

Sign Control News

Newsletter of the Center for Sign Control • A project of the Coalition for Scenic Beauty

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NO FEDERAL BILLBOARD REFORMS THIS YEAR

Efforts to reform the federal Highway Beautification Act were stymied in the final hours of the 99th Congress when House and Senate Conferees failed to reach agreement on the 1986 Highway Bill.

Before the federal legislation expired in the final hours of Congress, House and Senate Conferees had agreed to proposals to end tree-cutting in front of billboards, remove illegal billboards within 90 days, and freeze billboard construction along federal highways.

Negotiations, however, broke down over the issue of cash payments to the billboard industry. House conferees insisted that taxpayers should continue to pay the billboard industry to stop polluting our highways. The Senate, supported by the Reagan Administration, sought to end federal payments to the billboard industry.

Billboard control advocates were disappointed by the impasse, but Charles Floyd, President of the Coalition for Scenic Beauty, said, "We were successful in blocking the billboard industry's efforts to further weaken the federal billboard control law. We were also successful in pushing billboard control legislation further in this Congress than it had gone in over 20 years. Congress will return in January and it will then consider even tougher legislation to clean-up billboard pollution.

"Transportation Secretary Elizabeth Dole and Senators Stafford, Bentsen and Gorton all deserve tremendous credit for



Sen. Gorton (left) testifying on the reform bill he introduced; Sen. Stafford pushed those reforms through the U.S. Senate.

their leadership in the effort to reform the federal law."

The significance of this year's legislative fight is that it marks the first time in over 20 years that positive legislation to reform the 1965 Highway Beautification Act has made it out of either house of Congress. The legislation's strong showing demonstrated the ground swell of support for curbing the excesses of the billboard industry and saving what's left of our scenery.

The campaign to reform the Highway Beautification Act was supported by one of the broadest coalitions of organizations and individuals ever put together in support of major environmental legislation. Supporters included: the Reagan Administration, governors, mayors, city councilmembers, dozens of environmental, business

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BILLBOARD REFORMS

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and professional organizations and thousands of private citizens. Over 100 newspapers editorialized in favor of tougher billboard controls. Countless articles appeared in magazines and newspapers reporting on the legislation and the problem of billboard blight. In addition, the legislation engendered a new wave of support for cleaning-up of billboard pollution at the local and state level.

Congress will take up the highway legislation again in January. This means that billboard control supporters cannot let up on their efforts to halt the spread of billboard blight.

The billboard industry is spending an exorbitant amount of money fighting environmental controls. It will undoubtedly continue its efforts to oppose any regulation of its activities. Industry lobbyists have been swarming all over Capitol Hill for months. In the final weeks before adjournment, the lobby launched an enormous public relations campaign. This included press conferences, full page ads in major newspapers, a public opinion poll paid for by the industry and increased campaign contributions to members of Congress.

In anticipation of pending federal reforms the industry has also begun a large billboard building boom. Across the country the industry is applying for permits to erect thousands of new billboards.

"They're going up all over the place," said Carmen Cox, a Councilwoman from Riverside

County, California.

Coalition warns cities

"Cities need to act now or they are going to be inundated by new giant billboards," said Coalition

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BILLBOARD LEGISLATION IN THE 99TH CONGRESS: A TIMELINE

July 25, 1985. Senator Slade Gorton introduces S. 1494 which would impose a ban, allow amortization, and forbid tree-cutting.

April 10, 1986. The nation's top environmental organizations demand a halt to new billboard construction in America.

April 11, 1986. Secretary of Transportation Elizabeth Dole expresses the Reagan Administration's support for S. 1494.

July 22, 1986. Senators Stafford, Bentsen, and Moynihan offer a slightly modified Gorton Bill as an amendment to S. 2405.

July 23, 1986. The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee approves the amendment by a vote of 11 - 4.

August 6, 1986. Representative Clay Shaw offers an amendment to the House Highway Bill, H.R. 3129, which would ban new rural billboards, allow amortization, and prohibit tree-cutting.

August 7, 1986. Representative Bud Shuster offers a substitute amendment backed by the billboard lobby. The full House votes for Shuster's amendment over Shaw's amendment 251 - 159 then went on to approve the House Highway Bill.

September 24, 1986. The Senate, by a vote of 99 - 0, passes S. 2405 without any amendments to weaken the billboard provisions.

October 18, 1986. The House and Senate conferees, unable to work out differences in their respective highway bills, let the Highway Bill, including the billboard provisions, die in Conference. Current programs are taken care of by a continuing resolution, but any new legislation will have to be worked out in 1987.

ANCHORAGE VOTERS SAY NO TO BILLBOARDS, PORTABLE SIGNS

By a 2 to 1 margin, voters in Anchorage, Alaska decided on October 7 not to repeal their sign ordinance, a move that would have lifted prohibitions on portable signs and billboards.

Portable signs, rooftop signs, billboards and off-premise signs were prohibited by the Anchorage Assembly in September 1985. A group of sign owners then sought to repeal the ordinance by placing the issue on the city ballot.

Mayor Tony Knowles told the Anchorage Daily News (10/8/86) that "Alaskans never have liked

billboards and apparently they feel the same way about portable signs."

The Anchorage vote is the third referendum on billboard control held in the past two years. Last November, voters in Tucson, Arizona overwhelmingly endorsed a ban on new billboards. In November 1984, voters in Beaufort County, South Carolina endorsed a county-wide billboard ban.

The latest vote is seen as yet another blow to the industry's claim that the public likes billboards.

UNOFFICIAL FREEZE OF ST. LOUIS BILLBOARDS

St. Louis Mayor Vincent C. Schoemehl has found a way to halt construction of new billboards while the City of St. Louis drafts a new sign ordinance. The city already has about 1,000 billboards.

"We're knee-deep in billboards here," said Edward Dobbs, the city's zoning administrator. "Over the past two years there has been a drastic increase in billboard permit applications."

"Ten years ago, we would get about 30 billboard permit applications a year," echoed Kathleen Brady in the mayor's office. "Now we're getting 30 a month."

To halt this proliferation, the St. Louis Community Development Commission, the city agency with oversight authority on all build-

ing permits, asked to review all billboard permit applications to determine whether they complied with "minimum exterior requirements." The Commission has so far denied every new billboard permit--around 200--because the proposed billboards would add to "visual clutter."

In effect, these denials have the same effect as a moratorium, thus giving the Sign Ordinance Review Committee time to draft a new sign ordinance to present to the City Board of Alderman in about six months.

A strict sign ordinance is supported by Mayor Schoemehl, Downtown St. Louis, Inc., the Coalition for the Environment, and the Landmarks Association.

TOBACCO AND ALCOHOL STILL TOPS

Advertising for tobacco and alcohol products accounted for almost half of all billboard industry revenues in 1985, according to figures compiled by Advertising Age (9/4/86).

Tobacco products accounted for 31% of all industry ad revenues, alcohol advertising brought in 11%. Of the top 10 outdoor advertisers, five are tobacco companies (RJ Reynolds--#1, Philip Morris Co.--#2, Loews Corp.--#3,

Batus Inc.--#4, American Brands--#6) and three are liquor companies (Jos. E. Seagram & Sons--#5, Hiram Walker Inc.--#8, National Distillers & Chemical Corp--#10). In fact, only one roadside business--McDonalds--is among the top twenty-five billboard advertisers.

Overall, travel related businesses, hotels, motels and resorts accounted for only 8% of total industry revenues.

FLORIDA GETTING TOUGH ON BILLBOARDS

Florida appears to be making headway in its efforts to curb billboard proliferation in the state. In 1984 Florida banned billboards along new highways in the state. It also reduced height limits, increased spacing between billboards and increased annual permit fees by an average of 500%.

As a result, the Florida Outdoor Advertising Administrator Janie Steele says that the number of billboards along Florida highways declined from around 30,000 in 1984 to 29,000 in 1986.

This year the Florida Republican Party has included in its platform an environmental plank addressing "the issue of visual pollution." In addition, communities all across Florida are now examining ways to rid themselves of billboard blight. In the last few years cities such as Orlando, Tallahassee, Miami, and Key West have imposed strict sign ordinances. Now a new wave of Florida communities are imposing temporary moratoriums while they study their sign ordinances.

For example, Jacksonville is in an uproar since its city council voted down a strict sign ordinance this summer. After editorials and letters to the editor denounced the city council's action, civic organizations threatened a petition drive for a charter amendment to place severe restrictions on signs in Jacksonville. The city council responded by forming a sign committee to reconsider the issue.

Other communities have enacted temporary moratoriums while officials draw up comprehensive sign ordinances. Monroe County which includes the Florida Keys has a billboard moratorium and billboard control advocates want the string of billboards along U.S. 1--some of which stand in the Gulf of Mexico--down.

Bay County Commissioners in September passed emergency legi-

slation which prevents erecting billboards within 1,000 feet of each other for 90 days until a permanent sign control ordinance can be completed.

In Charlotte County, the Chair of the Planning Committee has convinced the County Commission to enact a tougher sign control ordinance. The persistence of the Planning Committee resulted in a 3 - 1 vote by Commissioners to develop a stricter sign law.

South Santa Rosa County has been the most successful this summer at halting further billboard pollution. In late July the County Commission passed an ordinance which sets a 2,000 foot spacing requirement between billboards and limits portable signs to 7 day displays in any six month period.

Logo signs work

Many observers feel that the proliferation of billboards in Florida is hurting tourism. As a result, the state is developing alternatives to billboards such as the logo sign system, rest area information panels, and highway advisory radio. At present, only the logo sign system is going up along rural stretches of Florida's interstates.

"We've gotten a lot of positive feedback from businesses on the signs," said Gary Kissenger, head of the logo sign project. He reported that many roadside business owners were skeptical about the new system at first. There were even owners who had logos for some businesses but not others along the same road. When they saw what a good job the logo signs were doing, they put all their roadside businesses on the logo signs.

The program is much cheaper than billboards, only \$250 per year per exit, and businesses must not have any off premise signs larger than 750 square feet or 15 feet higher

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CHARLESTON, SC HAS HAD IT WITH BILLBOARDS

To put an end to more billboard blight in Charleston County, the County Council has followed the lead of the city of Charleston in approving 5 - 1 on first reading a strong sign ordinance which restricts new billboards to heavy industrial zones - less than one per cent of the county's unincorporated area. It also sets a height limit of 40 feet, a size limit of 672 square feet, and a spacing requirement of 1,000 feet.

As a result of the council's action, the Outdoor Advertising Association of South Carolina has cancelled plans to hold its semi-annual convention in Charleston, telling the Charleston News & Courier (9/7/86), "the city would not have done a lot for our atmosphere during the convention."

Charleston city officials are not upset by the billboard group's actions. Mayor Joseph P. Riley, Jr. told the News & Courier, "The growth of billboards has marred our area. My only regret is that we didn't do it (regulate billboards) 10 years ago."

"Let them go meet in some city that's not nearly so pretty as ours that has billboards all over the place."

Meanwhile, the South Carolina Coastal Commission has gone to court to force the Charleston Outdoor Advertising Company to

remove its billboard from the marshland alongside SC Highway 7. The Commission contends that the billboard company never received permission from it before constructing the towering structure in the wetlands.

NEWS AROUND THE COUNTRY

COURT SAYS CHICAGO BILLBOARDS MUST COME DOWN

The Illinois Appellate Court ruled August 20 that 12 billboards on the Chicago loop must come down. The court ruled that the billboards were illegally erected by Foster & Kleiser and must be removed at the company's expense. This is very good news for citizens groups that hope to take down other billboards in the Chicago area. The ruling means that the city can withdraw a permit at any time for a sign installed on the public way.

The ruling was the result of a suit filed in May, 1985 by the city and civic groups who sought to remove two billboards attached to train overpasses at two street intersections that they said were illegal and detrimental to the historic area.

"It was a major and total victory," Betty Cerf Hill, president of the Burnham Park Planning Board, told the Chicago Sun-Times (8/21/86).

"The billboards make downtown look tacky," she said. "They are offensive and a possibly dangerous blight."

RED BANK, TENN BANS BILLBOARDS

On August 19th, Red Bank, a suburb of Chattanooga, banned the construction of any new billboards within its city limits. Existing signs are grandfathered in, but if taken down for 60 days or more, they cannot be put back up. The

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than their rooftop to be qualified for the sign. Kissinger says every Florida interstate should have logo signs by 1989. He is also working for approval of informational signage on federal primary roads.

With many communities limiting billboards, stricter laws from the Florida legislature and development of other motorist information systems, it appears that Florida is taking the first steps toward a better visual appearance.

NEWS AROUND THE COUNTRY

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provisions were adopted by city commissioners upon the recommendation of a citizens sign committee.

Dr. Wayne Shearer, chairman of the committee, told the Chattanooga Times (8/20/86), "the feeling seemed to have been that Red Bank would be run over by these billboards unless something is done."

This was because Chattanooga passed its own billboard ban last spring, resulting in a flood of new billboards in the city's suburbs.

VIRGINIA COUNTY RESTRICTS BILLBOARDS

The Currituck County commissioners voted unanimously in August to limit the size, spacing and location of billboards. The regulations came as a result of a petition from an billboard control group in May, according to reports from the Norfolk Star-Ledger (8/6/86).

Although Virginia state law allows billboards up to 1200 square feet, the new county law limits any new signs to 300 square feet. They must be at least 1500 feet apart on the same side of the road and no less than 1,000 from a residential area unless permission is granted from every homeowner affected.

Existing billboards that are nonconforming with the law must be brought into compliance in 10 years.

WASHINGTON COMMUNITIES REWORK SIGN ORDINANCES

Stanwood, WA city council has passed a ban on billboards and will require existing billboards to come down by 1994. According to the Stanwood News (9/10/86),

Councilmen who have drafted the proposal expressed concerns about the proliferation of signs creating an unattractive appearance for the town.

Renton, Washington officials are upset at a large billboard at one of the entranceways to the city. Their outrage has resulted in the city council enacting a moratorium while it draws up stricter rules to stop more billboard construction.

Renton's Comprehensive Plan already recommends banning billboards from the Valley Floor area, but the Plan is only a guideline, with no legal teeth, Planner Steve Munson told the Renton Record (8/18/86). Larry Springer, the city's policy development director, said of billboards, "They're big, they're overwhelming for the scale of the neighborhood, and my personal opinion is, they're ugly."

KANSAS CITY BUSINESS ASSOCIATION FED UP WITH BILLBOARDS

Businessmen in Kansas City, embarking on an ambitious renovation of the downtown area, have targeted billboards. "It doesn't do any good to spend hundreds of millions of dollars improving Downtown if we are going to have all its entrances covered with billboards," Arthur J. Doyle, member of the Kansas City Downtown Council, told the Kansas City Star (9/30/86). Doyle is the president and board chairman of Kansas City Power & Light Co., which spent \$1.4 million over the last three years to remove overhead power lines along major downtown streets, just to see billboards go up in their place.

The accelerated erection of billboards in Kansas City has brought together businessmen,

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planners, and residents who want to halt billboard proliferation. Tom Nelson, chairman of the Kansas City Plan Commission, told the Star, "The billboard industry is absolutely relentless. They don't give an inch, they don't compromise--they just spread [billboards] like cancer. It is time to look at the zoning ordinances related to billboards."

Billboard control advocates have already won some initial skirmishes. The Downtown Council went before the Board of Zoning Adjustment saying that a downtown billboard was illegal and the Volker Neighborhood Association argued before the board that a nearby billboard violated the law. The board agreed and ordered both billboards down with any expenses to be paid by the billboard company.

MOBILE, ALABAMA MAY CHARGE BILLBOARD OWNERS USER FEES

The Mobile City Council is considering a new billboard ordinance introduced by Councilmember John Peavy which would require an annual fee for a billboard permit equal to 10% of the sign's gross revenues.

In addition, the proposed ordinance would impose a ban on any new billboard construction and require removal of all existing off-premise signs from historic districts. Monies raised from the proposed legislation would go towards landscaping projects throughout the city. Mobile's city council is scheduled to take up the matter this week.

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Executive Director Edward McMahon. "We urge every American city to enact a moratorium on new billboard construction to protect themselves until Congress can act."

WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT BILLBOARDS

"Communities should be planned with an eye to the effect made upon the human spirit of being surrounded by beauty instead of ugliness."

-Thomas Jefferson

"It is in the best interests of neither the advertising industry nor the nation to permit a further decrease of our national beauty."

-Lyndon Johnson

"Billboards are acts of aggression against the American landscape."

-William F. Buckley

"Pollution is not limited to the air we breathe and the water we drink; it can equally offend the eye and ear."

-Warren Burger

"When a man throws an empty cigarette package from an automobile he is liable to a fine of \$50. When a man throws a billboard across a view he is richly rewarded."

-Former Governor
Pat Brown of CA

"I think that I shall never see a billboard lovely as a tree. Indeed unless the billboards fall I'll never see a tree at all."

-Ogden Nash

Sign Control News is a publication of the Coalition for Scenic Beauty and is available free to Coalition members. If you want to eliminate billboard blight and work for meaningful sign controls, you can become a member of the Coalition. Membership fees are as follows: Individual memberships start at \$20; for clubs, associations, organizations, private businesses, or government agencies fees are \$50 for local organizations, \$100 for state or regional organizations, and \$150 for national organizations. To join, send check payable the "Coalition for Scenic Beauty" to Coalition for Scenic Beauty, 44 East Front St. Media, PA 19063, Phone (215) 565-9131.

Editor, Sign Control News: David Michaud

THE COALITION FOR SCENIC BEAUTY NEEDS YOUR HELP IN OUR FIGHT TO SAVE OUR SCENERY. We defeated efforts to weaken the Highway Beautification Act but must redouble our efforts to renew the battle this January. Please sit down right now and write out a check for \$20.00 or more to help us fight the ugliness lobby.

Please join us in helping to stop the ruthless destruction of our scenic heritage.

Please send \$20, \$30, \$50, \$100 or whatever you can today to: Coalition for Scenic Beauty, 218 D Street, SE, Washington, DC 20003.

_____**YES!** I want to help Save Our Scenery. Enclosed is my check for \$_____.

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Phone: _____

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