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From: Tom Swann
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To: Committees
Subject: Inquiry into Billboards



To The Standing Committee on Planning and Urban Renewal

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission into the Inquiry into Billboards.

I strongly oppose further moves to open up more of Canberra's public space to billboard advertising.

Given existing advertising in public space, and apparent anomalies or uncertainties about application of current law, there are grounds for clarifying and reviewing current arrangements. However, the terms of reference suggest the agenda is to increasing billboard advertising in Canberra. Such an agenda seems poorly justified and without demonstrated community support.

As a matter of policy assessment, debate whether to increase billboard advertising in Canberra should include an assessment and comparison of both public costs and public benefits of doing so.

Public costs

Billboard advertising allows private interests to buy access to public spaces and so to buy access to the attention of the community. This explains both its commercial value and its impacts on community amenity, including not only enjoyment of public space but also potential psychological and cultural impacts.

Unlike media advertising, advertising in public spaces is not readily avoided. Increasing billboard advertising would impose a greater cost on more Canberrans simply to be in a public space, for the benefit of the private interests.

Canberra's public spaces are relatively free from this intrusion. This is something I value greatly. I remember noticing this unique feature of Canberra and realising its benefits. It was one of the many reasons I gave to friends to explain why I came to love Canberra and chose to live here. It is something I notice quite immediately and viscerally when I travel home to Sydney or other cities that have billboard advertising.

I know many other Canberrans feel strongly about this. I find it hard to believe that many, if asked, would say billboards "enliven" public space, as the Terms of Reference suggest. I submit that many more would express a preference not to sell public space for advertising.

While the community gives little attention to the absence of billboards day to day, that does not demonstrate indifference or lack of value. I don't notice the absence of an intruder in my house under normal circumstances, but it is certainly valuable to me.

Increased billboard advertising also erodes of the unique character of the national capital. By declining to allow private interests to buy large amounts of visual space in the public domain, Canberra expresses itself as a city serving the public good. A change of policy would undermine that character.

Public benefits

Public benefits might conceivably include levies or fees as a source of revenue for the ACT Government.

It is concerning that the Committee's terms of reference do not mention this. There is only a general reference to 'merits' of increasing billboard advertising in certain areas.

Without figures estimating such benefits and putting them in context, it is not possible for the Assembly, and the community, to have a meaningful debate about such a proposal.

While billboard advertising could result in cross-subsidisation of property development, note this accrues most directly to owners and property developers, not the public.

While some businesses may benefit from advertising on billboards, this does not mean that billboards will increase economic activity in Canberra. It seems at least as likely that it will merely move such activity around, towards those with the means to purchase advertising.

Moreover, those able to pay for advertising will generally include large businesses with at best a small economic footprint in Canberra. If advertising leads to economic activity shifting from a more Canberra-based to a less Canberra-based footprint, this would work against the government's aims of growing and diversifying Canberra's economy. It is not clear why the Committee should expect the opposite to occur.

The Committee should seek estimates for expected revenue from increased advertising, and any estimates of claimed economic benefits. All key modelling assumptions and parameters should be included and disclosed.

Citizen jury

To assess community values associated with the lack of billboards, the government could run a small citizen's jury. This would serve as a pilot and proof of concept for the new proposed model of community engagement. It would also provide meaningful information about how Canberrans value a public space relatively free of private advertising.

Thank you for considering my submission.

- Tom Swann