

The billboard industry is trying to overturn the current ban on electronic billboards in Durham.

This move would open the door and allow big, bright, blinking billboards on I-85, 147, 15-501 and 70. Overturning the ban would allow large lit billboards -- at the top of tall metal poles -- near homes, schools, parks and places of worship.

Below are letters/column in the Herald-Sun from across the community.

Column: Not enough lipstick in the Carolinas for this bad idea
By John Schelp and Larry Holt, Herald-Sun, 21 December 2008

A Georgia billboard company is asking Durham to open the door to allow electronic billboards along roadways that flash new ad images every few seconds.

They look like huge flat screen TVs on a stick -- bright lights that change messages every 4-5 seconds.

The advantage of billboards for advertisers -- according to Advertising Age, an industry publication -- is that billboards are: "not an on-demand medium. You can't choose to see it, you have to see it."

Readers can see these electronic boards in the Triad and near Richmond. These bright panels dominate the night horizon. They are a distraction and a danger on Interstates and roads in congested urban areas. And we don't need them in Durham, next to our streets, homes, and neighborhoods.

Scenic America calls electronic billboards unsafe, unsightly and un-environmental at any speed. Billboards are effective only if you look at them, they are designed to draw your eyes off the traffic in front of you. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has found that anything that distracts a driver for more than two seconds from the road ahead, "significantly increases the chances of crashes and near crashes." Scenic America estimates that it takes up to 5 seconds to understand the billboard messages. (Source: www.scenic.org)

The ever-changing images on electronic billboard cause drivers eyes to linger especially long, as viewers wait to see what's next. The billboards are especially eye-catching at night, when they are the brightest objects in the driver's field of vision. Designed to deliberately distract drivers, these electronic billboards create an unsafe environment on the road -- even for motorists who try to ignore them.

Not surprisingly, the billboard industry takes exception to these findings and has sponsored its own special studies insisting that flashing billboards are perfectly safe. But, in an embarrassing setback for the billboard companies, the Wachtel Report concluded that the industry's studies were not supported by scientific data: "Having completed this peer review, it is our opinion that acceptance of these [industry] reports as valid is inappropriate and unsupported by scientific

data, and that ordinance or code changes based on their findings is ill advised."

If safety concerns alone aren't enough to make us reject electronic billboards, there are environmental concerns and risks for Durham taxpayers. Scenic America estimates that one electronic billboard equals 108 tons/year of carbon dioxide. The carbon footprint of one of these billboards is equal to that of 13 houses. When we're all switching our home lamps to florescent bulbs to reduce our individual carbon footprints, why would we want to increase the carbon footprint of our advertising billboards?

The Highway Beautification Act requires cash compensation if billboards ever have to be moved or taken down. Scenic America reports that "compensation is usually defined as the value of the structure, plus lost revenue, making each digital sign worth millions of dollars." Because electronic billboard images do change, multiple companies can advertise on them simultaneously, significantly increasing their revenue value. Once a standard billboard goes electronic, the compensation required to remove it will be prohibitive. Do we really want to make taxpayers liable for huge bailouts to the billboard industry? Do we in Durham really want to expose ourselves to millions of dollars of risk so a company in Georgia can make more money?

Why go there? Existing billboards are currently "grandfathered" into new zoning standards as nonconforming uses. Building new billboards or upgrading existing ones is prohibited in Durham.

Several years ago, the Durham InterNeighborhood Council was instrumental in working with Durham officials and communities across the state to end billboard blight in the Bull City.

It was therefore surprising to learn that the sitting INC leadership placed a presentation by the billboard industry on its Agenda -- without including a speaker who represents an opposing perspective or who could provide historical background on current zoning restrictions on billboards. As a result, this newspaper wrote an article that basically reported what the billboard industry said. After wading through the first ten paragraphs telling us what billboard companies want, we FINALLY get to hear from a Durham resident who calls the idea "awful for our community."

Constructing more billboards in Durham, electronic or otherwise, is not a citizen or neighborhood initiated issue. It was placed on the agenda because it serves the interests of the billboard industry and advertisers. Cluttering our roads and neighborhoods with brightly lit, attention-grabbing billboards is a terrible idea. We shouldn't let the industry try to change our ordinances to line the pockets of out-of-state businesses with no interest in Durham and in the quality of life of its citizens.

Durham has been receiving lots of national recognition in national publications for the things that make it such a vibrant and engaged community -- our restaurants and "foodie" culture, our revitalized in-town neighborhoods, the arts, and our local shops. The diversity of our economy and community is what makes Durham a desirable place to live.

The national ratings Durham got as one of the best places to live did not include brightly lit billboards flashing ads 24/7 along heavily traveled stretches of the Durham Freeway, 15-501, I-85, and U.S. 70 to the Wake County line.

There's not enough lipstick in the Carolinas to fix these flashy pigs on a stick. We all should strongly oppose this self-serving move by the billboard industry.

Letter: Durham can't afford electronic billboards
Herald-Sun, 23 Dec 2008

I oppose Fairway Advertising's efforts to amend Durham's ordinances to allow it to erect electronic billboards. In Sunday's Herald-Sun, John Schelp and Larry Holt reported distressing facts about the carbon footprint of Fairway's proposed 25 electronic billboards, which will be equivalent to a new 325-unit housing development.

Fairway's proposal that we amend ordinances so they can build electronic billboards flies in the face of the efforts of many Durham residents and organizations working to make Durham a greener, sustainable carbon-neutral community.

Equally distressing, allowing electronic billboards now will make them much more expensive to get rid of down the road. Schelp's article states that the Highway Beautification Act requires cash compensation for the value of the structure plus lost revenue. Fairway's article estimates the value of the "donated" non-profit advertising at "millions of dollars." By extension, the value of the other six ads they would run on their billboards would be six times "millions of dollars."

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that for their "donation," Fairway is guaranteeing the future of these billboards. In order to take one down, Durham taxpayers would be obligated to compensate Fairway for the cost of the billboard plus the six- or seven-times millions of dollars of lost revenues.

That's a pretty good return on a donation for Fairway.

Durham gets a light- and carbon-polluting billboard we didn't ask for, putting advertising revenues in the pockets of an out-of-state company. Surely we can do better.

Kelly Jarrett
Durham

Letter: This isn't Vegas
Herald-Sun, 24 Dec 2008

Electronic billboards? Who needs this? Not Durham, the "foodiest" city in the country, according

to Bon Appetit. The best place to live and work, say several surveys -- a wonderful cultural crystal palace, the largest performing arts center filled with patrons. So we now are considering looking and acting like Las Vegas?

Please say no!

Sally Schauman
Durham

Letter: Electronic billboards will be dangerous
Herald-Sun, 24 Dec 2008

Driving safety is a great concern of mine, whether on back roads, city traffic, in parking lots or on highways. There are special problems to look out for in each of those locations, but one key element in driving safety is to be on the alert for unexpected movement or potential movement.

Are deer crossing the road at night? Is there a pack of cars approaching from behind, traveling 20 miles or more over the speed limit? Is someone moving out from the parking space directly behind mine as I attempt to back out? Is a bicyclist going to swerve from the sidewalk into the street? Paying attention to "background" visual components while driving is a major factor in avoiding accidents.

Electronic billboards would add visual disturbance to the driving landscape while making driving more hazardous. A non-electronic billboard may attract the driver's attention only when there are few driving distractions, but an electronic billboard (or a vehicle with changing electronic signage) is intended to be distracting. In the interest of safety, I urge Durham not to allow electronic signs.

Debbie Rubin Williams
Timberlake

Letter: No bright billboards
Herald-Sun, 28 Dec 2008

Old West Durham has everything that is good about a neighborhood. Everyone is welcome. There is a spirit of kindness and giving. Adults and kids walk together through the neighborhood, kids ride their bikes, and if you need help, there is always someone to lend a hand.

We all worked hard to make the neighborhood beautiful, we fixed up our houses, and planted trees and flowers. We share flowers from our garden and figs from our tree. There is a red-tailed hawk that lives our oak tree and an owl that sometimes visits at night.

It makes me so sad to hear that the billboard industry is trying to place bright flashing billboards near our Old West Durham neighborhood. This will destroy the peacefulness of our neighborhood at night. We have worked hard to make our neighborhood a good place for children and families. We don't need flashing lights in our bedrooms and the bedrooms of our children.

Victoria Seewaldt
Durham

Letter: Dangerous idea
Herald-Sun, 28 Dec 2008

The Durham Freeway is dangerous enough already without added distractions. The proposal to install electronic billboards to the freeway is the worst idea yet and will only add to the mounting car accidents we now experience. We need fewer advertisements, not more.

Barbara Taylor
[East] Durham

Question of the Week: What do you think about the proposed digital billboards?
Herald-Sun editorial page, 31 Dec 2008

The following are representative responses posted on www.heraldsun.com to the Sunday Perspectives Question of the Week: "What do you think about the proposed digital billboards?"

Say no to bright, digital billboards

This does not seem to be in the best interest for our community. I like Durham descriptives such as grit, diversity, city of neighborhoods. Do we really need to know what the hottest Vodka brand is or where the best car deal can be had while driving down our streets? I vote NO to propaganda and bright, digital billboards. - Long time resident and neighbor.

==

Tacky distraction

I enjoy the skyline I see now from the Freeway as I drive to various destinations. Our skyline is something Durham's history can be proud of, and electric billboards would be a tacky distraction. I already hate all the alcohol and fatty food ads I have to see on my way out of the neighborhood I live in as is.

If your not supposed to watch DVD players in your car, electronic billboards along a street don't

sound like a hot idea either. It's meant to take your eyes off the road and the science says that these ads succeed in doing that. Therefore, these electronic billboards have been shown to decrease safety along the roads they "grace".

Durham should decline companies that want to put up new billboards in our community.

==

Seen in Greensboro

From a friend...

Returning from Greensboro, NC to Durham yesterday along I-85 around 5:30PM there was this bright electronic billboard just outside of Greensboro which I had not seen before. It got my attention because it was extremely bright for that time of day. It was so bright and overpowering you could not read it. It was laughable because it was so useless. It over lit the area and it took a few seconds once I looked away for my eyes to adjust back to normal.

Further down the road in comparison, the old style billboards that have a fixed sign with lights shining up from the bottom was more readable and was better on the eyes for that time of day even though it added to the visual clutter along the road. You would think the billboard industry would know this but I assume the primary driver for them to go with the electronic LCD version is being able to flip different messages on a single billboard. I guess they did not realize that certain times of the day, these electronic versions would be useless because you cannot read them.

The light pollution from this one sign was extreme. Had there been more of these electronic versions along the road with one right after the other on both sides of the road, the light pollution would have been horrible, extremely distracting, irritating, and very blinding. You would be blinded for such long periods of time your eyes would never adjust back to normal so you can see the road. This major hazard and visual pollution should never be allowed.

Letter: Blinding billboards
Herald-Sun, 1 Jan 2009

Electronic lighting of billboards on highways will be absolutely blinding to people who have some night blindness, problems looking at certain kinds of oncoming headlights and confusing to anyone who has a shred of dyslexia. Anyone who remembers driving I-40 through Durham during major road construction would affirm that navigating the blaze of flashing bright lights was difficult and confusing. For me it was scary as could be.

We are already forced to look at too much advertising. It is not worth the sacrifice of anyone's life. The experts need to step up and say no to electronic advertising on highways because it is dangerous.

Kris Christensen
Raleigh

Letter: Bad ads for Durham
Herald-Sun, 3 Jan 2008

Let us consider this idea of electronic billboards. On the "con" side are the following:

- 1) They are bad for the environment with staggering amounts of carbon pollution, plus light pollution.
- 2) They are distracting at best and dangerous at worst for drivers.
- 3) They would provide revenue to yet another distant corporation while giving nothing in return (have we not had enough of such corporate greed?).
- 4) They would cost Durham greatly if we decide later that we want to remove them.
- 5) They are tasteless, garish and annoying.

On the "pro" side? I am at a loss to find one thing to recommend them.

We know this is a bad idea. Please do not change Durham's ordinance to permit electronic billboards here.

Julia Borbely-Brown
Durham

Letter: Electronic billboards bad ads for Durham
Herald-Sun, 5 Jan 2009

Durham is a city of distinctive neighborhoods. I have the good fortune to live in one, Morehead Hill, a charming suburb established at the beginning of the last century.

Unhappily, if lobbyists for the billboard industry are successful, motorists coming off the Durham Freeway to Morehead Hill will be greeted by the considerably less charming sight of enormous, electronic signs, looming over the highway, garishly lit and impossible to ignore.

If the signs were merely tacky and gross it would be bad enough, but the most serious problem with the billboards is not aesthetic. The very quality that makes them desirable as advertising -- people can't avoid looking at them -- makes them dangerous. The captive audience consists of

motorists driving down busy freeways who would be well-advised to keep their eyes on the road. As if to guarantee distractions, the flashing messages change every few seconds.

The billboards are also unhealthy for the environment. The conservationist group Scenic America estimates that just one sign has a "carbon footprint" equivalent to 13 houses.

The costs of electronic signs will be borne locally. As for benefits, the company promoting the billboards is based, not in the Triangle or even in North Carolina, but in Georgia. Many people have worked hard to improve Durham's image. Highway billboards would be a bad advertisement for Durham.

Lynn Kohn
Durham

Letter: No billboard blight
Herald-Sun, 7 Jan 2009

I am a home owner on American Drive in Durham. North Carolina is where I was born; I have always been proud of the state's concern for roads and nature.

The last thing we need is to have billboards as a blight on the beautiful Duke Forest setting. The woods and trails and trees are reasons for buying and living in this lovely area.

Please don't bring in what other states are doing away with. Let's keep Durham a leader and not succumb to billboard lobbying.

Whatever needs to be done to prevent it, I will be there.

Joyce Harvey
Durham

Letter: Billboard firm tries to buy support
Herald-Sun, 13 Jan 2009

Facing strong community opposition, the billboard industry has resorted to trying to buy local political support -- by handing out advertising space rent-free and making campaign contributions.

Billboard lawyers can deny this is a quid pro quo, but it definitely walks like a duck.

The Georgia company pushing this mess gave Downtown Durham, Inc. thousands of dollars of rent-free advertising space on a billboard -- shortly before the DDI board voted on the measure.

The same company sent monetary contributions to elected officials -- before their vote on whether to allow electronic billboards in Durham.

Billboard industry representatives are now approaching City Council members and asking them to name their favorite non-profits. So when the industry tries to get approval from the Council, they can show a list of non-profits receiving "free" advertising.

Durham citizens are speaking out to oppose the billboard industry's move to stick electronic billboards near our homes, schools, churches and parks. We don't want to walk along New Hope Creek and see a big, bright billboard for used cars, face distractions on our highways by lit ads for double cheeseburgers or visit the new DPAC or the Hayti Heritage Center and see flashing billboards for outlet malls in Burlington. And, anyone calling for a compromise is really saying, "let's gut Durham's ordinance and allow digital billboards flashing ads 24/7."

Thank you, Herald-Sun, for exposing this latest move by the billboard industry. This sneaky attempt to buy support speaks volumes.

John Schelp
Durham

Letter: Send a message
Herald-Sun, 14 Jan 2009

Fairway Outdoor Advertising, the Georgia firm that wants to light up Durham with digital billboards, has given the mayor and each of the members of the Durham City Council substantial campaign contributions. In an effort to cinch the deal, Fairway also gave \$28,000 in free advertising to the movers and shakers behind the prepared food tax that proved so popular with Durham voters. From the tenor of the recent letters to the editor, it seems that digital billboards are even less popular than the food tax. Fairway's lawyer sniffs at any suggestion of impropriety, denying any quid pro quo.

This is a rare opportunity for our politicians to prove that they cannot be bought, that powerful Georgia companies may supply the quid but our pols will never, never return the quo.

Steve Bocckino
Durham

Letter: No to billboards
Herald-Sun, 14 Jan 2009

It is time for our elected officials to speak up and do what we've elected them to do: Represent the citizens who are saying loudly and clearly, "No electronic billboards."

Your recent articles exposing Fairway Advertising's efforts to curry support for electronic billboards among local officials and civic leaders suggest some reasons for their silence. You have reported Fairway has made financial contributions to local elected officials, in-kind contributions to Downtown Durham Inc, and contacted city and county staff to solicit their support for electronic billboards.

The silence of those who have received contributions from Fairway Advertising is deafening. Their constituents are waiting to hear from them. You have printed many letters from Durham citizens opposed to electronic billboards because they are a dangerous distraction for drivers, sources of light pollution, have huge carbon footprints and would be hugely expensive for us to get rid of.

I share these concerns. I cannot recall a single letter supporting electronic billboards. Durham citizens seem to be speaking loudly and clearly: We do not want electronic billboards in Durham. Fairway Advertising and the billboard industry want to change our ordinances so they can clutter our highways, streets and neighborhoods with electronic billboards. If you oppose electronic billboards, write the City Council, county commissioners and Mayor Bill Bell and encourage them to put an end to Fairway's efforts.

Betty M. Greene
Durham

Letter: Lighted billboards 'tawdry visual litter'
Herald-Sun, 16 Jan 2009

Lit, flashing billboards should not be permitted in our community. Please urge our elected officials to vote against these dangerous nuisances. I have sent the following to the Durham City Council and the Board of County Commissioners, and hope others will also write.

"Please do not allow those awful lighted, flashing billboards in Durham City or County. Regular billboards are ugly enough; if you want to do something about billboards, figure out a way to rid us of them altogether. In addition to upping the uglification factor enormously, these new ones are a hazard to drivers. The human eye is designed to respond to sudden motion in the environment ... so it is impossible not to look. Anything that distracts drivers ... is inherently dangerous and should not be permitted. I know the first time I saw one (right outside of Richmond ...), I nearly wrecked with another driver who was also looking at the ... billboard.

"They are also unbelievably bright, and at night compound the night vision problems of older drivers. I don't even want to think about how horrible it would be to have one within sight of any human habitation or work place. If you want to see how fast they turn a highway into a tawdry stretch of visual litter, just take a ride to Charlotte. ... the result is not pretty."

Kate Dobbs Ariail

Durham

Letter: Billboards are ugly
Herald-Sun, 17 Jan 2009

I ask Durham leaders, please do not allow any electronic billboards along our roads. This visual litter is ugly, distracting and creates unsafe conditions.

I hope this issue will be quickly put down, so work can begin on tackling overdue problems that prevent Durham from being a shining first-class city, such as:

- * Re-surfacing our roads in substantial quantities.
- * Turning bike and pedestrian plans' recommendations into realities.
- * Getting a linear east-west bus connector route running from the west end of Main Street to East Durham with 12 minute cycles.
- * Installing benches and shelters at bus stops.

With the stimulus plan and new NCDOT leaders coming around, is the city getting projects online to address our maintenance backlog and long-suffering transportation infrastructure deficiencies?

Please fix the Downtown Loop and the mess of one-way, north/south freeways (Gregson, Duke, Roxboro, Mangum) running through the center of town that makes getting around illogical for visitors and frustrating for residents.

Now that the state DOT isn't doing maintenance, there's no reason for the city not to take over these roads and return them to two-way travel.

Back to the distracting matter at hand, our leaders should vote no on any electronic billboards and help prevent turning Durham into a low-class, illuminated highway pit stop.

I don't want to see digital billboards -- no matter how many freebie messages Fairway devotes to non-profits.

Dave Wofford
Durham
