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Business Improvement Districts Fact Sheet

In the past couple of decades Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) have been greatly expanding and criminalizing the presence and activities of poor people all over the country.

What is a BID?

A business improvement district (BID) is a special, legal subdivision of the city. BIDs have the legal authority to create their own districts which effectively positions BIDs as the owners of these neighborhoods. BIDs are funded from disbursed city collected assessments (taxes) from property owners, including city property and public space, within a district. The BIDS can use those funds with very little public oversight in any way that they see fits within the framework of business improvement.

To create a BID, a petition is circulated to property owners in a district. This is usually initiated by business owners who plan to run the BID. The percentage needed for approval varies but generally it is 51% of petitions that are turned in although larger property owner's votes carry greater weight. After a proposed district collects enough votes of support, the city holds a public hearing and votes on whether to establish the BID.

What do BIDs do?

BIDs spend money on the following types of activities:

- Security with ambassadors or private officers, patrol public spaces (sometimes armed and with the use of electronic security systems).
- Drafting and promoting legislation that privatizes community space for business interests and criminalizes poor and homeless people, and anyone who is not a consumer. They lobby local and state legislators to push legislation that supports the targeting, harassment and exclusion of homeless people, poor people, street vendors, and buskers from their districts.
- Opposing legislation that seeks to protect street based people from criminalization including those that attempt to overturn sit-lie ordinances.
- Controlling the architecture and aesthetics of the district including creating parklets, holding festivals, and cleaning public spaces.

Many BIDs hire private companies to implement ambassador programs that provide districts with “safety, cleaning, hospitality, outreach, and landscaping services.” In addition, Ambassadors work on behalf of the BID and wear special uniforms to distinguish themselves from the general public and from local cops (even though sometimes they can be confused for cops). BIDs are also known to hire private security or in some situations retired cops, working hand in hand with local law enforcement. Some BIDs claim to offer services, outreach, referral and resources to poor and homeless people. However, in most cities, the needs of the poor far outnumber viable services so often that the outreach that BID employees provide is superficial to non-existent.

TAKE ACTION – What You Can Do:

With BIDs playing an increasingly greater role in controlling our public spaces in our cities and states, and in creating laws that criminalize poor and homeless people, it’s important to take action and say NO to BIDs!

- Tell your local government:
 - Stop all public funding of BIDs
 - Ask for the immediate disbanding of BIDs
 - Cancel all special agreements with BIDs
 - Demand more public oversight
- Document (video, photos, take notes) incidents of BID harassment of vendors, poor people, buskers, homeless people, and send your documentation to wrap@wraphome.org and your local groups fighting BIDs.
- Ask your local business if they support BIDs. If they do not, ask them if they would be willing to put signage in their windows. If they support BIDs, don’t patronize their business!