

Fresno City Council to debate rules for recycling centers, shopping carts

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By George Hostetter

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Fresno's fight against public nuisances is moving to shopping carts and recycling centers.

The city's homelessness challenge is at the center of it all.

The City Council on Thursday will review four issues dealing with Fresno's quality of life.

First up is a workshop on recycling centers, in particular the neighborhood affairs often found in strip malls that focus on beverage containers. City officials have long viewed these small stations as magnets for clutter and spurs to crime. They want the green light to propose stiffer regulations on where and how they operate.

Then the council will consider two changes to the municipal code governing shopping carts.

The police department is proposing more than a dozen new rules designed to stem the flood of abandoned or stolen carts found in many Fresno neighborhoods.

The parks department wants shopping carts banned from parks, saying they spoil the city's scarce green space in a variety of ways.

Finally, the council will be asked to approve a deal with the Fresno Housing Authority that would spend \$1 million in rental assistance on the homeless or people in danger of losing their homes.

It's all part of Mayor Ashley Swearingin's effort to end chronic homelessness in Fresno with a "housing first" strategy.

City officials last summer razed four large downtown homeless encampments, saying they were public safety hazards. City officials said the camps won't be allowed to return.

City Hall and more than 20 nonprofits and government agencies are teaming to help the homeless find permanent housing.

City officials now want to use the law to change the incentives available to those who resist the housing-first strategy. City Hall's thinking: Recycling centers and shopping carts are central to the lifestyle and finances of many homeless people; government-sponsored housing looks better if that lifestyle becomes too risky or difficult.

"We're trying to deal with the situation the best we can with the resources we have," City Manager Bruce Rudd said.

Staff reports on recycling centers and shopping carts dwell on the law, not the homeless. The reports discuss the importance of recycling, the value of shopping-center aesthetics and ubiquity of four-wheeled carts abandoned far from their proper homes.

But Fresno for years has struggled with an immense homeless population, pegged conservatively in the hundreds and by many in the thousands. The person pushing a shopping cart loaded with aluminum cans and plastic bottles toward a raucous recycling center tucked in the corner of a big-box store's parking lot is a sight common to many Fresno neighborhoods.

The council will chew on ideas to alter that scene.

Council Member Clint Olivier is co-sponsoring the recycling-center workshop with the Swearingin administration. He said dozens of small business-owners in his central Fresno district have complained to him about recycling thieves.

"They are sick and tired of being ripped off," he said.

Olivier said he'll wait until he hears from council colleagues before suggesting solutions.

The planning department's report notes a distinction in recycling centers. There's the recycling station located near a neighborhood supermarket where beer cans and two-liter soda-pop bottles are turned in. And there are the bigger recycling centers confined to industrial areas.

Thursday's workshop focuses on the former. City officials are expected to discuss the theft of items from curbside recycling bins in residential neighborhoods, the over-concentration of recycling stations in some areas (south of Shaw Avenue, Rudd said) and the design of recycling stations.

Banning shopping carts from city parks would be a blessing to consumers, Rudd said. All too often, he said, someone will reserve an area at Roeding Park for a family reunion only to find a couple of men and a handful of carts already there. The ensuing conflict serves no one, Rudd said.

Police recommend about a dozen new rules for the regulation of shopping carts. The rules would put more pressure on businesses to retrieve stolen carts, give the city more authority to impound abandoned carts and require recycling centers to return lost carts to their owner.

If you go

What: Fresno City Council discusses recycling/shopping cart issues

Where: Fresno City Hall, 2600 E Street

When: Item during Thursday's regular City Council meeting is scheduled for 10:10 a.m.

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