

April 5, 2010

Seattle City Council

PO Box 34025  
Seattle, WA 98124-4025

Dear Councilmember,

We write to urge your support of the public safety measures recently proposed by Councilmember Tim Burgess. As individuals who work in the affordable housing and human services community, we believe it is important to share our perspective on the proposal before you.

Public safety in Downtown Seattle is deteriorating. It is routine to witness the buying and selling of drugs and drunk and disorderly conduct in plain view on City streets. It is common to experience aggressive solicitation from individuals collecting money for themselves or for organizations. Crime Downtown increased 22 percent between 2008 and 2009 – more than in any other neighborhood in the City – and one in four Seattle residents report they avoid Downtown because of a fear of personal safety.

We believe that a combination of new laws, additional officers, regular neighborhood foot patrols and increased services and housing will improve safety and the quality of life for everyone in the Downtown neighborhood.

We specifically want to address the anti-solicitation ordinance, which has generated a large amount of discussion and debate. Some have suggested in public testimony before the Council that the ordinance is “anti-homeless” or designed to “target the poor.” We couldn’t disagree more with these characterizations. We support this ordinance because it strikes a balance between protecting rights and restricting intimidating and aggressive behavior. The ordinance focuses on specific behaviors and applies to anyone who is aggressively soliciting in Seattle. The law would apply equally to individuals who are aggressively soliciting for their own benefit or the benefit of an organization. It provides very specific guidance to police officers charged with enforcing the law and should be approved as part of the overall proposal.

Improving public safety Downtown is critical to our ability to provide services to our clients. Consider that nearly half of all the subsidized housing in the City of Seattle is located Downtown. Approximately 100 human service providers are located Downtown and the percentage of people living in poverty Downtown is twice the national average. Taken together, there are more human service providers, shelter beds and subsidized housing units located in Downtown than in any other neighborhood in our state.

The individuals accessing these services are particularly vulnerable to street crimes and deserve safe streets and a safe neighborhood as much as anyone else.

The prevalence of drug and alcohol use on the streets makes it all the more difficult for individuals who are accessing treatment and working to remain clean and sober.

A successful retail sector Downtown is also important to our ability to provide services. As you are aware, the City relies significantly on retail sales tax collections to fund human services and Downtown is a major generator of sales tax. Upwards of 40 percent of the City's retail sales tax is collected Downtown. Furthermore, housing and human service providers lease out retail spaces on the first floor of housing projects Downtown. Plymouth Housing leases more than 60,000 square feet of commercial space in eight of our buildings Downtown. If we are not able to attract and retain retail tenants in these spaces our bottom line and our ability to provide services suffers.

It is for these reasons that we are supporting this reasonable and balanced proposal and urge your support.

Sincerely,



Paul Lambros  
Plymouth Housing Group



Rita Ryder  
YWCA



William Hobson  
DESC



Gary Wyckoff  
YMCA



Jeff Lilley  
Union Gospel Mission



Rick Friedhoff  
Compass Housing Alliance

cc: Mayor Mike McGinn  
City Attorney Peter Holmes