thought the amendment would have such a positive effect on the Downtown area and called the change "remarkable."

"It made a difference to people of all walks of life that enjoy the Downtown -- merchants, shoppers and residents alike. The cops love it," Verveer said.