Scenic America

FACTS FOR ACTION

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Billboard Industry Myths & the Facts they Distort

A community's natural beauty and unique character often are the core of civic pride. More and more however, our communities look the same, and billboards are a major culprit. Billboards blot out scenic vistas and distinctive architecture. Communities should highlight these assets, not hide them behind ugly billboards.

Billboards are often the leading edge of suburban sprawl development. As once rural areas open to new development, advertisers move in to target new audiences with billboard advertising. In many states, otherwise untouched scenic areas are marred by thousands of billboards. You've probably heard many outrageous claims by the billboard industry, but here are some of the industry's favorite myths:

Myth: Billboards provide essential information for millions of travelers.

Fact: Only a small percentage of billboards provide useful traveler information. What's more, a variety of alternatives, including logo signs, tourist-oriented directional signs (TODS), guidebooks, and new technologies like on-board navigation systems, provide the necessary information in a less intrusive manner. Indeed, tourism spending in Vermont rose 50% in the two years after the state removed its last billboard. In addition, some of the top vacation spots in the U. S. are billboard free including Alaska, Hawaii, Maine, and Vermont.

(Source: "Vermont Travel Estimates Out-of-State Visitors." 1982. Vermont Division of Research and Statistics.)

Myth: The Constitution protects the rights of property owners to put up whatever they want on their properties.

Fact: The Supreme Court has ruled that cities may regulate and even prohibit billboards altogether (Metromedia, Inc. v. City of San Diego, 101 S. Ct. 2882 (1981)) because they "take up space and may obstruct views, distract motorists, displace alternative uses of land, and pose other problems that legitimately call for regulation," (from City of Ladue v. Gilleo, 114 S. Ct. 2038 (1994)). Billboards are fundamentally a use of the public road -- not of private property -- accruing all of their value from their proximity to the taxpayer funded road. The concept that one item gains its value from its proximity to another is called "the parasite principle." Given that billboards affect property values, community character, and traffic safety, it's no wonder that so many communities have tough billboard controls or that courts uphold these controls.

Myth: Billboard operators do not target low-income and minority neighborhoods.

Fact: In urban areas, billboard operators cluster billboards in low-income, minority neighborhoods; many of the billboards in these neighborhoods advertise alcohol or tobacco. However, the 1996 tobacco settlement banned cigarette advertisements on billboards, traditionally a major user of billboards in low-income neighborhoods. Still, a 1996 New Jersey study found not only that Jersey City housed many more billboards per capita than surrounding jurisdictions but also that fully 35 percent (67 of 188) of the city's alcohol and tobacco billboards were within 500 feet of a school — in spite of the billboard industry's so-called "Code of Advertising Practices."

Dozens of other studies echo these findings, including some from Baltimore, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, San Francisco, and elsewhere. In 1988, Scenic America, working with Baltimore activists, found that 75 percent of the billboards in that city were dumped in low-income minority neighborhoods and that 75 percent of the billboards in those neighborhoods advertised either alcohol or tobacco.

Myth: Removing billboards without just compensation (i.e., via amortization) violates the Fifth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Fact: This claim is simply a self-serving way for billboard operators to lay claim to the tax dollars of hard-working Americans. Legally speaking, billboards are personal property, just like cars or machines, and governments may remove them after providing their owners enough time to recoup their investment, typically 5-7 years -- a process called amortization. Governments across the nation have successfully used amortization to remove not only billboards but also junkyards, strip joints, etc. Moreover, no federal appeals court has ever found billboard amortization itself to violate the constitution. However, the Highway Beautification Act does prohibit amortization on federal aid highways and several states prohibit amortization.

Myth: By supporting local businesses, billboards are good for the economy.

Fact: There is no evidence that billboards have any benefit for local economies. In fact, more than 1000 communities and five states prohibit new billboards and there is no evidence that this has had a negative economic impact. Cities such as Williamsburg, and Virginia Beach, VA experienced increased tourism spending after enacting tough billboard ordinances.
(Source: "Understanding Tourism Research Statistics." 1996. Virginia Department of Economic Development, Division of Tourism.)

Myth: Public opinion polls show that people like billboards and find them useful.

Fact: Actually, the opposite is true. Reputable public opinion polls find that most Americans think billboards are ugly, intrusive, and uninformative. Not one reputable survey shows that people like billboards.

- By a 10 to 1 margin, Floridians favor reducing the number of billboards "Survey on Outdoor Advertising." 1995.
- More than two-thirds of New Hampshire residents oppose billboards on highways "Public Attitudes Toward Billboards in New Hampshire." 1994.
- 9 out of 10 Michigan residents feel the state has too many billboards "Questions commissioned by Michigan United Conservation Clubs." 1997
- 69% of Missourians believe that fewer billboards would make their states more attractive. "Statewide Public Opinion Poll on Billboards." 1994
- 81% of residents of Houston, TX favor their existing ordinance banning new billboard construction. "Assessing Public Opinion Regarding Billboards in the Houston Area." 1996.

Resources

The following publications are available from Scenic America at (202) 543-6200, or through our secure online bookstore at www.scenic.org.

Fighting Billboard Blight: An Action Guide for Citizens and Public Officials. (1999). $20.00. Scenic America. Everything you need to know about reducing billboard blight in your community.