



Protest gets cool reception

As advocates mark a year since tents were raided in St. Petersburg, sympathy for the homeless wanes.

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Surrounded by homeless men and women dressed in worn clothing, the Rev. Bruce Wright stood on the steps of City Hall and demanded justice for the city's neediest residents on the anniversary of a raid where police slashed tents used for shelter.

But on Sunday, as cold winds blew through St. Petersburg, hardly anyone bothered to show up to listen to what the homeless and their supporters had to say.

One year after police cut up tents used by the homeless, triggering a national outcry that prompted city leaders to pledge to find a solution, sympathy for the men and women who live on St. Petersburg's streets seems to have waned.

In recent months, some homeless behavior such as creating a tent city in front of City Hall, leaving piles of clothing and personal items on public sidewalks and urinating near storefronts has alienated homeowners and business leaders across the city.

In response, business owners and downtown residents demanded City Hall take a tougher stance against loitering homeless. The City Council approved a series of strict new ordinances that expanded a ban on panhandling and gave the city the power to seize private property from the homeless. There was scant opposition from the public.

And when the homeless attempted to embarrass city leaders by protesting outside the Mahaffey Theater during the GOP presidential debate in November, the national media barely took note.

"People are simply tired of these antics," said City Council Chairman Jamie Bennett. "They are tired of the piles of trash and they are tired of that fight. Bruce keeps bringing in his troops, and it only antagonizes the situation and the overall population of St. Pete."

Advocates, who have been trying all year to revive the nationwide outrage that followed the tent-slashing raid, acknowledge that building public sympathy for a group of people grappling with substance abuse, mental illness and hygiene problems is a tough sell.

But shunning the homeless is not the answer, they say.

"We don't want businesses to have folks sleeping on their doorways either," said Eric Rubin, an advocate who used to be homeless.

"We are on the same page. But there has to be a solution that the business community, the city and the homeless can agree on. You can't just say, get them out of here, because that only exacerbates the problem."

Since the tent raid, city leaders have struggled to strike a balance between meeting the needs of the homeless and those of people who frequent downtown.

The city enacted stricter rules designed to keep new tent cities from forming on sidewalks. Plans to build a permanent shelter were tabled in the wake of statewide budget cuts.

But Mayor Rick Baker and police Chief Chuck Harmon also eventually called the raid a mistake, and city officials have since launched several initiatives to help the homeless, including a temporary outdoor shelter, Pinellas Hope, and a resource fair.

"There is a lot of good that has come out of something that was not so good," said Rhonda Abbott, the city's manager of social services.

"More people in our community are aware that this is not a government issue, this is not a social services issue, but this is a community issue and we all have to come together to try to manage it."

It is a message of unity homeless advocates echoed Sunday as they prepared to spend the night in front of City Hall in protest of the city's unfulfilled promise to create permanent shelter.

Wright compared the recently enacted ordinances targeting the city's homeless population with the Nuremberg laws of Nazi Germany. Those laws institutionalized many of the racial theories of Nazi ideology and deprived those of Jewish ancestry of most political rights.

"It's nothing but an attack on the homeless," Wright said.

His claim was moot to those fed up with the issue.

In the middle of the news conference, as a homeless man stepped forward to read a poem he had written about life on the street, several television news crews had already begun to pack up their gear.

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