

# Mayor, community groups unveil panhandling reduction plan

By: Kevin Rollason and Ryan Thorpe

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A plan to reduce panhandling unveiled Friday by Winnipeg Mayor Brian Bowman and community groups is being criticized as sweeping the problem — and people — off the street.

Bowman — along with groups including End Homelessness Winnipeg, Main Street Project, Siloam Mission, Downtown Winnipeg Business Improvement Zone, Winnipeg Police Service and the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority — announced three short-term actions to end what they called "unsafe panhandling."

They include setting up pilot programs to engage panhandlers and make connections to assist them, and give them temporary full-time jobs and help find them permanent employment.

But it was the third step — using "low-cost, physical elements on unsafe boulevards, leveraging better design to enhance safety" to prevent panhandlers from asking for money at these locations — that upset both Arthur Schafer, founding director of the Centre for Professional and Applied Ethics at the University of Manitoba, and architect Wins Bridgman, who created the pop-up toilet facility being used in downtown Winnipeg.

"I think this attacks our humanity," Schafer said on Friday. "We need to know about social problems. To make it invisible strikes me as indecent.

"The attempt to sweep them under the rug or push them from high-visibility spots so we don't see the homeless, the jobless or the alcohol- or drug-addicted... I think there is a real problem. There are solutions — all of which need social resources and government intervention."

Bridgman called the idea, "terrifying, absolutely terrifying.

"I'm almost speechless. It doesn't seem like the Winnipeg I know... We cannot close our eyes and hide from what people are doing. It seems against human decency."

Bowman, along with Lucille Bruce of End Homelessness Winnipeg, said the proposals were created by the community groups themselves, after meeting with the mayor last month.

The mayor said they "will be put into place immediately."

When asked what the barriers would look like, Bowman said he wouldn't call them barriers.

"I'm talking about building designs on boulevards," he said. "There are already some boulevards that have certain design elements that are in place that are designed, not only for just beautification, but also designed to not create platforms for people to set up shop on."

Bowman said one such place is on Main Street, south of Higgins Avenue, where the



raised boulevard is designed to ensure people use only the crosswalk when crossing the street.

When asked about the criticism, Bowman said: "I don't think the Main Street Project, Siloam Mission or other organizations on the front lines would say this if it didn't address the long-term root causes."

"We really are, ultimately, talking about the safety of folks who are panhandling in and amongst traffic," he said.

Bruce said when people are panhandling in dangerous places, you're not helping the person by giving them change, and the city has to come together as a community to find better ways to help.

"We believe that we all have a role to play in addressing the continuing supports for the vulnerable population," she said. "This is a fine example of what can be done when we work together, collectively, to tackle complex issues and find local solutions that can result in meaningful impact."

Jim Bell, Siloam Mission chief executive officer, said panhandling on the street is unsafe.

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"One little slip and one little fall and it could be tragic," Bell said. "We're playing with fire if something happens."

The groups also came up with some long-term strategies, to be led by End Homelessness Winnipeg, including: creating a public education and awareness campaign on unsafe panhandling and the other ways of helping those in need; coming up with environmental designs for new developments to discourage panhandling; and organize businesses and associations to employ panhandlers and other homeless people.

Meanwhile, mayoral candidate Jenny Motkaluk criticized Bowman for having, what she termed, "a campaign announcement."

"I think the message Winnipeggers need to take away from that is the mayor is very willing to use his office and public resources to support his re-election campaign," Motkaluk said, adding she will announce later in her campaign what she will do to address the issue of problem panhandling.

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*Reporter*

Ryan Thorpe likes the pace of daily news, the feeling of a broadsheet in his hands and the stress of never-ending deadlines hanging over his head.

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**Kevin Rollason**

*Reporter*

Kevin Rollason is one of the more versatile reporters at the Winnipeg Free Press. Whether it is covering city hall, the law courts, or general reporting, Rollason can be counted on to not only answer the 5 Ws — Who, What, When, Where and Why — but to do it in an interesting and accessible way for readers.

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