

A Question of Safety - Digital Billboards

Digital billboards represent a giant leap in applied technology that is very appealing to the business person who wants to advertise. Messages can be changed frequently. Prices compare with newspaper and other media. The public can't turn them off, as with TV or radio.

But, for the public – that's the problem. Digital billboards are one more distraction for the driver traveling at 60 or 65 miles per hour. Relevant independent studies (mostly by the auto insurance industry) on the usage of cell phones while driving or other driver attention-distracting activities (eating, putting on makeup, etc.) overwhelmingly show that driver inattention is a major cause of traffic accidents and even fatalities - with younger drivers more subject to distraction.

An analysis of the "100-Car Naturalistic Driving Study", conducted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and released in 2006 states: *taking one's eyes off the road for more than two seconds for any reason not directly related to driving significantly increased individual near crash/crash risk.* The study goes on to say that the factors that make drivers likely to look at an electronic sign for more than two seconds at a time are:

- They are extremely bright and are designed to be visible in bright sunlight and at night. They are designed to be eye-catching, and they are.
- They can be seen from great distances, making them distracting even before they begin to communicate their messages.
- Because the messages rotate, drivers are likely to look to see what comes up next. And, unlike static signs, there will always be the urge to look. These signs do not fade away into "background visual noise."
- Younger drivers may be more easily distracted by electrical media.

The Federal Highway Administration has initiated a study to examine the safety issues related to electronic signs and will announce its results in 2009. Your City Council could not wait for these studies. It relied upon studies produced by the billboard industry stating that digital billboards had no more impact than static billboards. In October 2007, the first peer review of these studies, conducted by the Maryland State Highway Administration, refuted that conclusion.

We ought to be able to rely upon our local government to protect our safety. Have they let us down?

For more information on driving safety, see:

1. "A Critical, Comprehensive Review of Two Studies Recently Released by the Outdoor Advertising Association of America," by the Maryland State Highway Administration
2. "Billboards and the Digital Age," by Scenic America

Both studies can be downloaded from www.scenic.org

If you are concerned about your driving safety, let your City Council representative hear from you. This issue comes up again in December 2008. But, don't wait, let them hear from you now.

A message from June Kachtik, Co-Chair
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Scenic San Antonio is a member organization. Individual dues are \$30. Email: scenic@scenictexas.org. Or, mail to: Scenic Texas, Inc./ 3015 Richmond, Suite 220/ Houston, Texas 77098.

If your group would like a presentation on billboards, please contact June Kachtik at junekac@aol.com or 342-0135. She or another member of Scenic Texas is available. We have a 5-minute video that you will appreciate. It shows what can happen when billboards get out of hand.

Please distribute at your next neighborhood meeting. Thank you.