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SHOULD WE TRY TO RELOCATE BILLBOARDS?

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Austin should not allow relocation of Off Premises Signs (billboards) where not required to do so by state law.

Each time the billboard issue has come up, both the Austin City Council and the Planning Commission have reaffirmed the goal of eventually phasing billboards completely out of our city and our ETJ. Since this is a long and difficult process, other methods have been proposed by the City Council in the interim to lessen the impact of billboards in general, and on certain areas of the city in particular.

Recently an idea that has been explored periodically has resurfaced; namely the idea of relocating billboards. One way that this might be done is contained in a proposed Ordinance Amendment from two current City Council members. Basically, the idea would be to relocate some of what some folks think are the most objectionable billboards (although not specifically mentioned in the proposed ordinance, the ones discussed at the Council meeting were ones that are downtown) to areas that could be agreed upon to be better (less objectionable) locations. Over the last 25 years, many communities have grappled with this basic idea. At first, it always looks appealing to move billboards out of areas where they have been deemed most objectionable, but there are serious flaws with the concept.

It needs to be stated that the entire subject of lessening the impact of billboards and eventually eliminating them is a complex matter that is a primary focus of Scenic Austin, Scenic Texas and Scenic America. Also, it must be noted that the subject of relocating billboards due to the widening of public streets is a separate issue and needs to be dealt with separately. It is beyond the scope of this document to address relocations due to street widenings, or the myriad of issues that become relevant when attempting to amend our ordinance; rather, this paper is intended to address the specific idea that is on the table, namely the relocation of billboards from what are determined to be the “most undesirable” locations to other “less undesirable” areas. “Undesirable” here is used to mean areas where we would not want billboards.

WHY NOT RELOCATE BILLBOARDS?

The following are the primary reasons that we recommend against utilizing relocation as a method of lessening the negative impact of billboards:

1. Many people are unaware that many billboards have come down in our city and its ETJ over the past twenty years. In fact, the total number of billboards in Austin has been reduced by at least 59 in the last 5 years alone. What is most noticed is when a new billboard goes up. If a billboard is relocated from downtown, often, while everyone will agree that the downtown has become more beautiful, few may notice that a specific billboard has been removed. But, when the billboard is re-erected somewhere else, it will most assuredly be noticed there, and many objections will be raised regarding the visual blight being introduced to their community and subsequent devaluation of their property. It is impossible to visualize an area in Austin or its hinterlands that would not be harmed by introduction of previously illegal billboards.
2. Locations that may appear at first glance to be “acceptable” always turn out to be problematic. Even when efforts are taken to avoid parks, “scenic” areas and roadways, historic areas and residential neighborhoods, they still wind up somewhere, and wherever that is they will detract from the beauty or potential beauty of that place. Even a garbage dump or a wrecking yard can become a scenic place over time, but a 30 year lease for a billboard guarantees that whatever views of the natural or manmade environment that exist now or in the future will be spoiled by the presence of the billboard. There are virtually no districts in Austin that we can confidently say will not be a desired development zone during the 30+ year life span of a relocated billboard. Under the proposed ordinance, densification (as outlined by the favored scenario of the recent Envision Central Texas poll) will force continual relocation of these billboards further into the ETJ, putting these billboards in the middle of our most scenic countryside.
3. The relocation of a billboard offers the probability of a new, longer lease and a more permanent sign structure.
4. The most important reason not to allow the relocation of a billboard is that doing so removes the one tested and most effective method that exists to get rid of billboards (see below).

HOW CAN WE GET RID OF BILLBOARDS?

The following are the primary ways that are available to get rid of billboards:

1. Buy them down. The City can purchase the lease for the billboard from the sign company as was done in recent years in Fort Worth. Although Scenic Austin is not in agreement with current valuation methods for billboards, the fact is that buying down billboards is currently very expensive and thus is not a viable avenue at this time. We do believe that the fact that billboards are taxed as depreciated personal property is evidence that purchasing them should involve much less expenditure; however this is an issue that needs to be addressed over time.
2. Leave them down when they are destroyed or damaged beyond reasonable repair. Houston and other communities have been more successful than Austin in getting

rid of billboards by this method, but we believe that Austin could, in fact, get rid of some billboards by more aggressive enforcement of its ordinance provisions in this regard. Still, at best this would only address the older wooden-pole signs and this method would never make a serious dent in the inventory of billboards. As Ms Cerkan has pointed out, Houston has a large staff (perhaps as many as 30 employees) that does nothing but enforce their sign ordinance; Austin has only one employee assigned this task.

3. Require the billboards to be taken down by the sign companies after their value has been amortized over a span of years. Currently, Austin does not have the authority to do this, and a change in State law would have to occur for Austin to join Houston and other Texas cities, which have this authority. Scenic Austin has been recommending for over fourteen years that Austin pursue this mechanism as a part of its state legislative efforts.
4. Allow them to disappear by Attrition. This is BY FAR the most effective way to get rid of billboards. Since new billboards were banned in the mid eighties in Austin, we are confident that we have lost hundreds of billboards by this method. In areas of increased development (i.e., the “desired development zone”) this strategy is the most efficient. Basically, as land values and building densities increase and as land uses change, eventually virtually every place where there is a current billboard will one day be a site where the billboard is not deemed by the owner or developer of a property to be compatible with a new or expanded use, and the lease for the billboard will be purchased as a part of the development or redevelopment. This method works and there are a variety of ways that it can be enhanced. Exact numbers since the prohibition of new billboards are not available, since there is no requirement that the city be notified when a billboard is taken down, and billboard companies have no reason to advertise that this method actually works. However, since the billboard inventory in 1999, there is evidence of at least 59 billboards being removed in the City, and this is attributed to a combination of attrition (especially in the downtown area) or the neglect of sign owners to erect replacement billboards within 90 days of the building permit issuance.

This last method, natural attrition of billboards due to increases in land value and land-use changes over time, is completely lost when billboards are allowed to be relocated. No community committed to lowering the number of, and eventually eliminating, billboards should ever allow relocations.