

Dear Members of the Arcata City Council,

There is no doubt that excessive panhandling has become an issue for many community members here. And within the larger group of panhandlers exist a malcontent few who are aggressive, intimidating, and outright disrespectful in their actions. There is also a need to cultivate an environment where all community members feel safe and able to engage in their day-to-day activities, may they be business owners, workers, students, or any other resident. But Ordinance 1399 does not offer the tools to truly and effectively tackle the issue of panhandling and cultivate this kind of environment.

For one, the proposed blanket restrictions on panhandling, which includes most areas of the city, would not only target the segment of the community who, by their actions, are helping to foster an environment of unease or fear, but also other members of the community who solicit funds for causes that are positive and productive, including charities, non-profits, high school organizations, and even the Girl Scouts. It is unfair to deny these legitimate fundraising activities because of the actions of a few disrespectful panhandlers.

These blanket restrictions, even if they have been upheld in the courts, essentially restricts the free speech of all community members and should be opposed, even if solely on philosophical grounds, by the council.

Although making “aggressive panhandling” a crime would provide another “tool in the tool belt,” the current tools at the disposal of law enforcement are not being fully utilized. The Center for Problem-Oriented Policing has stated in a handbook about panhandling that even if such laws can stand up to legal challenges, enforcing such laws can be difficult “partly because few panhandlers behave aggressively, and partly because many victims of aggressive panhandling do not report the offensive to police.”

The same handbook goes on to say that enforcement alone does not solve the issue of panhandling and that informal means of tackling panhandling are much more effective than formal enforcement. Public education campaigns can be an effective way of empowering community members to say “no”, to call the police when aggressively panhandled, to give their money to social welfare organizations, such as the North Coast Resource Center, that are tackling the root issues of the problem, and to help cultivate an environment of mutual respect for all stakeholders involved.

This ordinance, if passed, will merely perpetuate, and add more fuel to, an already tense, if not hostile, situation. And this ordinance, even if not crafted for this purpose, will be perceived by members of this community as a backdoor way to push the homeless and transients out of the business and tourist centers of the city, and such perceptions could tarnish the image of the city. Arcata is better than this ordinance.

I urge the council to vote against this ordinance, and to instead direct law enforcement to use their now-available resources to enforce current laws, while also engaging in a massive public outreach campaign to accomplish the above stated objectives. Let's be creative and create a solution that truly tackles the roots of panhandling, not merely a branch.

Thank you for your consideration.

Name (printed): _____

Name (signed): _____

Address: _____

Telephone Number: _____