

Holiday bottle gesture in peril

The city may close a loophole that allowed bourbon to homeless

NICOLE HUTCHESON - *Times Staff Writer*

ST PETERSBURG - Earlier this month, Evander Preston handed out 100 bottles of Kentucky bourbon to homeless people lounging in Williams Park.

It was an eccentric gesture that made the news and garnered him the name "Woodstock Santa".

Now City Council member Bill Foster is trying to put an end to Preston's giving spirit.

"Many of those residents are homeless because of an addiction to alcohol" said Foster "to me, that just smacks of offensive.."

Offensive, maybe. Illegal? No.

When it comes to city code, it is indeed illegal to pass out alcohol in public parks. However, that rule doesn't apply to the city streets or right of ways. When Preston handed out the bottles, he pulled his signature Bentley up to the curb and homeless people walked to him to pick up their gifts.

Foster hopes to close the ordinance loophole by introducing a measure that would include streets and right of ways in the code. The council will vote today whether to move Foster's measure to committee and brought back before the council before a final vote.

If passed, it would not affect bars and restaurants with outdoor seating or events like Ribfest and First Friday, which have permits and insurance to dispense alcohol.

Other City Council members say they agree with Foster.

Is this really the best gift you can give somebody sleeping outside - bourbon?" said Rene Flowers. "I don't know what a bottle of bourbon goes for these days, but I'm sure that would buy some soap, a small washcloth, maybe a comb, some coffee, maybe a nice hot meal."

Preston, owner of a popular art and jewelry store in Pass-A-Grille, declined to comment for this article.

Earlier this month, he told a reporter with the weekly Creative Loafing that he wanted St Petersburg's homeless to enjoy the holidays the way he does, "with a cigar and something to sip on".

The homeless people quoted in the article knew Preston and were excited to see him coming. He has handed out bottles to the homeless on several other occasions, according to the article.

"I'll give him the benefit of the doubt that he was trying to be thoughtful at the holidays" said City Council Member Jeff Danner. "But I think there are other things he could have done."

Foster gave this suggestion: "If he had true care and compassion, he would have spent the money and invited them to his art gallery in Pass-A-Grille and fed them a nice gourmet meal."