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New studies indicate digital billboards compromise driver safety

WASHINGTON, February 23, 2016 – A review of recent research on driver distraction near digital billboards finds growing evidence that the bright, constantly changing signs negatively impact traffic safety.

The compendium, created by The Veridian Group, highlights new studies showing that digital billboards are attracting longer and more frequent glances from drivers than do static signs, and that driver attention is particularly captured by changes between advertisements, which typically occur every six or eight seconds on a digital billboard.

The compendium's author, engineering psychologist Jerry Wachtel, said that while digital billboards may be succeeding in capturing driver attention, as they are designed to do, for that reason "they represent a growing threat to traffic safety, particularly along our busiest streets and highways."

A 2015 study of eight digital billboard locations on highways in Florida and Alabama showed significantly higher crash rates, 25% in Florida and 29% in Alabama, at sites near the digital billboards than those further away. A disproportionate number were rear-end and sideswipe collisions, both typical of crashes caused by driver distraction.

A new study from M.I.T. suggests that drivers may be unwittingly compelled to look at digital billboards during changes from one advertisement to the next. Due to human nature, "it is likely that drivers find it nearly impossible to avoid a glance to digital billboards during switches between advertisements," said the study's authors.

Other recent studies, including an industry-sponsored study in Australia, have found significant problems with drivers drifting out of their lanes in the vicinity of digital billboards.

"These studies are especially alarming given the rate at which digital billboards are going up around the country," said Mary Tracy, president of Scenic America. "It is particularly concerning that our federal government became complicit in these growing threats to public health when they allowed these signs to start going up without first requiring a study to prove they do not endanger driver safety."

In 2007 the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) reversed a long-held position by giving the green light to digital billboards utilizing "flashing, blinking or intermittent lighting" along federal highways. With no safety analysis, FHWA declared that billboards changing as frequently as 20,000 times a day were not changing "intermittently" as long as they were static for 4 seconds.

The Veridian Group compendium can be downloaded at www.scenic.org/Feb16comp.

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Scenic America is the only national 501(c)3 nonprofit dedicated to preserving and enhancing the visual character of America's roadways, countryside and communities.