

Wednesday, March 2, 2011

Panhandling puzzle

Ultimate decision should be county's, not state's

A decision on whether it's better to require panhandlers in Montgomery to obtain a permit for their solicitation or ban the practice altogether is one best reserved for county leaders, not state legislators.

The County Council is seeking a ban on panhandling along county roads, but needs approval from the state legislature to do so. County Executive Isiah Leggett has indicated he favors a permit system, and hasn't determined if he would support an outright ban. There are merits and drawbacks to each, but none is a state matter. The issue is scheduled to go before the county's state delegates on Friday.

County Council member Phil Andrews, chairman of the county's Public Safety Committee and a supporter of the ban, said the state delegation is divided on the issue, with some questioning how a ban would affect fundraising efforts by career firefighters. The firefighters' annual charity campaign can raise about \$200,000 in a three-day period, according to firefighters' union president John Sparks.

That's a reasonable concern, and no one wants to take away a proven method to help those in need. Alternatively, there are serious safety concerns with panhandling in roads, and either a ban or permitting system would help alleviate some of those.

The state delegation subcommittee has already indicated it supports a permitting system, but was unfavorable toward an amendment from Del. Aruna Miller that would allow the county to implement a ban. By not including Miller's language in the final version of a bill under consideration, the delegation undercuts the authority of the council and executive to determine the best way to provide for the safety of their constituents.

Addressing the safety concerns related to panhandling goes well beyond a permitting system or ban (which police believe would be easier to enforce). Additional outreach from homeless advocates would be an essential component of any legitimate strategy to reduce roadside solicitation (in 2010 there were an estimated 52 homeless camps in the county with about 600 people, according to a county report issued in January).

The council and executive need as much flexibility as possible in developing that strategy. The delegation can help by giving them as many tools as possible and backing state legislation that allows the county regulatory flexibility.