

Testimony by Kevin Fry to Connecticut General Assembly

Re: Gov. Rell's proposal to ban billboards on State property

Spring 2008

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of Scenic America, thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on legislation to prohibit billboards on state-owned property and to stop the proliferation of digital billboards across the state.

We strongly support Bill No. 44, which we believe represents an important first step in reclaiming the visual quality of Connecticut's roadways and communities. The legislation recognizes billboards as one of the most egregious contributors to visual blight in Connecticut and a threat to the long-term economic health of the state.

Although this bill does not doesn't address the larger issue of sign proliferation on non-state property, our view is that removing billboards over time from state land would represent a strong statement that Connecticut wants visitors and residents alike to have a chance to see and appreciate the state's visual qualities, both urban and rural.

By definition and by design, billboards obscure the fundamental character of Connecticut's landscapes and cityscapes. After all, if the billboards weren't distracting drivers from the driving task or from their surroundings, they would be worthless to advertisers.

The argument is made that businesses will be crippled if billboards go away. But we believe that deliberate ugliness is not an effective broad-based business development strategy.

As you know, four states -- Vermont, Maine, Alaska, and Hawaii -- along with thousands of local jurisdictions across the country completely ban all billboards. Many others have capped the number of off-premise signs allowed along their roadways. These places understand that there is more to gain economically and culturally by allowing the genuine nature of their places to shine through. Rather than allowing a small number of national advertisers or local businesses to claim the view for their own purposes, these places have concluded that by removing blight they can thrive economically in a world that more and more values authenticity, local character, and respect for landscape and history. They decided long ago that outdoor advertising is often an inappropriate and economically destructive force that sacrifices the broader good for the benefit of a few.

Although this bill only places approximately 120 billboards at risk, out of almost 1,500 statewide, it nevertheless would represent an important statement of principle by the state.

It's worth noting that New England, with its legendary sense of place, has something of a tradition of resisting intrusive outdoor advertising. Vermont and Maine prohibit all billboards, period. Rhode Island placed a cap on outdoor advertising years ago, and no longer permits new signs (the recent regrettable and possibly improper conversion of some billboards to digital technologies, notwithstanding). Like its regional neighbors, Connecticut has a well-rooted visual and cultural identity that should not be obscured behind acres of vinyl, steel, and now, gargantuan LED screens.

As anyone who drives Connecticut's main highways, billboards often proliferate along roadways leading into urban centers. They become a city's de facto visual gateway, blocking views of the skyline and neighborhoods, even in places that have worked hard to improve their cityscapes and public image.

Who could doubt that billboards play a big role in establishing the first impression of a place, elbowing their way into the position of the preeminent visual element along the road. This is particularly true of the new digital billboards, whose constantly changing images are enormously bright, especially at night. Digital signs completely dominate the driver's field of vision, to the detriment not only of the traveler's experience but also of roadside businesses whose own signs or buildings can't compete for attention in the face of these giant, attention-diverting TV screens in the sky. Unlike regular billboards, electronic billboards are visible from great distances, depending on the geometry of the road and their height. They intrude far beyond the distance from which the message on the sign can be seen.

Electronic billboards, because they are so visually dominant pose aesthetic challenges far beyond those of regular billboards, and this bill's efforts to put a stop to their proliferation is extraordinarily important to communities across the state.

But there is a much bigger problem with digital signs that must be addressed. Because an electronic sign is often the brightest object in the driver's field of vision, especially at night or in dim light, safety experts fear it is impossible to avoid. Its images change every few seconds, and many curious motorists often continue looking at the sign to see what comes up next – and next. Additionally, the advertising messages on the sign are visually complex, often requiring five seconds for the message to be received.

The essential nature of digital signs, and the amount of time they pull motorists' attention away from the driving task, seems to run headlong into the findings of a 2006 study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) which stated that there is a two-second threshold for driver distraction that, if exceeded, significantly increases the chances of accidents.

The "100-Car Naturalistic Study" showed that:

- Anything that distracts the driver from the forward roadway for more than two seconds significantly increases the chances of crashes and near-crashes;
- Nearly 80 percent of crashes and 65 percent of near crashes were caused by distractions that made the driver look away for up to three seconds; and,
- 23 percent of the crashes and near-crashes that occur in metropolitan environments are attributable to eyes off the forward roadway greater than two seconds.

State and local governments debating whether to permit these signs will need to take into consideration this existing research on driver distraction, plus additional studies planned

by the Federal Highway Administration, AASHTO, and the Transportation Research Board.

Our hope is that Governor Rell's proposal (and her personal epiphany) will stimulate a public dialogue throughout the state about how much of Connecticut's environment should be surrendered to the multi-national media companies that dominate the billboard industry. We also hope it will encourage people to see their state with new eyes and recognize how much has been lost by unrestrained billboard blight.

The governor has taken the first brave step on behalf of the visual integrity of Connecticut, but citizens should now step in and make it clear to their state and local public officials that they'd like to have their state back. There is no shortage of beauty, charm, history, and character along the state's roadways. It would be nice to be able to see it all again.

The article neglects to mention that along with the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the American Association of State Highway & Transportation Officials (AASHTO) and the prestigious Transportation Research Board of the National Academies (TRB) are all examining the safety implications of digital signage precisely because many experts have serious concerns about the potential for distraction inherent in electronic billboards and on-premise signs.

The reporter correctly points out that distraction exceeding two seconds poses significant dangers, but does not explain how digital billboards don't routinely cause glances far beyond that limit. Digital signs are often the brightest objects in the driver's field of vision (as the pictures illustrating the story clearly show), attracting glances far beyond the norm; images change every few seconds, causing motorists' attention to linger to see what comes up next in the show; and of course most billboard messages take several seconds to comprehend. Given all that, one wonders how the article (or the FHWA, for that matter) came to the conclusion that the two-second distraction threshold is not often violated.

These digital signs, using LED technology, function like enormous television sets in the sky. They are extraordinarily bright, especially at night, where they automatically become the dominant visual element in the landscape. Because of their brightness they can be seen from miles away. Unlike regular billboards which hold a single message, they employ computer-controlled images that change every four, six, eight, or ten seconds,

depending on state or local laws. Think of them as giant vividly illuminated PowerPoint presentations looming over the highway 24 hours a day.

Currently, we estimate there are at least 600 of these signs along American highways. Without question, there will be thousands within a few years. Because they can often be seen from well over a mile away, they affect the visual quality of places at significant distances, potentially including byway communities, historic landscapes, and other sensitive areas.

But aesthetics and environmental considerations are not the only, or even the main, threat from these new signs. Many concerned citizens believe that digital billboards pose a significant threat to driver safety.

It remains to be seen whether these digital billboards will soon intrude directly on byways themselves. They will almost certainly pop up in segmented stretches, but because billboard companies are seeking permission to erect these signs in hundreds of cities and towns, including in rural areas, many byway communities can expect to be affected.

A new FHWA policy (which requires state action) permits the replacement of existing *conforming* signs with digital technologies. FHWA says *nonconforming* signs cannot be converted. But the status of existing billboards along byways in ostensibly conforming locations (commercial and industrial zones or unzoned commercial and industrial areas) is not entirely settled, and may become a point of contention in some locations. Given aggressive efforts to convert regular signs to electronic billboards as quickly as possible, it is not out of the question to find giant digital displays 48-feet wide looming over some of America's Byways in the near future.

Scenic America and many other organizations and concerned citizens believe that the preeminent visual elements along our byways and in our communities should be the treasured intrinsic qualities that make them unique and appealing as destinations and hometowns, not huge glowing TV sets that serve only to distract us from what is most precious, important, and genuine about American life.