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Latest Grand Jury Report Focuses on Panhandling and Charity Soliciting

"Brother, can you spare a dime?" So goes the song popularized by Bing Crosby in 1932 lamenting the fate of an American Everyman during the Great Recession. Fast forward to 2015: Begging—also known as "panhandling"—is conspicuously still with us. In California, moreover, in-person soliciting for charities (and other causes) has become a near-universal feature of shopping malls, entertainment complexes and restaurant rows.

In this context, the 2014-2015 Ventura County Grand Jury received a complaint about soliciting in privately owned places open to the public, such as malls, within the City of Thousand Oaks.

The grand jury investigated by studying legal and social issues surrounding public soliciting. The grand jury reviewed Thousand Oaks' policies, procedures and practices related to soliciting and spoke with the city's public-safety officers. Jurors also conducted informal, in-person interviews with store managers, pedestrians and solicitors in Thousand Oaks shopping malls.

The grand jury learned key facts about the divisive legal issues surrounding soliciting, including that soliciting has been considered "free speech." Federal and California Supreme Courts differ in their interpretations of free speech rights within privately owned

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shopping malls, but the state has a right to its broader interpretation. The grand jury learned that local law enforcement efforts toward public soliciting fall into two main categories: compassion and criminalization.

The grand jury found that the Ventura County Sheriff's Office and its officers serving in the Thousand Oaks Police Department have an accurate understanding of the legal issues surrounding soliciting but that numerous members of the public may not. Innovative programs demonstrate that Thousand Oaks places a high priority on effectively managing soliciting using compassionate, community-oriented approaches. When surveyed, Thousand Oaks residents did not mention either "charity soliciting" or "panhandling" as a concern. However, "homelessness" did show up and some survey respondents may be mentally combining these issues.

The grand jury's recommendations to the Thousand Oaks City Council include the following:

- Add a "Frequently Asked Questions" (FAQ) section to its "Panhandling Resources" webpage;
- Develop a survey for panhandlers and charity solicitors, possibly to be conducted by volunteers, that could gather important local information; and
- Put questions about public soliciting as separate from homelessness into its biennial Community Attitude Survey.

The complete report may be accessed at www.ventura.org/grand-jury; click on the Annual Reports tab and consult "Fiscal Year 2014-2015."

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[Related photo and caption attached below]

Proposed photo caption: *A charity solicitor sits near the entrance of Cost Plus World Market in The Promenade shopping mall in Thousand Oaks. (Grand Jury photo)*

