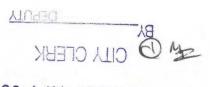
- Re: Public Comment Council File: 13-1493
- Title: Street Vending / Special Sidewalk Vending District Program

Los Angeles Daily News Friday, January 23, 2015 Front Cover, Page 1, Page 7



2015 JAN 28 PM 1:38

CITY CLERA'S UPPUL

STREET VENDING

A RISKY BUSINESS



Street vendor Jose Flores makes a sale at his snack cart at a playground at Van Nuys Sherman Oaks War Memorial Park recently.

Squeezed: Illegal hawkers of food, sodas, other goods face gang extortion and arrest. Would legalization help?

By Dakota Smith

dakota.smith@langnews.com dakotacdsmith on Twitter

Fruit vendor Mariposa Gonzalez remembers the advice given by her mother, also a street vendor. Talk back to the gang members who demand money. Say you don't have any cash. Throw a pineapple if need be.

"They're all tattooed up," Gonzalez said of the gang members who hassle her. "You're scared. But you have to stand up for yourself."

Street vending is prohibited in Los Angeles,

but that doesn't stop an estimated 50,000 vendors from hawking sodas, sausages and handmade goods in neighborhoods such as Westlake, Pacoima and Boyle Heights. Working from pushcarts and food trucks, vendors generate \$504 million in annual sales, a recent report found.

But the illegal nature of their work makes vendors easy prey for extortion and robberies. As Los A geles considers allowing street vending advocates argue legalization will encoura more crime reporting and reduce violence VENDORS » PAGE 7 ar Memorial Park recently.

50,000 Estimated number of vendors working in the Los Angeles area

"You have a micro-industry that doesn't have standing. The first thing we have to do is give them standing so they can address crime."

- City Councilman Gil Cedillo

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Los Angeles would follow cities like New York and Seat- blessing of the city and tle, which allow vending.

Advocates point to vending's economic benefits: A December report by the legalization will deter the nonprofit group Economic Roundtable projects that legalization could bring in \$43 million in state and local taxes.

Selling on gang turf

Around the MacArthur Park neighborhood on a recent night, vendors crowded the sidewalk, selling grilled sausages, wallets and bottled water-One man called out, "Licenses, passports." The area has long had a reputation for both illegal vending and gang activity.

Lopez, who sells hot dogs at thing we have to do is give Vermont Avenue and 12th them standing so they can Street, stays away from sidewalks known to be controlled by gangs, citing the tion will decrease neighbor-"rent" they can charge.

"It happens to everyone," Lopez said of being ap- the street will strengthen proached by gangs.

city tested a temporary pi- of operations at the advolot vending program in this cacy group East L.A. Comneighborhood, allowing tamale vendors in MacArthur Park. Rocio Ramirez, the overall safety of the owner of Mama's Hot Ta- neighborhood." males restaurant, took part in the program, which was Michael Owen Baker condeemed a success.

The vendors had the weren't hassled by gangs, Ramirez said.

But asked if she believes extortion around the park, Ramirez shook her head. "Not necessarily," she said in Spanish. Gang activity is too widespread, she said.

City Councilman Gil Cedillo, whose district includes MacArthur Park, supports legalization, saying that the city's policy toward street vendors has been "uneven."

Cedillo said legalization could help vendors feel less vulnerable.

"You have a micro-industry that doesn't have stand-Vendors such as Claudia ing," Cedillo said. "The first address crime."

> Others believe legalizahood crime.

"More eyes and feet on commercial areas," said Is-In the mid-1990s, the ela Gracian, vice president munity Corp.

"And that will improve

tributed to this report.

Vendors

FROM PAGE 1

against workers. Vendors are in a vulnerable position, said Mark Vallianatos, an adjunct professor at Occidental College, who serves on the steering committee of the Los Angeles Street Vendor Campaign. They believe reporting the crime is riskier than the benefits of going to the police, Vallianatos said.

"Businesses fear police will say, 'Why were you vending in the first place?" he said. Gonzalez, 31, has in gang territory. been robbed five times, she said. In Boyle Heights, a gang member pulled out a gun. She said she can't remember if she filled out a police report.

Police dilemma

Los Angeles Police Deand served on the LAPD's court documents state. street vending task force, which cracks down on vendors.

ier for the victims to pay (the tenced to 17 years. gangs)," Barba said. Vendors risk robbery or payment of a bers of a South L.A. gang weekly tax or "rent" - typi- were charged with attemptcally \$25 to \$100 - to work ing to extort \$50 a week in



Leon Javier reads a paper by his hot dog cart at Van Nuys Sherman Oaks War Memorial Park recently. MICHAEL OWEN BAKER - STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Barba took part in an undercover operation in Van Nuys after an elderly vendor was threatened by a member of the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, gang.

MS-13 gang member Mardoqueo Guevara demanded the vendor pay \$25 in propartment Detective Peter tection money "or risk be-Barba has worked on both ing killed or having his taco sides of the issue. He over- stand burned down" by Guesees the Van Nuys Gang Unit vara and his companions,

Guevara was charged with extortion, robbery and carrying a loaded, unregis-"It's sometimes just eas- tered firearm. He was sen-

In another case, two mem-

dors. One victim had a rock thrown through the front windshield of his truck, officials said.

Many vendors are not U.S. citizens, advocates say.

"I'm doing this because I can't do regular work," said Carlos, who sells chips and ice cream sandwiches in Van Nuys Sherman Oaks War Memorial Park.

his head on Vanowen Boulevard and forced him to strip, They discovered the \$300 he'd hidden in his underwear.

Threat of arrest

rent from food truck ven- but potential arrest. Police made more than 1,200 vendor arrests last year, while hundreds of citations were issued, a city report states. In some cases, vendors' food or goods are confiscated by police.

> The LAPD was unable to provide the annual cost to the city of enforcing vending laws.

Los Angeles is in a bind. In one instance, Carlos Barba believes. Police issue said two men put a gun to tickets to vendors but also want them to report crime.

"It's backwards," Barba said of the city's approach to gangs. "There has to be a better way."

A City Council committee is expected to take up Vendors face not only the the street vending proposal threat of violence by gangs, later this year. If approved,