

Scenic San Antonio Position on Digital Billboards

Good public policy regarding signage leads to a more prosperous and beautiful visual environment. While it may be tempting to agree to a deal with Clear Channel to remove one fourth of the billboards in San Antonio in return for allowing them to double-side their existing digital billboards, Scenic San Antonio questions whether or not this is the best deal that the City can get.

A quick survey of other cities in the United States by Scenic Texas finds

- **No new billboard-construction ordinances**

The large Texas cities of Austin, Houston and Fort Worth do not allow new billboard construction, nor do these smaller cities surrounding San Antonio: Balcones Heights, Boerne, Bulverde, Cibolo, Fair Oaks Ranch, Garden Ridge, Helotes, Kirby, Leon Valley, Olmos Park, Schertz, Selma, Shavano Park, Terrell Hills and Universal City. Why does San Antonio settle for a 2– to–1 take down when we have the opportunity to do better?

- **The City defines which areas, streets or highways are the priorities for take downs**

Scenic San Antonio suggests that the City establish some criteria for deciding which signs will come down. The number one priority for us is the removal of billboards located in the Historic District, the Scenic Corridors, and the Urban Corridors. The second priority is following an equity standard in take-downs, i. e., it should occur in all city council districts, proportional to the number of billboards currently in each district.

- **Higher ratios of take-down area to new-billboard area**

For example, St. Paul, Minnesota, has a 6-to-1 swap-out ratio. St. Petersburg, Florida, has a 7-to-1 ratio, and Dallas' ratio is 3-to-1. Scenic San Antonio proposes a 10–to-1 ratio to allow for some meaningful removal of signs other than the clutter of the smallest signs.

- **A sunset provision on the digital signs so that ultimately they go away.**

Some other cities have term limits. We would recommend 10 years.

- **Beautification programs that are available to all companies operating billboards in the city**

San Antonio should allow equal opportunity rather than only to a single company (Clear Channel)

Scenic San Antonio has the following comments on the public participation process.

- 1. Question 6 does not provide true choice and input to this question, so it should not be counted.**

There is no alternative provided for those who do not wish to make a “Sophie’s choice” decision. (Remember, she had to choose which child to condemn to death.)

- 2. There is no mechanism to assure that all responders live within the City’s jurisdiction.**
- 3. The time frame for response is too short.**

The survey opened on 2/15/19 and closes on 3/8/19. Many organizations may not be aware of the survey in time to offer their members an opportunity to respond. Many residents do not have access to the internet. What arrangements are being made by the City to invite comment?

- 4. We ask for fair representation from the meetings to be held by the Development Services Committee with the stakeholders group that prepared the new Sign Code.**

After the sign code was passed, Scenic San Antonio visited with most City Council members complaining about the ratio of the stakeholder group – $\frac{3}{4}$ were sign companies or related to that business, and $\frac{1}{4}$ represented groups that wanted good public policy that would lead to a more beautiful visual environment. There was no weighting of the vote to account for values, nor numbers being represented.

To sum it up, Scenic San Antonio suggests that the City table this entire effort until it is prepared to carry it out correctly

We remind the City staff and council of the arguments made when the digital pilot program was approved.

1. Increased energy consumption through the use of billboards is not compatible with the City’s goals to reduce the City’s carbon footprint.
2. Billboards contribute to light sources in areas where it is detrimental to the military mission.
3. Billboards (this is non-digital so digital may be worse) have negative impacts on nearby property values. According to Scenic Texas, “In Philadelphia, there is a statistically significant correlation between real estate value (as measured by sales price) and proximity to billboards. **Properties located within 500 ft. of a billboard have a decreased real estate value of \$30,826. Additionally, homes located further than 500 ft. but within a census tract/community where billboards are present experience a decrease of \$947 for every billboard in that census tract.** Income for strict sign control cities is higher than that for not-strict cities. Furthermore, the home vacancy and poverty rates for strict control cities are lower. Having strict sign controls does not negatively impact the economic prosperity of a city.”

4. Studies show that digital billboards that are not properly regulated have an adverse impact especially on young, inexperienced drivers and older drivers. Remember, there was the issue of brightness standards and measuring brightness when the stakeholder group met to revise Chapter 28, and it was decided that the staff would measure between 2017 and the next time the sign code was to be revised and revisit the brightness issue. So, that issue is not settled.

Statement by the Executive Committee of Scenic San Antonio, representing neighborhoods, AIASA, and the San Antonio Conservation Society

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