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Panhandlers continue protests in NoHo

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A crowd of 80 to 100 students, Northampton residents and panhandlers marched last night in the latest of a series of protests against Ordinance 285-53, which seeks to implement limitations on panhandling and related activities.

Protesters held signs that read, "No free speech if you are disabled" and "No free speech if you need help."

If passed, the ordinance would ban people from asking for money within 15 feet of any bus stop, ATM machine, public telephone, bank or public bench.

The protest was organized by the Poverty is Not a Crime Committee (PINAC), and Bands United for the Voices of the Oppressed. The PINAC organization, whose members come from all walks of life, works in collaboration with the Freedom Center, Arise for Social Justice in Springfield and Social Change in Mind.

There was a Mock Ordinance Enforcement demonstration at 4 p.m. Black tape was placed on the ground, showing the areas in which people would not be allowed to panhandle under the ordinance. Protesters held signs at the boundaries.

This was followed by a march in which protesters chanted slogans demonstrating their opposition to the ordinance. After the protest, there was a public hearing at the Public Safety Subcommittee meeting, where various residents of Northampton spoke out against the ordinance.

"This is a constitutional issue" said Caty Simon, of the PINAC, who said this ordinance would infringe upon free speech.

"I understand this is a hot topic," said Mayor Mary Higgins in response to the protest. "We are trying to

provide a reasonable place and manner restriction on soliciting behavior, whether it is panhandling or raising money for organizations, that allows everyone to share the sidewalk amiably," Higgins explained.

She also added that "there is no prohibition of panhandling in the ordinance. It simply sets up a place and time that it can happen."

Simon said that if the ordinance is passed, "It will be incredibly difficult for people to panhandle. They say only 21 percent of the city will be affected but that 21 percent that will be affected is the area where most people will be out walking."

Opponents of the ordinance were handing out pamphlets to tell people Northampton was undergoing gentrification, the process of forcibly moving low income people into slums, ghettos or jails when wealthier people move into a community and find comfort in being surrounded by people of their own class.

"They say it is about safety but it is not," Samon said. "Middle class people are 20 times more likely to be attacked by people from their own class."

Higgins said Northampton has taken very seriously its responsibility to the town's underprivileged residents and will continue to do so by providing shelter, meals and permanent housing to those who need them, and is working with non-profit organizations to do this.

"This ordinance is part of an effort to push undesirable people out of an area that is to be a business improvement district," said PINAC member Nina Ashanti a. "It is important that we protest to show our outrage. This ordinance is not being voted on by the people, it is being voted on by city council members."

Northampton police officer Andy Trushaw said the police were not notified of the protest.

"It would be nice to have had a heads up so we can set it up and make it safer for people," said Trushaw.

"Even if this ordinance is passed, we the people will intensify our efforts and resist," Ashanti a. said.

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