

*citizen comment
10/20/11*

ADDRESS

*mark v.
110465*

of Mark Venzke

to the Commissioners of Gainesville, Florida
at the regular meeting of that body
on Thursday, September 20, 2011

**concerning the petition of Occupy Gainesville
for an exception to the City Code
to allow said group continuous occupancy of the Downtown Plaza
from 2011.11.20 to 2011.12.31**

Mister Chairman, I am Mark Venzke of Gainesville. I am the community organizer for the Near South Neighborhood that is located immediately southeast of downtown Gainesville.

As you know, I have been working diligently for the last seventeen weeks—since five days after the murder of Angel Harris and one day after a homeless man brutally attacked me in Saint Francis House—to revitalize the Near South Neighborhood.

As you know, I have been an outspoken advocate for the interests of homeless people. Over the past decade, I have participated in demonstrations and even lead a one that have championed the interests of homeless people, and I have appeared before the Gainesville City Commission numerous times over the years to speak on their behalves.

As you also know, I have been actively participating in the Occupy Gainesville demonstration since the first day demonstrators appeared on the Downtown Plaza. You are probably aware that I have been an ardent advocate for all of the objectives of the October 2011 Coalition and the Occupy Wall Street Movements for probably thirty years. As you would expect, I am tremendously heartened at the appearance and growth of the Occupy Movement and the involvement of the scores of people—most of them young people—who have been pouring themselves into what I hope will be a correction of massive abuses by financial institutions, mortgage and securities companies, governments and large businesses and a renaissance of participatory, representative democracy.

Mister chairman, I am well aware of the value of conspicuous positioning in public spaces and in the public consciousness of the aims, symbols and agents of political and social change efforts. As such, I strongly support the occupations of select, prominent public spaces where those occupations do not cause undue adverse effects on the health, safety and moral welfare of the greater communities in which those occupations occur.

Mister Chairman, in working to revitalize the Near South Neighborhood, I am working to prevent additional Angel Harris tragedies and additional attacks on innocent people like myself. I am

working to virtually eliminate the presence of illicit substances of the kinds to which Angel became addicted and to virtually eliminate dangerous prostitution activity in which Angel was engaged to pay for the substances to which she was addicted.

Mister Chairman, continuous occupations may work in some communities but not in others. They may work in communities that have a minimal population of homeless people. They may work in communities that have elected officials and municipal staffs, and criminal justice systems that can distinguish between active and purposeful free speech activities and idle dwelling activities. They may work in communities that have no overly litigious public interest lawyers who indiscriminately extend the range of behaviors in which homeless people can engage. They may work in communities that have no activists who squander opportunities to engage in productive activities by engaging in uncivil agitation activities that exacerbate nuisances.

Mister Chairman, as Commissioner Wells noted on Monday, city attorney, Marion Radson, has expressed his judgment that, by allowing Occupy Gainesville demonstrators to occupy the Downtown Plaza outside of the posted hours for it, the City Of Gainesville would likely be obligated to allow homeless people and any other people to occupy the Plaza outside the posted hours for it. Indeed, I could conceive no criteria that could reliably distinguish in a court purposeful demonstrators from idle dwellers. I and others are also very concerned that liberalization of the rules and the enforcement of them for occupancy of public spaces would lead to broader occupations of public spaces such as rights of way and parks in and near residential and commercial areas throughout our city. We want no additional murders, robberies, batteries and other crimes and nuisances perpetrated by an ever-changing collection of homeless people that includes habitual criminals—some of whom have histories of violent crimes—in residential and commercial areas. Until a tightly run campground and intensively managed transitional housing are available, homeless people can legally occupy outdoor areas of undeveloped and industrial areas where they are welcomed or tolerated at least one-eighth mile from the nearest domicile or publicly accessed business.

Mister Chairman, the Occupy Gainesville participants can well exercise their rights to assemble, to express themselves and to petition their government officials during the established hours of the Downtown Plaza. As a participant, I do not feel that any of my rights are being unreasonably abridged by having my activities occur during those hours.

Mister Chairman, I am looking forward to working with the activists in the Occupy Movement and with similarly dedicated citizens to continue to forge a more perfect union until it no longer needs to engage in public demonstrations or until I go to the “great soapbox in the sky” whichever comes first.

Mister chairman, for the sound reasons that I have expounded in this address, I ask this Commission to reject the petition of the Occupy Gainesville participants to continuously occupy the Downtown Plaza until December 31, 2011.

829 words