



Testimony on LD 1367
By Max Ashburn, Scenic America
To
Maine Legislature Joint Standing Committee on Transportation
April 26, 2011

Mr. Chairman and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Max Ashburn and I am the Communications Director of Scenic America, a national nonprofit advocacy organization devoted to scenic conservation, the preservation of community character, and the fight against visual blight. For over 30 years, we have led a national effort to protect the visual character of America's communities and countryside, and, in fact, our roots extend here to Maine as one of our founding members is Marion Fuller Brown, former state representative from York.

Although we work on many issues concerning the visual environment, we are the acknowledged leaders of the growing movement for effective billboard control and are the sole national counterweight to the powerful outdoor advertising industry. It is in that context that I come before you today to speak against LD 1367, a bill that would end Maine's 34-year-old ban on billboards by allowing for "off-premise" signs (otherwise known as billboards) within the right-of-way of the state's roadways. This bill would allow for a return of the billboard blight that so many forward-thinking Mainers worked so hard to rid the state of in the 1970s and 80s.

National overview of outdoor advertising control

There are four states that ban all billboards: Maine, Vermont, Alaska and Hawaii, as well as over 700 municipalities across the country. In addition there are over 1500 communities nationwide that have prohibited construction of new billboards. The national trend is towards tighter regulation of outdoor advertising, not towards more permissive regulations. This is because people don't like billboards and when given a choice they don't want them in their communities. In this way Maine is held up around the country as the gold standard for billboard control.

When we are approached by citizens and community leaders about the best approaches to billboard control, we tell them that the most important thing is to first stop new signs from going up, because once they're up it's very hard to get them down. When talking about the process of billboard reduction we talk in years and even decades. The city of Houston passed a ban on new billboards in 1980 with the goal of eventually eliminating them from the city. At the time over there were over 10,000 signs in the city; today, over 30 years later, there are nearly 4,000 still standing. This makes what states like Maine and Vermont were able to accomplish – total elimination of billboards – all the more remarkable.

Billboard proponents will argue that billboards are effective tools for business, that being in favor of billboards is being “pro-business” and being against them is somehow “anti-business.” Yet, areas of the country with the highest concentration of signs are among some of the most economically depressed. The state with the most billboards, Michigan, has one of the worst economies in the country and was the only state to lose population in the last census. Billboards are considered by many sociologists to be both a cause and a symptom of urban decay.

Further, the idea that billboards are a necessary or even effective tool for business, in particular tourism, is just plain wrong. The four states that ban billboards all have economies highly dependent on tourism. Dana Connors, president of the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, recently said, “I think time has rendered [the billboard ban] be a very good decision, a *right* decision, that has fit very well with how we see ourselves and how other people see us in terms of the importance of the environment to our state and how it fits into the **business** agenda...it has become **part of our brand, our quality of life.**”

Billboards look the same whether they are in Mississippi, Missouri, or Malaysia. As a result, they homogenize communities. They help turn unique places into “Anyplace.” In fact, almost nothing will destroy the distinctive character of a place faster than a proliferation of signs and billboards. This has **negative** economic consequences.

“Community differentiation” is a key concept in economic development today. If you can't differentiate your community from any other community you have no competitive advantage. Put another way, the “image of a community is fundamentally important to its economic well being.”

Every day, people make decisions about where to live, invest, or vacation based on what communities look like. In regards to tourism: the more one community comes to look like every other community, the less reason there is to visit. On the other hand, the more a community does to protect and enhance its distinctive character, the more reason there is to visit. This is where Maine thrives: nowhere else in this country looks like Maine, and a person has a very distinct “sense of place” when they're here.

A recent major study by the Knight Foundation called the “Soul of the Community” project sought to find out what attaches a person to the place they live. The study found that aesthetics was one of the top 3 reasons why people choose to live in a place; people care greatly about the way their community looks.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, I appear before you today not just as a representative of a national advocacy organization, but as a native Mainer. As I travel around our country talking about billboards, the very first thing I hear from people when I tell them I'm from Maine is “There are no billboards in Maine! It's beautiful and I love visiting your state.”

One doesn't need to travel far to see the deleterious effects of outdoor advertising on the landscape. Mainers are extraordinarily fortunate that we've protected ourselves from this blight, let's not undo that by opening up our laws for billboards to once again tarnish our

precious and unique landscapes.

Thank you allowing me to be here to today and I would be happy to answer any questions you have.

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Scenic America is the only national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated solely to preserving and enhancing the visual character of America's communities and countryside. We accomplish this mission through national advocacy efforts and technical assistance services, local and national projects, and the support of our state and city affiliates.