

Works for Them

HOW OTHER CITIES TACKLE URBAN CHALLENGES

Signing Up for Signs Down

By Dana Logan

“Visual chaos.” That’s what Scenic Virginia’s Executive Director, Leighton Powell says is the result of billboards crowding open spaces, cities, and interstates. “When you have signs fighting each other for attention,” says Powell, “you end up with visual chaos.”

Apparently, the City of Virginia Beach agrees. Since 1988, there has been an ordinance in the City Code that bans billboards. “No new billboards shall be erected within the city limits,” it says.

Now, that’s not to say that there aren’t any billboards standing in the City—there are. According to Kevin L. Hershberger, “28 billboards exist in Virginia Beach today.”

“They are legal as they exist,” says Hershberger, the Sign Inspector for the City of Virginia Beach. “They can stay in perpe-

tuity until something happens,” he says. And by “something,” he means “rezoning, resubdividing, and redeveloping.”

Widening roads, improper structural alterations, and expired conditional use permits are just a few of the other reasons that Kay Wilson, the City Attorney for Virginia Beach, cites as grounds for requiring that a



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boards wear out, they need to be removed.” But, he says that mostly, “we are just allowing nature to take its course.”

While some large, nonconforming signs have come down in recent years due to storms, like Hurricane Bonnie, billboard companies know the power of nature’s wrath and do their best to guard against it. Hershberger claims that they “take the faces off when they know we’re going to have a big storm.”

They also know the power of the City’s wrath. Though there has been some opposition to the City’s ban on billboards, Hershberger, Powell, and Wilson agree that the opposition lies almost solely with the billboard companies themselves. “They’d like to be able to do whatever they’d like,” says Hershberger. But, he continues, “there are never any citizens or other businesses opposed to it.”

Despite citizen support, there have been court cases regarding the ban. In fact, the Virginia Supreme Court has seen several cases and 2 cases have gone all the way to the United States Supreme Court. But across the board, the courts have ruled with the City, upholding the ban.

“The billboard industry works every year to chip away at the locale’s authority to control its signage,” says

[T]he ban has caused “no change at all in revenue.”

Powell. She suggests that “the best thing a locality can do is,” following the example of Virginia Beach, “make sure that it has a good strong sign ordinance in place.”

“What is admirable about [Virginia Beach] is that they recognized that billboards are a form of blight and made the

billboard be removed.

And then sometimes, like everything else, billboards just get old and worn out. While Virginia Beach has made the conscious decision to get rid of billboards, Hershberger claims that there is “no specific time goal. As existing bill-

COURTESY OF DEPUTY CITY ATTORNEY WILLIAM MACALI, VA BEACH



One of 28 billboards still standing in the City of Virginia Beach. An artist’s conception of the same location is shown above as it would look if the billboard were removed.



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One of the many billboards that has been removed, making way for a clear view of the Virginia Beach skyline.

conscious effort to address it," says Powell.

There are several benefits of addressing billboards, according to Wilson, who says that "it's a health, safety, and welfare issue."

Hershberger sees "cleaner, more attractive thoroughfares" as the primary benefit. Powell and Wilson agree with him that it's mostly an aesthetics issue.

"It instantly says to visitors that they're entering a place that's special," says Powell. "Sign control is good for everybody—you can see the scenery."

If there's any concern about billboard restrictions causing a lull in retail revenue, it is easily quelled. Virginia Beach is number 3 in Virginia for tourist expenditures and Wilson says that the ban has caused "no change at all in revenue. The City of Virginia Beach is thriving!" she exclaims.

If further proof is needed, Powell says that "Vermont, Maine, Alaska and Hawaii have completely done away with billboards—old and new—and their business revenue didn't suffer at all."

And besides, "a big billboard is kind of a dinosaur," claims Powell. With technology moving forward as it is, she thinks that "cars are soon going to have a pop-up ad telling you that there's a Wendy's 5 miles ahead on the right"—making billboards an even more obsolete form of advertising.

The point that Wilson thinks is important—the thing that other cities can learn by looking at Virginia Beach—is that "billboard restrictions work. There are fewer billboards in the City of Virginia Beach because of restrictions," she declares. "They can be enforced and they can work."



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