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Committees

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April 14, 2010

Dear Neighbors-

I am writing to update you on one of the most contentious issues in Venice -- the proliferation of homeless people living in cars and campers.

For the last couple years, I have been working on a two-pronged, "carrot and stick" strategy. My goal has been simple: through both enforcement and social services, rid our streets of the unsightly cars and campers that impact our quality of life. To be successful, we will need an approach that is measured, balanced, and humane.

In pursuit of this goal, I have fought for increased enforcement against vehicular living, and pursued establishment of Overnight Parking Districts (OPDs) that would ban non-residents from certain streets from 2 a.m. to 5 a.m. At the same time, I have been working to create a Safe Parking program, which would create designated areas where people living in vehicles could sleep lawfully, obtain counseling and social services, and begin the transition to permanent housing.

Last week, I introduced a council motion that would help fund the Safe Parking program -- just as I identified funding two years ago to start the creation of the OPDs. In the overheated political environment that accompanies this issue, the motion has generated a lot of attention and misunderstanding.

Let me respond to the most common questions and misperceptions I have heard:

What would your motions do?

I have introduced two motions, which allocate money for various programs and projects.

The first motion allocates money exclusively from the Venice Area Surplus Real Property Trust Fund for: improvements to the LAPD Substation at Venice Beach, after-school programs at Penmar Park and the Oakwood Recreation Center, recycling bins at Venice Beach, additional staffing for Recreation & Parks at Venice Beach, facility improvements at Venice Beach, maintenance and steam cleaning of bathrooms at Venice Beach, and design and construction of a new park at Driftwood Avenue on the Marina Peninsula.

The second motion allocates money from the Venice Area Surplus Real Property Trust Fund and other sources for a Safe Parking program for Venice and Council District 11.

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What is the Safe Parking program?

When we implement the OPDs, it is imperative that we also find a place for people to go, and give them an opportunity to move into housing and social services. To do that, we need a Safe Parking program, similar to successful programs in the beach communities of Santa Barbara and Eugene, Oregon.

In Santa Barbara, more than 20 different lots in scattered locations each allow a handful of people to park legally overnight (and only overnight) as part of a monitored and supervised program that provides counseling, and housing referral services. Combining parking restrictions and a Safe Parking program, Santa Barbara has significantly reduced the problem of vehicular living on city streets – and they did so in a humane and sensible manner. The similarly successful program in Eugene has different requirements and services, and has a great track record of moving people into housing.

My staff is working with community leaders, with the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, and with other service providers to craft a similar program that will work for Venice.

Why do we need a Safe Parking program? Why can't we just force outsiders from our neighborhoods?

We need to understand that the population of people living in their vehicles is diverse. Many people living in their cars are veterans and senior citizens who need a safe place to park and the right connection to services. Many are economically disadvantaged, in need of help getting back on their feet. And, yes, a sizeable number are taking advantage of free rent in a beautiful community, and need to be cited and told to move on.

A carrot and stick approach makes sense. A Safe Parking program will provide services and shelter to those who need it, while the OPDs will give us the tool we need to force from our neighborhoods those who have no need for services.

What is the Venice Area Surplus Real Property Trust Fund?

The trust fund, established in the 1970s, contains monies collected from the sale of surplus city properties in Venice. The money has restricted uses, and can be spent only on projects in Venice that benefit Venice and the entire City. In the past, the fund has been used to renovate Venice Beach, rebuild the Venice Pier, rehabilitate the Venice Canals and Ballona Lagoon, build the LAPD substation, create public art, create additional parking spaces, fund programs for at-risk youth, and pay for the initial studies to create OPDs.

I have been told the fund can only pay for physical projects. Is that true?

No. When the ordinance was created, it was restricted to capital projects. But several years ago, it was amended to allow broader uses, which has included a design study for new parking lots off Electric Avenue, a Safe Routes to School program to keep our children safe from gang violence, and the studies necessary to get the California Coastal Commission to consider the OPDs.

Still, the Venice monies can be spent only in Venice. How can you use this money for this purpose?

The money from the Venice fund is only one of many sources that will be used to be pay for the Safe Parking program. I'm also tapping other accounts that can be used for district wide or citywide programs, and we are also going to aggressively seek money from grants and other levels of government. LAHSA itself will bring resources to bear for the program. The percent of money spent from Venice will be commensurate with the services provided in Venice, and the number of vehicles from Venice neighborhoods that are moved off the streets and into the program. Leftover monies from Venice will revert back to the Venice property fund.

Does this mean that the Safe Program will be in effect only in Venice? Won't this attract people living in their cars to Venice?

The program will serve the entire 11th District, and I hope will be a model for the entire City. I anticipate we will have lots in other parts of the district, as well as in Venice. Money from other sources will be used to help pay for the program in the non-Venice parts of CD11.

The purpose of the Safe Parking program will be to draw those living in their vehicles off our residential streets, into a service continuum, and eventually into housing. Our intention is to demonstrably reduce the number of people living in their cars in Venice and in CD11.

Why don't you use the money to hire more cops for Venice or for CD11?

Venice is getting more police. I am pleased to report that between the end of April and Memorial Day Weekend, the Venice Beach detail will be augmented by 36 additional officers. The additional patrols will help us considerably with the enforcement of existing laws.

I understand the Grand Canal project still needs more money. Why not give it to that project instead?

The Grand Canal project is a worthy long-term project. It currently has \$400,000. On Friday, I also intend to submit a motion to reprogram \$700,000 to augment the Grand Canal project.

What is happening with parking restrictions to help combat vehicular living?

As you may know, I supported the creation of Overnight Permit Parking Districts, and funded our application for those districts before the California Coastal Commission. The Commission denied those applications. The commission decision is facing a legal challenge, and I hope it will be resolved in a way that allows us to implement the OPDs.

In the meantime, I recently submitted a motion directing our City Attorney and our Department of Transportation to amend the City's Oversized Vehicle Ordinance. This Ordinance currently restricts parking vehicles that are 22 feet long and 84 inches high from 2 am to 6 am. My motion, Council File 09-3036, requests that the municipal code be amended to restrict parking of Oversized Vehicles that are 22 feet long OR 84 inches high from 2 am to 6 am.

This amendment, in addition to my support of Overnight Parking Permit Districts, will provide our law enforcement entities with additional tools they can utilize as a means to address the large number of Oversized Vehicles that consistently park on Venice streets in the late and early morning hours.

Many people think you are allocating too much from the Venice Property Fund to this program. How do you respond?

I always listen to my constituents and try to strike a balanced and fair approach, especially on this issue. Just as I have sought to balance aggressive enforcement with a Safe Parking program, I intend to provide financial support to both efforts. Accordingly, on Friday, I will amend my motion, reduce the amount allocated for Safe Parking, and transfer the corresponding amount to help pay for the implementation of whichever restricted parking measures are legally permissible.

I welcome further questions and comments, and look forward to working with everyone on a solution to this pressing social problem which so severely impacts our quality of life.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bill", written in a cursive style.

BILL