TOURISM--TAKING THE SCENIC ROUTE

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Northern section of the George Washington Memorial Parkway, Arlington, Virginia
Billboard compromise a good sign

Council’s agreement on roadside advertising should give I-35W expansion a green light

No matter how much you love Fort Worth, calling its long stretches of interstate highway “beautiful” would be somewhat of an overstatement.

That’s not for lack of trying. Beautifying the roadways has been part of the city’s agenda for years.

And a 20-year-old ordinance restricting new construction of off-premise signs (billboards) has made great strides toward cleaning up the appearance of local highways.

City policy allows existing billboards — there are 668 — but prohibits their replacement if government projects, such as road expansions, force the signs to come down.

Still, for two decades, the local sign code has put reasonable limits on this sometimes unsightly segment of the outdoor advertising market and has improved the look and feel of local freeways.

Yet after some heated debate at Tuesday’s City Council meeting, the city made an exception to its rule, at least in part to expedite the expansion of I-35W.

The long-delayed I-35W project has been a source of headaches for North Texans for years but finally seems to be within reach. The groundbreaking is tentatively scheduled for early May.

The proposed expansion, which includes rebuilding existing lanes and adding two toll lanes in each direction as well as improvements to access roads and ramps, will require the Texas Department of Transportation to remove 25 freeway signs on I-35W between downtown and Loop 820. And TxDOT is eager to get the sign acquisition underway immediately.

Per standing policy, those signs would come down and stay down for good.

However, TxDOT asked the city to grant an exception in this case, allowing signs in the affected area to be relocated elsewhere along the corridor.

And the transportation department’s request was not as arbitrary as it seems.

During Tuesday’s pre-council meeting, Assistant City Manager Fernando Costa explained that giving the sign owners an outside option might help the state agency, which must compensate owners of condemned signs for their value, avoid paying millions for the signs that are relocated.

Tarrant Express Mobility Partners, TxDOT’s private-sector partner in the project, indicated that such savings could be reinvested in the expansion.

Costa pointed to the anticipated cost of 15 signs removed during the construction of the Chisholm Trail Parkway in southwest Fort Worth. The department hasn’t tallied its costs yet, but could spend an average $1 million on each billboard acquired for construction of the parkway.

Balancing aesthetics with economics is never an easy equation. So the city split the difference, setting on a compromise that permits owners to relocate signs in the I-35W corridor only if each sign moved means four others in scenic districts of the city — there are 194 of those — are taken down.

City council members seemed skeptical that many sign owners would take such an option, and they could be right.

Star-Telegram City Hall writer Caty Hirst reported that Jake Smith, president of Clear Channel Outdoor, a national advertising company that owns 14 of the affected signs, said the compromise will result in a laborious condemnation process and only serve to delay the freeway expansion.

Eminent domain procedures are onerous, but threats that the ordinance will postpone the expansion are just hot air.

City spokesman Bill Begley told the Star-Telegram Editorial Board a delay because of the legal process is unlikely: “Once the money is placed in the registry of the court, after the commissioner’s hearing, the property is subject to development for the project even though the lawsuit over actual damages will continue.”

Although there may be a nasty and expensive fight in TxDOT’s future, the I-35W expansion shouldn’t be compromised — at least not because of the billboards.

And while most businesses will get to keep their larger-than-life advertisements, a small stretch of Fort Worth highway will get a little more beautiful.

We’ll consider the council’s action to be a good sign.
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Employment Driver

- Travel spending directly supported 529,400 jobs with earnings of $16.5 billion.
- Jobs directly supported in industries like Accommodations, Food Services, Retail Trade, Transportation and others.
- Travel spending supported jobs in all 254 Texas counties.

Travel Supported Employment in Texas

Source: Dean Runyan & Associates

![Graph showing travel supported employment in Texas from 1994 to 2010.](TravelSupportedEmployment.png)
Average Spending Per Party - Primary Activity


- No Activity: $385
- Outdoor Sports: $802
- Culture: $1,106
- Sightseeing: $1,013
- Attractions: $1,000
- Nature: $939
- General: $992

Overall Texas Average: $724
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