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WEST PALM BEACH

'We're not going to tolerate hate': West Palm reacts to swastika projected onto building

The city is creating a new ordinance that would have more teeth after a January incident in which a swastika was projected onto a downtown building.



Wayne Washington

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Key Points

A man was blamed for the incident but he was only charged with littering

A state proposal to make such an act a felony passed first hurdle in Tallahassee

In response to an incident in which a swastika was projected onto the side of a downtown West Palm Beach building, the city has given preliminary approval to a new ordinance that would criminalize projecting images onto a building without the owner's permission.

Mayor Keith James and City Commission members are expected to give final approval to the new ordinance later this month, and it would go into effect 10 days after that vote. Those who violate the ordinance could be jailed for up to 60 days and face a fine of up to \$500.

The ordinance voted on March 6 is West Palm Beach's response to the incident that occurred in January, when men in masks projected the offensive image onto the side of the AT&T building at 325 Gardenia St.

Law-enforcement officials have said the projected image was related to other recent acts of antisemitism, including the distribution of plastic bags containing obscene, hateful messages.

The antisemitic acts frightened and angered many across the county. While a suspect was charged with littering in the case of the antisemitic messages, lawmakers were dismayed to

learn that no current law makes clear that bigots are barred from projecting images of hate onto a building.

Ruling expected soon in Sunset Lounge management anti-lobbying case

In DeSantis' Florida, Black residents sicker, poorer, less educated. It's getting worse.

'I thought it was a spoof': Why West Palm's mayor got an invite to the White House

Soon, that could violate West Palm Beach and Florida law.

In addition to the ordinance West Palm Beach is considering, state Rep. Mike Caruso, R-Delray Beach, has filed legislation in Tallahassee that would make projecting a message of hate onto a building a third-degree felony and a hate crime.

This week in Tallahassee, a House committee passed the bill.

Palm Beach County Mayor Gregg Weiss, who hosted a roundtable discussion to address what can be done to combat the spate of antisemitic acts, has said the county is also working on an ordinance to criminalize such conduct. Weiss, along with State Attorney Dave Aronberg, attended the House committee passage in Tallahassee this week.

Florida is home to several Jewish communities. Organizations that track hate groups say antisemitism is on the rise in the Sunshine State, as it is across the country.

In July, police found antisemitic flyers in Sarasota, Fort Myers, Fort Pierce, Vero Beach and Orlando.

At the March 6 West Palm Beach city commission meeting, James made clear the city's new ordinance is not an attempt to curtail speech, which could be challenged as an affront to someone's First Amendment rights.

"We're not regulating content," the mayor said, adding that the ordinance would simply make clear that a building's owner would have to give consent before his or her property could have an image projected onto it.

Brian Seymour, a vice chairman of the Jewish Federation of Palm Beach County's executive committee, thanked city leaders for moving forward with the ordinance, saying it "means more than we can say."

Seymour added: "I understand this is not about the swastika per se. This is about people's rights. But I want you to understand how important for us as a community that you have

stood up and said, 'We're not going to tolerate hate in the city of West Palm Beach.' "

Wayne Washington is a journalist covering West Palm Beach, Riviera Beach and race relations at The Palm Beach Post. You can reach him at wwashington@pbpost.com and follow him on Twitter [@waynewashpbpost](https://twitter.com/waynewashpbpost). Help support our work; subscribe today.