

Testimony on
The Nationals Park Graphics and Entertainment Regulatory Amendment Act of 2016
By Mary Tracy, Scenic America President to
Subcommittee on Consumer Affairs, Chairperson Brianne Nadeau

November 14, 2016

Chairperson Nadeau and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Mary Tracy and I am President of Scenic America, a national nonprofit advocacy organization devoted to scenic conservation, the preservation of community character, and the fight against visual blight. We are based here in Washington and we have 48 state and local affiliates around the country.

Last October Scenic America gathered 150 people at the National Press Club to honor the 50th anniversary of the 1965 Highway Beautification Act, often called “Lady Bird’s Bill” after its chief proponent, Lady Bird Johnson. Our keynote speaker that day, Cokie Roberts, told us that Lady Bird loved Washington and worked hard to make it more beautiful for all residents and visitors. She promoted the planting of millions of flowers and the creation of neighborhood parks all over the District. Lady Bird said that “beauty brings us together.” I think Lady Bird would be terribly disappointed by yet another proposal to further blight the visual character of our capital city.

As President of Scenic America, I have traveled all over the country talking to citizens, public officials, and community leaders about the visual environment. I have seen many of our country’s great cities, big and small. Despite the best efforts of Scenic America and our affiliates, there is a creeping growth of electronic billboards in many communities, and it’s making those neighborhoods less unique and less appealing as places to live and work.

For many years, the District had strong restrictions on outdoor advertising. A de facto ban on billboards stood for decades until the year 2000, when the city allowed dozens of huge signs to be hung on the sides of buildings. A few years ago City Council allowed massive electronic billboards to go up on the Verizon Center. Neighboring residents and businesses have testified to those signs’ detrimental impacts on the enjoyment of their homes and offices. Elsewhere the city has allowed bright electronic signs into bus shelters, flashing new ads every few seconds. And now we have another proposal to allow electronic billboard blight to further establish itself in the District and diminish the city’s unique visual environment.

All around the country the billboard industry is making a concerted push to install bright, blinking billboards in our cities. Their motive is profit. But the community suffers from a loss of quality of life for neighbors, increased safety risks to pedestrian and drivers, reduced property values and diminished community character. The District is currently in a legal battle over electronic billboards that appeared literally overnight on city buildings. A Council move to allow electronic billboards on the exterior of Nationals Park will only further embolden billboard companies who see Washington as a lucrative untapped market for their bright, blinking signs.

Outdoor advertising preys upon the fact that if you're in the public space, you can't avoid it. Studies have said that the average person is exposed to as many as 5,000 marketing messages in a day. In so many facets of their lives people are trying to turn off these advertisements: they're using TiVo to skip commercials, they're listening to Internet radio, they employ spam filters on their email, all in an effort to block the commercial messages coming at them from every direction. But when you're in the public space, you have no choice about whether to be exposed to outdoor advertising.

Proponents of these types of bright, garish, billboards in urban areas will often say that the signs will help lend a sense of "vibrancy" to an area and will help draw people in and even make them feel safer. Actually, billboards thrust a discordant commercial note into our environments and contribute to a hectic and alienating atmosphere in our cities.

What we have seen is that carving out exceptions to the law leads to more exceptions. "Special signs," Gallery Place, the Verizon Center, our bus stops, all of these were exceptions to existing law. Nationals Park would be yet another exception. Where does it stop?

Washington is the country's face to the world. We are so fortunate to have streetscapes that are universally recognized. When people think of Washington D.C. they think of the Mall, the monuments, the dignified and historic Federal buildings, our low-slung skyline and our wide Avenues laid out by L'Enfant. No one's experience will be improved by massive electronic billboards on Nationals Stadium: not visitors, nor the people who live or work near the park. Scenic America respectfully asks that you stop the proliferation of visual pollution in the District.

Thank you for your time and I would be happy to answer any questions you may 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.