

Electronic Signs: Visual Pollution and Aesthetic Appeal

Imagine sitting down at your computer to check e-mail, do some work or plan a vacation. Every time you get a little more done, another flashy pop-up ad covers up what you're doing. Not only are you distracted, but you feel as if your right to go about your business without disruption has been violated. Now imagine feeling this way every time you drive down a commercial street.

The people who call Billings home have high expectations for responsible development within its city limits. People do not choose to live in Billings for the hustle of huge cities or the flashy lights of Las Vegas. Billings is home to individuals who like to keep things simple – individuals who know that less is more.

Unfortunately, the right to live in a community where these values are embodied in its development has been endangered as technology has allowed businesspeople to get their messages across in a flashier, more aggressive manner through the use of electronic sign displays. This technology can be useful in certain situations for safety, but the use of these signs for advertisement purposes has become a matter of concern for Billings residents.

Electronic Signs Ad Hoc Committee

After numerous citations were written for electronic signs and business owners complained about the unclear nature of the Billings sign ordinance, the City Council authorized the creation of the Electronic Signs Ad Hoc Committee in June of 2006 to make recommendations to the City Council about the ordinance. The committee, which completed its work

in June of 2007, consisted of three representatives from sign companies, three sign owners, two city councilmen, two city staff people and only two community representatives. The city staff people had voting powers – an unusual situation. While it is obviously reasonable that some members of the committee have personal interest in electronic signs, it is unacceptable that only two citizens without personal interest were appointed to the committee.

Current Policy in Billings

Current city policy on electronic signs is ambiguous. There are seven different policies that all define the terms differently. The code that was recently brought into consideration is city code 27-203, the most general city sign policy. Statements in the code about animated signs were written in 1989 when the technology of recent signs was not even conceived. This language was written in Section 4 of the document to allow for changing temperature and time signs. The result was that within one paragraph the document states both that electronic signs are allowed and are not allowed. Because of this unclear language, businesspeople have been acquiring permits for electronic signs, and over a hundred such signs are now located within city limits. Though flashing, blinking and scintillating signs are not allowed in the current policy, the terms are not defined.

Current policy also does not define how much of a sign can be electronically animated. This has allowed more than 75 business owners to put up signs without limits. Lee's Casino's sign is 24 square feet, Dairy

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Queen's is 26 square feet and Big Bear's is a staggering 102 square feet. Not only are such signs unattractive, but they also pose possible threats to the safety of drivers. The Federal Highway Administration is currently conducting research on exactly how electronic signs affect drivers.

The Yellowstone County and City of Billings Growth Policy of 2003, created by the Planning and Community Services Department, emphasized the need to increase Billings' aesthetic appeal and explicitly expressed a worry about our use of signs within the city. It also echoed concerns over the visual appeal of roads taken by visitors when first arriving into the Magic City. Though the policy being considered does not have jurisdiction over the Shiloh Road entrance, many concerns have been raised in the environmental community about the lax standards at this important gateway to our city.

Because of these issues and the number of electronic signs already in place, the committee faced a number of challenges. They had to consider how many electronic signs, which typically cost about \$40,000, would be non-conforming if strict size codes were imposed. If the council were to adopt the committee's suggestions, at least 31 signs would be nonconforming. Even if these signs were grandfathered in, such signs could not be altered at all without being shrunk down to conformity.

The committee looked at policies of communities in the state and region including Missoula, Boise, and Bozeman. Bozeman, for example, prohibits electronic signs with exceptions only for schools and churches and to display time and temperature. However, the unique situation in Billings created by this neglected issue proved challenging. The committee also tried to create a code that would be easy to enforce and could be followed with reasonable amounts of regulation. The final draft of suggestions moved from the committee on a nine to one vote.

Committee Recommendations

- Add definitions of various functions and terms to the City Sign Code for electronic signs;
- Regulate off-premise billboard electronic sign displays;
- Do not allow flashing, blinking or motion borders;
- Require automatic dimming by ambient light monitors so signs adjust to surrounding natural light;
- Allow code enforcement officers to respond to complaints about sign brightness and require changes;
- Require electronic signs to be a part of a wall or free-standing sign;
- Limit the size of electronic signs to no more than 40 percent of a wall sign or freestanding sign, or up to 40 square feet on smaller commercial streets and 100 square feet on larger commercial streets;
- Limit the number of electronic signs to one per developed parcel;
- Signs that have already been permitted in Billings would be grandfathered in terms of their size, but would have to adhere to the new regulations on function.

Shortcomings and Policy Recommendations

Though the committee did make some positive additions, the conservation community notes the following problems:

- **Size:** The committee admittedly decided to allow larger sizes so more current signs would be conforming. They chose to prioritize a small number of businesses and signs over better regulation of future signs. The conservation community believes that electronic signs should be a maximum of 24 square feet.
- **Distance from residential zones:** The committee's suggestions are silent on how close the signs can be to residential zones. This allows them to violate people's rights at home. Signs should not be allowed within 300 feet of residential zones.
- **Landscaping:** The committee failed to look into other forms of compromise that have proven useful in other communities like Bozeman and Santa Fe. These communities have worked with sign owners to make their signs more aesthetically appealing using landscaping and other means that help blend signs into their surroundings. Conservationists would like to see a requirement for landscaping and aesthetically appealing signs.
- **Rate of display change:** Off-premise electronic sign displays, or electronic billboards, have the capability to show a number of advertisements in series. The conservation community would like these advertisements displayed for at least eight seconds before changing in order to avoid a blinking effect. Despite original plans to require an eight second interval, the committee decided to require only a six second interval.

The conservation community also believes that special care should be taken to ensure that the areas that make a first impression on visitors to our beautiful city, such as the Shiloh Road entrance, are protected from being ruined by unattractive electronic signs. The South Shiloh Corridor allows video—a decision made by the city council upon recommendations from a committee of landowners. With tourism becoming a major contributor to our state's economy, Billings wants to maintain a reputation as a beautiful "get-away," not as a city like all others.

Visual environmental concerns are a matter of conservation – preservation of the scenery that Billings residents and visitors can enjoy for generations to come. In order for this to happen, we need to take steps now to ensure that it does.

What Citizens Can Do

After a work session on July 30, the City Council decided to send the committee's suggestions to the City Zoning Commission for work at a public hearing on September 4 at 4:30, possibly followed by an additional work session. The City Council will have a follow-up hearing on the ordinance on September 24 at 6:30 in the Council chambers.

To have your voice heard, contact your city council people and tell them what you think about this issue, write a letter to the editor of a local publication, and get involved in a grassroots organization like MCVEF.