

How Many Billboards Are There?

Scenic America estimates there are between 560,000–780,000 billboards on federal aid roads as of December 2013. This is based on a Congressional Research Service estimate in 1991 that there were 450,000 permitted billboards along federal aid roads and that the number was growing by 5,000–15,000 annually. Combined with those on local and state roads there are likely over 2 million billboards in the United States today.

The Highway Beautification Act (HBA)

Passed by Congress and signed by President Johnson in 1965, the HBA:

- Requires states to maintain effective control of outdoor advertising along federal highways
- Regulates billboards within 660 ft of federal aid roads
- Prohibits billboards in areas with non-commercial activity
- Prohibits new billboards that don't conform to certain size, spacing and lighting requirements
- Requires a 10% reduction in federal highway funding to states in violation of the law

The Billboard Industry

Today the outdoor advertising industry is highly consolidated and more powerful than ever. Three huge corporations: Clear Channel, CBS, and Lamar own nearly 65% of all billboards nationally. They employ legions of lawyers and lobbyists to protect their business model, which relies entirely on public investments in roadways and infrastructure.

Billboard lobbyists are omnipresent in many state capitols, relentlessly pushing for more favorable regulations. In Texas, recent bills would allow billboards to grow ever taller; one proposal would remove any cap on their height. A bill in Michigan would have changed state zoning laws to allow digital billboards on public school property. In North Carolina a series of bills currently under consideration would essentially make the state's roadsides subject to every whim and desire of the industry.

Billboard Industry Revenue

\$8.6 billion in 2019, according to the Outdoor Advertising Association of America.

Billboards hinder a community's ability to grow and thrive. All the benefits of billboards accrue to the large billboard companies in the form of revenue, and to a lesser extent the owners of the lots which host billboards. The costs of billboards are significant, and are borne by everyone else.

Property Values

A recent study in Philadelphia showed that homes within 500 ft of a billboard are worth \$31,000 less at time of sale than those further away. In addition, every billboard in a census tract correlated with a nearly \$1,000 depreciation in home value compared to the city average. The presence of billboards reduces local property tax bases. Attempts by town and county

governments to recoup these costs though permit fees and taxes on billboards never succeed in offsetting the lost value.

Tree Cutting

About half the states allow billboard companies to cut and remove trees on public property to preserve clear views of their advertising. The practice of tree-cutting is so widespread that it was the clue for “What is a Billboard?” on a recent episode of the game show *Jeopardy!* In many instances the states require only a fraction of the trees’ value as compensation for their removal.

Public Safety

Billboards also pose a major threat to public safety. In brief, billboards create dangerous and unavoidable driver distractions. Billboards, both static and digital, are designed for the purpose of drawing driver attention away from the road and toward the advertisements.

Harmful to Ecosystems

Billboards also harm ecosystems. Brightly illuminated static billboards generate light pollution which can cause significant disruption to wildlife. In response to a recent billboard proposal in San Jose, CA, the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society issued a joint letter stating, “the incremental and cumulative impacts of light pollution to biological resources are not disputable, and that scientific evidence shows that the effects of light pollution are incremental and cumulative...”. These negative impacts extend to human health as well, and light pollution is becoming a public health priority.

Taxpayers’ Burden

Billboard owners pay little to no property taxes and no road user fees such as fuel taxes and tolls, yet they derive 100% of their value from their proximity to publicly-funded roads. When the government needs the land under a billboard for a public purpose such as a road improvement project, billboard owners often demand compensation for lost future revenues, often for up to seven years or more into the future. For example, the replacement of the Lafayette Bridge in St. Paul, Minnesota required the removal of one digital billboard and four static billboards owned by Clear Channel Outdoor. In September 2013 the Minnesota Department of Transportation settled with Clear Channel, paying them \$4.3 million for the digital billboard and \$3 million for the static billboards, all from public funds.

No Amortization on Federal Highways

Congress passed an amendment to the HBA in 1978 to revoke the rights of cities and states to amortize billboards along federal highways, therefore governmental agencies must pay cash compensation to remove even nonconforming billboards.

Are Billboards Effective Advertising?

In a 2012 study by the research firm Marketing Charts, only 0.2% of adults said outdoor advertising was the most influential ad medium in their purchase decisions.

Billboards as a Percentage of All Advertising

In 2019 billboards accounted for approximately 3.8% of total advertising spending in the U.S., according to figures from Marketing Charts and the Outdoor Advertising Association of America.

Public Opinion

A 2011 poll of North Carolina voters by Public Policy Polling found that 70% of registered Democrats, 68% of registered Republicans and 78% of registered Independent voters said billboards detracted from community appearance. In the same poll 80% of respondents opposed removing trees to clear views of billboards. In 2011 the M.J. Ross Group polled voters in Reno, Nevada and found that 80% said the city already had enough or too many billboards. A 2011 poll by the Portland Press Herald showed that 94% of Mainers opposed a plan to allow billboards back into the state. The proposal was quickly scuttled.

Who Uses Billboards?

According to Outdoor Advertising Association of America, in 2019 the top users of outdoor advertising included:

- Amazon
- McDonald's
- Apple
- Geico
- State Farm
- Google
- American Express
- HBO
- AT&T
- Disney
- Coca-Cola
- Chevrolet
- Facebook
- Netflix
- T-Mobile
- Verizon
- Universal Pictures

Billboard Prohibitions

Four states prohibit all billboards: Maine, Vermont, Alaska and Hawaii. Larger cities with prohibitions on new billboards include Houston, Los Angeles, St. Paul and Kansas City. Scenic America estimates thousands of communities around the country prohibit construction of new billboards. All of these places have come to the realization that not only is beauty good for the health and happiness of people -- it's good for business, too.

May My City Prohibit New Billboards?

Most likely, yes. Decades of case law has affirmed the rights of communities to prohibit construction of billboards based on safety and aesthetic concerns.

More than 700 towns across America have banned billboards. Your community can too.