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Tully: Panhandlers' hands still out in Downtown Indianapolis

A week after he was elected mayor, Greg Ballard walked around Downtown with me for more than an hour on a chilly afternoon, talking about his plans and hopes for the city he would soon lead.

At one point, we passed a common Downtown sight: a disheveled man who sat on the sidewalk with a cup and a sign asking for money.

"You won't see that in six months," Ballard said that day in November 2007, confidently promising to take steps to rid Downtown -- at least in large part -- of the panhandlers who seek money from visitors every day, to the frustration of many business leaders.

You might call the end of this [story](#) the education of Greg Ballard.

From coast to coast, he soon learned, cities have long struggled with the problem of panhandling and its sister headache, so-called passive solicitation -- the kind that involves a sign and a jingling cup but no direct or personal request for help. In Indianapolis, those problems have not only remained since Ballard took office nearly four years ago, but in many ways seem to be worse.

Pick a day to stroll Downtown and you're guaranteed to pass corners of key intersections filled with people who ask passers-by for money -- quietly or otherwise. Pick an evening and you'll see just as many panhandlers bugging diners and theatergoers out on the town. The problem also can be found near many highway exit ramps and in some well-traveled neighborhoods.

"You're definitely seeing an upward trend," Steven Shattuck, a 27-year-old Downtown worker, told me this week. "I went for a walk yesterday afternoon, and it struck me how many people were out asking for money. It doesn't really bother me, but I know a lot of people have concerns about Downtown's image, especially with the Super Bowl coming."

He's not imagining things. Tuesday evening, two hours before tipoff of the final Indiana Fever playoff game, Downtown intersections were peppered with people, young and old, seeking to separate pedestrians from some of their cash. At Meridian and Maryland streets, for instance, three of four corners were worked by people with sad-looking faces and heart-tugging signs that claimed homelessness, hunger or poverty.

A block away, at Maryland and Illinois, two of the four corners were occupied by men shaking cups and holding signs. "Homeless Please Help," one of the signs read. Farther south on Illinois,

two girls sat in front of a newspaper rack and stared ahead. One held a sign saying she was homeless and pregnant; the other's sign said she was single with five kids.

To get a sense of the problem, I contacted Tamara Zahn, president of Indianapolis Downtown Inc., a group that has struggled with this complex issue for years.

"The number of panhandlers and passive solicitors in Downtown impacts perceptions of public [safety](#)," she said. "That is a problem."

When I asked the mayor about the issue at a debate this week, he noted several points. First, he said, most of those asking for money are not homeless, regardless of what their signs say. Second, it's hard to legislate such behavior out of existence. People have the right to sit on the ground and hold signs. Third, the city has worked hard to step up enforcement of aggressive panhandling.

That appears to be true. Today's panhandlers are quieter and less aggressive than those in the past. As I walked by a woman who sat on the ground and held a sign Wednesday evening on a Meridian Street corner, she softly apologized for bothering me by asking for money. Across the street, another woman who sat on a milk crate simply said "Have a nice evening" to everyone who walked by. Arrests for aggressive panhandling have dropped from 162 in 2007 to 82 last year.

Still, the large number of panhandlers is a problem for a city that relies heavily on its ability to sell its bustling Downtown as [safe](#) and vibrant to hundreds of thousands of convention visitors each year. And many Downtown advocates think panhandling is more coordinated than in the past, essentially with bosses who oversee and direct some of the people who solicit for handouts.

The bottom line, however, is this: The city can take steps to control panhandling, particularly among those who are confrontational or abusive. But attempts in other cities to curtail passive solicitation have largely been struck down by the courts.

"You can't ask for money; we all know that," said a man named Bobby who has sought money from people Downtown for more than a decade. Wednesday afternoon, he wore a camouflage jacket and sat on the ground near an Arby's restaurant, holding out a White Castle cup as pedestrians passed by. Several hours later, I saw him sitting in front of St. Elmo Steak House.

"There's more money over here," said Bobby, who a few years ago stepped in to shield me from another panhandler who had started screaming for no reason as I walked Downtown.

The city has taken steps to address the problem during Ballard's tenure, although those measures haven't been effective enough. The most high-profile move has been the installation in Downtown of several donation boxes where people can contribute money to groups that assist homeless residents. Critics have mocked the boxes as an ineffective baby step. In a symbol of that, panhandlers occasionally can be seen leaning up against the donation boxes as they ask for money. But, advocates say, the goal is to heighten public awareness to the reality that most of those who ask for money on Downtown street corners are not homeless.

"If you want to help people who actually are dealing with homelessness, don't give money to people on the street," implored Michael Hurst, program director for the Coalition for Homelessness Intervention and Prevention. "Many are scam artists, and most are not homeless."

The group conducted a series of studies of those who asked for money Downtown in 2008 and 2009, he said, and found that no panhandlers and only a small portion of passive solicitors were homeless. Still, he knows many people believe what they read on those ever-present cardboard signs, and that the faces of those holding the signs lead many to want to help. And many panhandlers, homeless or not, indeed do need help.

But, Hurst said, your money is much better spent by giving to organizations that assist the homeless, such as Horizon House or Wheeler Mission Ministries. Dollars given out on the street, Hurst said, do two things: They encourage scammers, and they keep those who actually need help from getting the wrap-around services that local homelessness organizations provide.

"The answer to ending panhandling is for people to stop giving them money," he said. "And you can do that with a full heart."

Hurst said the donation boxes dotting Downtown have brought some awareness to the problem. But they have collected only about \$12,000 over the past three years. Those metal boxes, after all, have to compete with living and breathing people who sit on so many corners.

Wednesday, I stopped and talked to a man who said his name is Mark. With dirty jeans and messy hair, he held a sign that said, "19 and homeless." He told me he collects about \$5 a day and insisted he truly is homeless; he said he lives in a tent by the White River. I have no idea whether his story is true or a lie. Either way, a life of sitting on a Downtown street corner isn't adequate.

So what can be done? Plenty.

The person who is mayor for the next four years -- whether it's Ballard or Democrat Melina Kennedy -- should work to create a dedicated local stream of money to fight the very real problem of homelessness. He or she must intensify efforts to fight aggressive panhandling -- and help create more collaboration on this issue among police, prosecutors, judges and those who run the jails. They also should lead a much more ambitious communications strategy aimed at discouraging visitors and locals from opening their wallets on street corners.

Those generous people who give directly to panhandlers unwittingly contribute to a worsening problem. They need to understand the reality: There are better ways to help.

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