

THE CASE AGAINST MORE BILLBOARDS

You may have heard the following myths about billboards. Please consider our responses. Then contact the Mayor and your city council person. It is City Council alone that has the power to set and change public policy.

MYTH: Billboards help **promote business**.

TRUTH: Nobody comes to San Antonio to see billboards. To quote from “B.B. Control is Good for Business” a five-year study of 35 cities by the Mississippi Research and Development Center concluded that “The way a community looks affects how both the residents and visitors feel about it. An attractive community has a better chance at industry, including tourism.” Remember, tourism is the second largest “business” in San Antonio.

When San Antonians had the opportunity to express their preference about off-premise billboards, in every instance those attending public meetings about design standards in all of the urban and scenic corridors established in the 1990’s asked that new off-premise billboards not be allowed. Unfortunately, our current City Council has ignored the input of hundreds of citizens in passing the Pilot Digital Billboard Ordinance. This has resulted in digital billboards replacing existing billboards in urban and scenic corridors.

On December 11, 2008, the City Council passed the “Dark Skies” zoning overlay ordinance affecting lighting regulations around the military bases. The first to be implemented with specific zoning will be Camp Bullis. The military has told the City that, if it cannot maintain its night mission, it will have to move from San Antonio. Yet, the ordinance has two serious flaws. (The devil is always in the detail.) (1) LEED lighting standards are optional, not mandatory. The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design lighting standards are from 3 to 10 times more effective in reducing the impact of lighting than the standards in the ordinance. LEED standards have been adopted by other areas that are serious about keeping the military. The areas have noticed a drop in the night time sky effect of their lights with no loss in ability to illuminate the areas that need illumination. (2) The adopted ordinance allows billboards to raise their lighting levels as the ambient light level increases with the addition of development. (The ordinance allows the candlepower of billboards to be 30% above the general ambient light level.)

MYTH: Billboards are just the “**cost of business**” in the 7th largest city in the United States. Why be opposed to progress?

TRUTH: Houston and Dallas are even larger, and they ban new billboards, including digitals. Fort Worth and Austin do as well. In 1980, Houston had 10,000 billboards. Their ban has reduced that number to 4,500 – and all by normal land use changes, not by paying your tax money to billboard companies. About 350 cities in Texas ban new billboards.

Prohibiting the proliferation of billboards, including digitals, does not preclude the use of modern technology by companies whose business is advertising. For example, Clear Channel was recently awarded a contract with VIA for bus shelters. Their website offers advertising at River Center Mall, the Convention Center, San Antonio Airport, hotels, buses, and taxis.

MYTH: Two recent studies sponsored by the billboard industry have concluded that **digital** multiple message billboards are no more likely to cause **traffic accidents** than conventional billboards.

TRUTH: Both studies have been blasted by a peer review. In addition, a federal district judge ruled that the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute study was so infected by industry bias as to lack credibility. Both were debunked by traffic safety expert Jerry Wachtel, hired by the Maryland DOT, who has been highly critical of the conclusions and methodology of both studies and recommended that no governmental entity should rely on them to establish public policy. The Federal Highway Administration will develop appropriate methodologies to study driver behavior in 2009 and warn that such studies will take considerable time to validate. City Council was told about the lack of valid driver safety studies prior to their vote to allow a pilot program for digitals for 2008, but they chose to ignore it. City Council is not requiring a genuine traffic safety study as part of the pilot program on digitals. Don't you think they should have considered your safety?

MYTH: There will be a 4-to-1 reduction in billboards as a result of the pilot digital multiple message billboard program.

TRUTH: We will never see a visual reduction in billboards as long as we allow new billboards. Because we have not adopted a "**No New Billboards**" ordinance, billboards are being erected on the most profitable routes, and digital multiple message technology is being installed on existing signs in scenic corridors and urban corridors where they should be prohibited.

How has the "trade off" **really worked out?**

- If City Council was going to do this, it should have gotten a much better deal. Billboard companies may yield up to a 38-to-1 increase in gross revenues, which is far better, by a factor of 9-to-1, than another offer Clear Channel Outdoors made to the City of Anaheim, CA. For the complete analysis, go to the website of the Vance Jackson Inc. Neighborhood Association and find "The Economics of San Antonio's Digital Billboard Ordinance."
In San Antonio, the **ratio of take-down so far has been 2-to-1**, not even the 4-to-1 that was promised. And our analysis is generous. It includes signs that had no advertising on them when taken down!
- **Digital billboards generate** noise pollution, heat pollution, light pollution, pollution from manufacturing and disposal of signs themselves – and for those billboards that are not powered by Windtricity, there's carbon pollution.
- The City Council and CPS have publicly stated goals to **reduce energy consumption**. The City has purchased Toyota Prius Hybrids as an energy savings measure. Yet, a digital billboard uses 28.7 times as much electricity as a regular billboard, and the 15 digitals negate the savings of 345 Hybrids – far above the number of cars in the City's fleet.

MYTH: WE can control the messages.

TRUTH: The **first amendment** will not allow control over content. We could have daily, repeated advertisements for sexually oriented businesses and alcohol seen by our children.