

PANHANDLING BAN APPROVED

Council expands no-begging zone

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PANHANDLING WILL BECOME ILLEGAL in downtown Atlanta as soon as Mayor Shirley Franklin signs an ordinance adopted Monday by the City Council.

The council, after two months of debate and boisterous public meetings, voted 12-3 to ban spoken requests for money in the central part of the city.

The ordinance covers a "tourist triangle" that contains the soon-to-open Georgia Aquarium, Centennial Olympic Park, the AmericasMart and several major hotels. At the last minute, the council expanded the panhandling ban to include the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site east of downtown.

"Shame on them. Shame on the mayor. Shame on everybody," homeless advocate Anita Beaty said after the vote, which triggered outbursts and several arrests.

Council President Lisa Borders asked police to remove the protesters, and police took at least seven people into custody, including former Councilman Derrick Boazman, an outspoken critic of the panhandling restrictions

"What we see is a travesty," Boazman said as he was placed in a police van outside City Hall. "This was ordered by big business and the mayor."

The former councilman was later seen outside the 24/7 Gateway Center, a homeless service center, talking with fellow protesters.

Supporters of the ordinance welcomed the crackdown on begging, which they say is a nuisance and hurts the city's image.

"What a relief," said Carlotta Ungaro, a government liaison for the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, as she left City Hall.

The panhandling ban goes into effect immediately after Franklin signs it, but authorities probably will take a "short time" thereafter to implement it, said the mayor's chief of staff, Greg Pridgeon. "She has every intention to sign it," he said.

Monday's vote followed heated debate among council members and the public. Council members Ivory Lee Young Jr., Natalyn Mosby Archibong and C.T. Martin voted against the ban.

Borders repeatedly called for quiet from the standing-room-only crowd of more than 200. For more than three hours, about 80 people addressed the council on the issue.

Business people wearing red "Stop panhandling, save jobs" buttons spoke of the annoyance and intimidation of panhandlers, who they said drive away tourists and their money and generally make life miserable downtown.

Advocates for the homeless and the poor — many of them wearing red T-shirts bearing the name of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. — criticized the panhandling ban as harsh and unnecessary.

"You have laws on the books right now that deal with aggressive panhandling," Elisabeth Omilami, director of the Hosea Feed the Hungry campaign, told the City Council. "We don't need anything different. You don't have to do this."

The existing panhandling laws, which outlaw pushy begging, aren't adequate to protect the thousands of Georgia State University students who dodge panhandlers on their way to classes downtown, said Rick Venetico.

Venetico, 21, a vice president of the student government association, said students feel unsafe. "If you ladies and gentlemen pass this ordinance, our city can be a safer place to live and work," he said.

The boundaries of the ban extend from Martin Luther King Jr. Drive northward to Ralph McGill Boulevard and from Marietta Street eastward to Piedmont Avenue. Another area in which begging will be banned is enclosed by Auburn Avenue, Jackson Street, Irwin Street and Boulevard and contains the new Ebenezer Baptist Church and the King historic site.

Opponents contend the ban violates free speech rights, but Stacey Abrams, the city lawyer who drafted the ordinance, said it is legally defensible because it is limited to two specific parts of the city. She said her conclusion is based upon the successful defense of similar bans in other cities, such as Fort Lauderdale, Fla., which banned panhandling along a five-mile strip of beach.

Atlanta officials say the ordinance will steer repeat offenders into the 24/7 Gateway Center, which opened last month in what was once the

city jail. Critics contend the center is no solution to homelessness.

