



TO: City of Portland
FROM: Panhandling Ad Hoc Committee
DATE: June 8, 2017
SUBJECT: Panhandling in downtown Portland

I recently was vacationing in Portland, specifically Old Port with family as it was always a place of beauty and charm. We were so turned off from all the panhandlers around the beautiful area. They not only sat in the front of shops and restaurant entrances, they spread out into the walkways and even approached us asking for money and other items. It made us so uncomfortable that we left the area early and did not go into the shops we had always loved in the past... It is such a shame that the city doesn't do something about this as Old Port was once a beautiful, safe place to visit. Sadly, we certainly will not be back though." —Lisa T, visitor

THE ISSUE

Safety is foundational to ensuring the vibrancy of downtown Portland. The perception of a lack of safety and security within the downtown is directly affecting the economic vitality of the City. As a result, the City's image has been adversely impacted as it relates to public safety. The ad-hoc committee's initial focus was on panhandling, but research and feedback from stakeholder groups revealed that substance use disorder, behavioral and mental health issues, as well as a gap in rehabilitation and treatment also have a profound impact on safety issues. The committee recommendations will reflect Portland Downtown's willingness to partner with the City and to advocate for greater measures to ensure increased awareness of safety concerns and policy measures to help counteract both perceived and real issues involving personal safety in downtown.

BACKGROUND

- Portland Downtown's Panhandling Ad Hoc Committee was established in December 2016 and formed in January 2017 by a group of constituents within the Downtown district.
- The committee was deemed necessary by the Board of Directors as a result of numerous complaints, concerns, and surveys that had been presented to the Board, in both formal and informal capacities. Over the last few years, the reports of issues with panhandling increased and specifically focused on the issue of the perception of an unsafe downtown for residents, workers, and visitors.
- Portland Downtown determined that addressing the issue was a priority for the organization based on its own mission statement, which is to maintain a clean and safe downtown while building and promoting a vibrant business, residential and tourism destination. The Board of Directors also determined that the best method to address the issue was to form a sub-committee that would provide a recommendation to its District and Community Services Committee, which would then vote to bring it before the Board of Directors.
- Since mid-January, the committee has been meeting on a weekly basis. The committee is comprised of a diverse group of residents, non-profits, homeless advocates, small businesses, property owners and small business owners.
- The committee created a goal and timeframe. The goal was to prepare recommendations for a plan of action to address the issue. It was agreed that the recommendations would satisfy certain criteria:
 - Impactful towards the issue at hand
 - Clear and concise with measurable results
 - Reasonable probability of enactment
 - Garnered the support of the larger Portland community, where possible

- Must not rely 100% on Portland Downtown’s staff and resources
- The date for completion of the recommendation was tentatively set for July 1, 2017.
- The steps would include research, analysis, and formulation of recommendations.
- Research was conducted via three different methods:
 - Outreach to over 20 local stakeholder groups including business, legal, and social service groups that comprise the downtown landscape. These groups were invited to Portland Downtown’s offices to partake in conversations and small focus groups to gather feedback.
 - Contacted cities across the nation (similar to Portland in size, demographics, a vibrant tourism economy, and a defined downtown area) to collect information and helpful input. These cities had taken a variety of actions to address panhandling and the committee was interested in understanding their challenges and triumphs.
 - Direct outreach and conversations, via email and in-person with downtown constituents. A public forum was held at the Maine Historical Society in April 2017 as an additional opportunity to gather input and to provide information to the public.

KEY FINDINGS

- Research and discovery confirmed that one of the primary reasons that residents, workers and tourists feel unsafe in the Downtown area is due to panhandlers.
- While the data shows that Portland has a low crime rate, what is not easily measured through quantitative data is people’s perception of safety.
- Not all panhandlers are homeless and many solicit to acquire discretionary funds to fill the gap from social services and purchase items they need or want.
- Every panhandler has a different story, some acting on a perceived opportunity versus a real need.
- There are different types of panhandlers with the volume increasing during summer months with seasonal transient travelers who beg by choice, are not local, are not seeking permanent housing through local programs, and tend to loiter in groups. The presence of these transient groups causes implied intimidation—as they aggressively ask for money and target tourists at restaurants, hotels and bars.
- High concentrations of panhandlers exist in the city due to the proximity and access to social services. Individuals who choose to give are usually acting on an immediate sense of wanting to help those that are in need.
- Based on these key findings uncovered by the committee, a multi-pronged approach is advised to lessen panhandling activity in the downtown district and to reduce the negative perceptions of safety that are held by downtown workers, residents and visitors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The committee’s recommendations have been classified into three categories:

1. Safety
2. Education and Awareness
3. Future Efforts

Safety

Proactive policing and enhanced perception of safety

- Explore ways to support the City in increasing police patrols in Downtown, with an emphasis on foot and bicycle patrols
- Seek ways to expand the Portland Downtown's Cadet program
- Encourage and support the City in engaging in more conversations with downtown constituents, including merchants and residents, with regards to their perceived safety in downtown and finding solutions to improve the level of safety
- Work to understand how the PPD interprets the existing abusive solicitation ordinance and how it is enforced

Refine the current abusive solicitation ordinance

- Suggest a refinement of the ordinance with parameters, which may include:
 - Proximity to banks and ATMs
 - Entrances and exits of ground-floor businesses
 - Captive audience solicitation
 - Traffic interference
 - Private property
 - Within 12 feet of outdoor café
 - Asking more than once
 - After dark
 - No groups

Education and Awareness

Establish an alternative program for giving

- Develop a fundraising and awareness campaign that engages downtown business owners who could serve as outlets for information and possible donation collection. The campaign could be organized and launched by Portland Downtown with the goal of establishing a sustainable plan (potentially administered by a 501(c)3, or specific non-profit organization.)
- Explore alignment with current Portland Downtown fundraising efforts such as popular annual events

Educating panhandlers and givers

Portland Downtown will lead an effort to develop two targeted campaigns with hand-outs providing information and resources.

- For panhandlers:
 - Provide information on local resources—(ie. food, shelter, work and substance use)
 - Deliver via direct contact by willing assistance organizations and PD cadets
 - Include information about the abusive solicitation ordinance
- For givers, public and visitors:
 - Provide information describing the variety of types of panhandlers that exist (local, seasonal, homeless, not homeless seeking discretionary resources)
 - Provide information on why giving directly is not the most assured way of assisting Portland's needy
 - Provide information on the abusive solicitation ordinance, what is tolerated and what is not
 - Encourage individuals to call 911 or the non-emergency number if they feel concerned
 - Evaluate whether a separate, 3 digit non-emergency number may be helpful and easy for merchants and visitors to use

- Help visitors understand that the City of Portland wants to help its community by giving through alternative methods
- In addition to hand-outs, consider appropriate signage (bus stops, parks)
 - Coordinate in partnership with other members of the Economic Development Stakeholders Committee (Visit Portland, Chamber of Commerce, Creative Portland, and the City of Portland)

Future Efforts

Analyze success of the Portland Opportunity Crew and evaluate for possible expansion

- Acquire data and feedback from the City of Portland to assess the effectiveness of the pilot program
- Consider expansion to include downtown (in addition to medians)

Produce and track data to inform future efforts

- Data is essential for informing future policies and programs
- Identify available metrics to establish a baseline
- Encourage City to gather data around perceptions of safety
- Work with the police department to capture quantitative data and statistics
- Continue to gather and report data from PD's cadet program
- Encourage the City of Portland's Health & Human Services committee to establish a Safety Awareness Committee
- Establish a data clearing house for information and establishing outcomes

PARTNERSHIP

Portland Downtown will be a partner through:

- Continued funding for the summer cadet program, with a consideration of expanding the program in future years as demand requires
- Assistance with distribution of materials for the City of Portland's Text to Donate program through our downtown constituents, small business owners, etc, with the intention of encouraging financial support of the program to grow the Portland Opportunity Crew initiative
- Providing opportunities to engage with City of Portland's police department and other staff and stakeholders to have open conversations about downtown safety and concerns and to work together to find solutions
- To continue to fund the Milestone Foundation's Home Team program, with the consideration of growing the contribution as our budget allows in the coming years, and in response to increased demand
- Continue to host successful events, such as Shop For A Cause, which offer partnerships to nonprofit organizations and result in raising awareness and contributions for those organizations ranging from \$3,500 to \$10,000 per event (Past recipients have included Preble Street and Milestone Foundation)
- Creation of a 2017 summer position at Portland Downtown, which will produce a report on how the existing social service and outreach organizations can better communicate and collaborate toward better outcomes

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