

The State

[Next Story >](#)

Columbia planners set sights on adding to Vista

Are the homeless hurting Columbia's downtown businesses?

Published: July 16, 2013



A bicyclist passes by the Mast General Store at the Main and Taylor Street intersection.

FILE PHOTOGRAPH — The State

By BRYAN BETTS — bbetts@thestate.com

COLUMBIA, SC — Several business owners along Columbia's Main Street echoed concerns raised recently by a key retailer that the downtown homeless population is hurting the revitalization of the area. But many suggested the problem disproportionately affects businesses around churches and organizations serving the homeless closer to Elmwood Avenue.

Joe Kastner, owner of Paradise Ice, said he's witnessed an increase in vandalism and car break-ins during the past couple of months, suggesting that the "criminal aspect of the homeless has skyrocketed." He said he'd also experienced problems with panhandlers harassing customers both inside and outside his store.

"It's not that we're against homeless people, but something needs to be done with them other than letting them roam the streets," Kastner said.

Paradise Ice is a few doors down from Mast General Store, another business that has expressed concerns

about safety issues stemming from homelessness. Fred Martin, president of Mast, sent a letter to Columbia City Council members last week in which he wrote that the homelessness situation made it “virtually impossible for us, or anybody, to create a sustainable business model.”

But several business owners see the issue differently.

Andrew Zalkin, owner of the Columbia Army Navy Store near both Paradise Ice and Mast General Store, said he doesn't think the homeless hurt his business. But he suggested that it might harm newer businesses with a more suburban clientele less comfortable around panhandlers.

“It's been a problem always,” he said. “It's the perception of the problem that's the problem.”

Both Zalkin and Kastner said they often see homeless people walking back and forth between local churches and service agencies in the area, and they shared the view that homeless individuals from outside Columbia are being bused into the city from other cities in South Carolina because there are more services available for them.

But Mac Bennett, president and chief executive of United Way of the Midlands, said there is no evidence that he knows of to support that idea. He said that three-quarters of the homeless coming through the Transitions homeless shelter at Main Street and Elmwood Avenue had a last known address in Lexington or Richland counties.

He noted, however, that about 120 people from the Alvin S. Glenn Detention Center are dropped off at the bus station on Sumter Street each week through an agreement between the city of Columbia and Richland County, though he said that not all of those people are homeless.

Bennett added that there is no clear way to identify the homeless downtown, creating discrepancies in how people view the problem.

Representatives at businesses closer to the State House, including Something Special Florist and House of Fabric, said they had not had many issues stemming from the homeless population.

Dana Taylor Getz, a business partner at Frame of Mind, said that homeless individuals rarely enter the eyeglass frames store. She said she suspects that is because the store doesn't sell food or other goods the homeless might want.

But she said that she had been accosted by panhandlers on several occasions and once had to call the police after witnessing a fight between a homeless man and woman across the street. She shared the perception that there were more homeless individuals toward Elmwood Avenue and said she makes a point of turning toward the capitol building when she walks her dogs in order to avoid panhandlers.

“We just want a safe Main Street,” she said. “We want the worst of the problem to be that we don't have enough parking.”

Mark Plessinger, owner of Frame of Mind and one of the founders of First Thursdays on Main, voiced a similar opinion, saying that homelessness damages how people see the downtown area despite the city's ongoing attempt to revitalize Main Street.

“It doesn't give a very good image of where Main Street is coming and where it's trying to go,” he said.

[Back to Top](#)
[< Previous Story](#)