

THE CASE AGAINST MORE BILLBOARDS

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

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. 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 tax money to billboard companies. About 350 cities in Texas ban new billboards. San Antonians need to tell their elected officials that they want better public policy – **REDUCE VISUAL BLIGHT! BAN NEW BILLBOARDS!**

MYTH: Billboards help **promote businesses**.

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. Think about it this way: how would you feel if a billboard blocked your view of The Alamo?

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 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 complete its safety study by the end of 2009.

City Council was told about driver safety prior to their vote to allow a pilot program for digitals for 2008, but they chose to ignore it. City Council did not require 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 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 will be installed on existing signs in scenic corridors and urban corridors where they should be prohibited.

An how has the “trade off” **really worked out so far?**

- City Council did not wait for an **unbiased driver safety study** slated for release next year. Instead they are using San Antonio citizens and visitor as guinea pigs.
- 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 for companies, 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.

BACKGROUND:

Since 1986, San Antonio has had a billboard ordinance that requires taking down two signs whenever a sign company wants to put up one new billboard. And, no new billboards could be erected on our major corridors. On December 6, 2007, City Council passed a pilot program to allow billboard companies to change 15 existing billboards into digital multiple message billboards in our major corridors, in exchange for taking down some of their older signs in 2008. We have been told that in November, City Council will receive a staff report on this pilot program.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

1. Contact your City Council representative by letter or email right now to demand no new billboards, digital or non-digital.
2. Talk to the leaders of your group about having a presentation from Scenic San Antonio about billboard blight.
3. If there is a public meeting in November about the digital billboard pilot program, attend and voice your concerns.

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