Bennington Banner

Citizens ask for change: Panhandling ordinance protesters swarm Four Corners

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BENNINGTON -- About 70 residents gathered at the Four Corners, the intersection of North Street, South Street, and Main Street, in Bennington on Sunday to protest the Town of Bennington’s newly adopted "panhandling” amendment.

The protests were organized by Bennington Selectman Jim Carroll and local activist and secretary of the Bennington Coalition for the Homeless Mary Gerisch. According to Carroll, the protest was organized primarily on social media and through word-of-mouth.

Gerisch said plans were made starting on Friday night, and quickly came together. The protests began just after noon and lasted about an hour.

Protesters’ signs lashed out at all aspects of the amendment. "Brother can you spare some sense?" read one, while others argued, "Sleeping in your car should not be a crime when it's all you have" and "Asking for help should not be illegal." Some of the signs asked for the town to focus on solving the problem of homelessness, rather than forcing the homeless out of Bennington. "Keep your coins, I want social change," read one, while a second read "Solve the problem, don't move it."

The amendment to the town's "Improper Use of Public Way and Abatement of Public Nuisances" ordinance, which was approved by the Select Board on Monday, but will not go into effect for 60 days, will heavily restrict soliciting in all forms, and ban what the amendment defines as "aggressive soliciting," on publicly owned property.

Particularly controversial is Article 17.4 Section I, which states that "No vehicle parked on a public street, highway, sidewalk or other public place shall be used as housing or for the purpose of sleeping beyond that of a short rest for the purpose of safety," which many worry will adversely affect the homeless population of Bennington.

Gerisch is currently working on a petition to appeal the amendment, however, the wording has not been finalized. According to Town Manager Stuart Hurd, the petition will need the signatures of 5 percent of registered voters, or about 500 people. After it is submitted to the Town Clerk, who will verify the signatures, the petition would be brought before the Select Board for a vote.

Gerisch was confident that she could get the 500 signatures, but wanted to make sure the legal wording in the petition was correct, to ensure that it wouldn't be dismissed on a technicality.

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