

Planning starts for summer safety planning for Golden Heart Plaza

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Jack Barnwell/News-Miner

Visitors take in Golden Heart Plaza in downtown Fairbanks.

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The city of Fairbanks plans to get a jumpstart on security at Golden Heart Plaza ahead of summer events, according to Chief of Staff Michael Sanders.

Sanders provided an update to the Fairbanks City Council Monday, noting the city's goals are partially in response to complaints and concerns that emerged last year.

“Last year the plaza was a debacle to say the least,” Sanders said. “It was overrun at times with folks who were vandalizing it, drinking and fighting.”

Sanders said the Fairbanks Police Department plans to add downtown foot patrols to its schedule, rotating on four-hour blocks throughout the day.

“Just having a continuous presence of FPD in the area will definitely help,” Sanders said.

The city will also task the Emergency Services Patrol (ESP) to make occasional patrols through the plaza and surrounding areas to handle intoxicated or incapacitated people that are considered of a non-criminal or non-emergency nature. Sanders noted, however, that ESP units are limited in what actions they can take.

In 2022, the city saw an uptick in complaints and unpleasant interactions with belligerent people in the plaza, whether they were homeless or loitered in the area. Councilmembers proposed several solutions, including carving out a part of the city’s bed tax for dedicated security and increasing police presence.

Festival Fairbanks Executive Director Julie Jones told the council last year that high levels of aggressive or intoxicated behavior comes in waves. The summer of 2022 was higher than in previous years. Festival Fairbanks maintains the plaza for the city.

Sanders and then-Mayor Jim Matherly conducted daily or semi-weekly walks through the plaza to check on any new graffiti or potential issues. Sanders said he will continue to perform those walks, in addition to Mayor David Pruhs and others.

Sanders said the city will install a high-speed surveillance camera system in the Golden Heart Plaza to monitor the plaza. The system includes anti-glare and infrared technology.

The system will provide a live stream for the Fairbanks Emergency Communications Center and a server for recordings. Sanders said the camera system will back up any disputes over citations or fines.

If violators don’t pay the fine, the city can recoup it from their Permanent Fund dividend.

Sanders said starting in 2025, the plaza will have a security/informational shack.

Signs and restrooms

Sanders requested that signs be placed in the plaza to discourage camping of any type.

“If it’s a posted no camping area, FPD can move people along within an hour,” Sanders said. “If not, it’s a three-day or 10-day process.”

Last year, people were camping under the William Ransom Wood Memorial Pedestrian Bridge. Sanders said it would take police officers up to 10 days to move people along, but camps would return within a day or two.

“By having something posted, we can prevent the encampments from happening in the first place,” Sanders said.

Sanders, the city’s former housing and homeless coordinator, said encampments shouldn’t be encouraged.

“There is this myth that encampments are safe and they are not,” Sanders said. “They tend to be violent, a lot of assaults happen in encampments. We’ve had several injuries and assaults in the past, so we don’t need that to happen in Golden Heart Plaza or Griffin Park.”

Sanders added the city intends to install temporary restrooms from May 15 to Sept. 15 within the coverage area of the new surveillance system. Sanders added vandalism is anticipated.

“We have to cut down on the folks who are using facilities that don’t exist on the sidewalks,” Sanders said.

A more durable set of semi-permanent Portland Loo stand-alone restrooms will be installed the following year. Sanders said the restrooms are designed to prevent interior vandalism and to deter illicit activity such as drug use.

Outreach specialist grant

Sanders adds the city hopes to receive a \$275,000 state grant it recently applied for to fund two peer support specialists over 15 months.

The specialists would conduct encampment street outreach both in the community and in the police station.

Sanders said Brynn Butler, the city’s housing and homeless coordinator, and Brenda McFarlane, the Crisis Now coordinator, prepared the grant. Butler, he said, operated a homeless encampment outreach program for years that was successful.

The grant was originally designed to help handle incidents among homeless or displaced residents who used the police department building’s vestibule as a warming location during the winter.

For summer, he said, those specialists would conduct outreach efforts and “lower the number of problems downtown.”

He added Alaska Behavior Health’s Path team of behavioral specialists did outreach in Golden Heart Plaza, “and nobody in that crowd at Golden Heart Plaza was interested in any sort of services.

“But we will make the effort, and if we can get even one person connected to services, it’s worth it,” Sanders said.

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