



Fort Lauderdale: Let everyone catch breath on homeless issue

By Daniel Vasquez
November 19, 2014

The last thing Fort Lauderdale needs is more bad news about homeless people.

The last thing Fort Lauderdale needs is more agitation, more people stoking the embers.

It's time for everyone — on all sides of the issue — to take a deep breath.

At a terribly sensitive and emotionally raw time, commissioners removed a well-known homeless gadfly — wanted on a court warrant — from Tuesday night's public meeting. It happened shortly before the city issued a proclamation recognizing National Hunger and Homeless Awareness Week.

You can't blame Mayor Jack Seiler and city commissioners for having police deal with someone wanted on an outstanding warrant — whether the person is homeless or not. Given what is going on, it's not hard to believe Ray Cox was there to get arrested.

Let's hope not. The last thing Fort Lauderdale needs is more people poking at it.

Ever since the city rolled out a new ordinance regulating the feeding of the poor on the beach, Fort Lauderdale has become ground zero nationally and internationally for the issue of finding new ways to combat the problems and challenges that surround homelessness.

The city has been tarred with the name heartless. The city does not deserve it, but its actions and messages are getting lost in translation as activists continue to commandeer the conversation. The world is not listening to the city. They are listening to folks like Arnold Abbott, another activist who has received world-wide attention for defying the new ordinance. He's been cited by police several times in front of TV news cameras. Abbott practically owns the bully pulpit.

Tonight, Abbott is expected to be out on the sand again feeding the homeless. If the city cites him, he will end up back on TV, which will be broadcast far and wide. If the city cites him, it will again generate more bad press and risk losing tourist interest — and dollars.

If Abbott is out there to get cited again — and poke at the embers — who wins?

Again, it's time for everyone to take a deep breath.

The truth is Fort Lauderdale has a heart for the homeless. City leaders are trying to balance the needs of the homeless with the demands of residents and businesses who desire clean and safe streets. Fort Lauderdale is doing no worse than other major cities across the nation in this regard — except when it comes to the PR battle.

Cox is a regular at city hall meetings. He signs up to speak on various agenda items. He could have guessed the world would be watching when he got ejected — and arrested. But people wanted by police should be arrested.

On the other hand, Cox wants to be heard. The homeless want to be heard. It's time for the city to pause the enforcement of its latest homeless ordinance and engage the greater community on solutions. So, too, should agitators step back and recognize the city's concerns and best intentions are real.

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