

SunSentinel



Sun-Sentinel Editorial

November 16, 2014

County summit needed on homelessness

It is good news that the battle between the city of Fort Lauderdale and activists fighting for the right to feed the poor on the beach is headed to a [Broward County](#) courtroom.

Let the courts give this supercharged issue a needed time-out.

Let a judge determine whether Fort Lauderdale's new ordinance passes constitutional muster or needs a tweak.

And let our community use this time to convene a bigger conversation about the societal challenges posed by people who are homeless, particularly those who are chronically homeless and don't want to change their lifestyles.

For too many days now, protesters with picket signs and bullhorns have commandeered the spotlight and used it to hammer Broward's center city on the world stage.

Sure, Fort Lauderdale officials could have done a better job of engaging stakeholders on the new ordinance that regulates outdoor feeding sites. Before instituting strict enforcement, it would have been helpful if everyone understood the lay of the land, particularly where all the feeding sites are and which houses of worship are willing to open their doors to feed the homeless.

The city also should have anticipated the response of Arnold Abbott, the 90-year-old activist who's spent much of his later life feeding the homeless and challenging the city for the right to do so.

Because while a caring man, Abbott now exudes a sense of entitlement. He says he'll move his Wednesday beach feeding indoors only if given an oceanfront hotel dining room. "If it has a view of the beach, I would possibly consider it," he said.

Can you imagine? This standoff has gotten way out of control.

So let us dial back for a moment, while the court weighs in.

Let us figure out alternatives that meet human needs and balance community concerns.

For it is past time to hear the voices of everyday citizens who deal with the debris, defecation and safety challenges posed by these outdoor programs.

Let's consider the concerns of the Fort Lauderdale Woman's Club, which has trouble scheduling events because of the throngs of homeless people who regularly congregate next door for a free meal in Stranahan Park.

Let's hear from business owners who must regularly clean their entryways of garbage left by the homeless.

Let's hear from the leaders of suburban cities, who benefit from the region's economic heart. For they share responsibility for the homeless people arrested in their cities who are later released from jail in downtown Fort Lauderdale.

Most of all, let us hear from the leaders of [Broward County](#) government, particularly our county commissioners and our county administrator. For the challenge of homelessness is not just a Fort Lauderdale problem, it's a regional problem that demands a countywide solution.

The federal government requires Broward to have a 10-year plan to deal with homelessness. With the issue front-and-center, now is a perfect time to better communicate the plan.

With homeless shelters at or near capacity, there's been talk of converting the old stockade facility on Powerline Road into a shelter. Does that offer a solution? What are the other ideas?

This issue isn't going away. Rather, it could well worsen this winter as more homeless people gravitate south.

Given the world's attention, we can no longer afford to turn our collective heads. So let us take advantage of the timeout offered by a court challenge.

Let community leaders convene a regional summit on homelessness. Let's bring together the county and cities, the United Way and Salvation Army, the homeless coalitions, the neighborhood associations, the business leaders and the faith-based community to brainstorm immediate solutions and long-term strategies.

Then let's tell the world we not only have a heart, we have a plan.

Copyright © 2014, [Sun Sentinel](#)