


Inquiry into Billboards

Standing Committee on Planning and Urban Renewal

Submission by:

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Response to terms of reference:

1. Current rules and practises concerning billboard advertising including:

a) the rationale for existing regulations in the ACT

There is a strong rationale for the existing regulations, based on the fact that Canberra has established a unique identity as the 'Bush Capital' that is internationally recognised and reflected in its ranking as the world's most "liveable city" ¹. The ACT's longstanding ban on billboard advertising plays a key role in contributing to the Bush Capital image.

The existing regulations also have substantial community support, not least from myself. As a lifelong Canberra resident, I have always found the contrast between the natural landscapes of my hometown and the visually overwhelming urban landscapes of Sydney and Melbourne to be a strong factor in having never moved away from the ACT.

b) & c) the terms and effectiveness of the existing regulations in the ACT

While I am a supporter of the current terms of Canberra's billboard regulations, I am concerned as to their effectiveness in recent years. The plastering of the new bus stops with advertisements is one example of my concern. Another is the peppering of the construction site along Northbourne Avenue with hundreds of advertisements for the light rail.

I agree with the ACT Chief Minister's comment in the Canberra Times observing that there are many instances that currently "stretch the current regulations" of billboard advertising ². I am alarmed however that his proposed solution is that "establishing a small number of designated areas for such outdoor advertising might reduce the proliferation of questionable outdoor advertising."

I consider that improving the governance and enforcement of the regulations would be a more effective way to address the "stretching" of the regulations than further relaxing them.

d) a comparative analysis of billboard regulation in other jurisdictions;

I am unsure as to how effective a comparative analysis with other Australian jurisdictions might be, considering that the ACT regulations on billboard advertising are unique in an Australian context. Furthermore, given Canberra's internationally recognised status as one of the most 'liveable' cities, it is unclear on what basis advice on billboard regulation should be adopted from jurisdictions that are placed lower.

2. Community views on placement and construction of billboards;

Community consultation is an absolutely vital component of any process to consider outdoor advertisement regulation. I note that, in his Canberra Times article of 20 May 2017, the Chief Minister expressed a desire to make sure that the Government "reaches a representative sample of Canberrans" and that consultation is not just limited to those who can make submissions or attend public meetings ³. I would therefore hope that careful consideration is given to how the Silent Majority's views on advertising might be attained.

3a. Impact on business and community organisations

As a major part of Canberra's tourist appeal is its internationally recognised image as the 'Bush Capital,' it is reasonable to assume that a relaxation of billboard advertising rules would have a negative effect on the tourism numbers (as Canberra's distinctive 'brand' is diluted). It would therefore be disconcerting if the Government were to proceed without undertaking analysis of the potential negative consequences for affected sectors.

3b. use of new billboard technology

Any approach to billboard regulation should be technology 'neutral.' There is no basis to assert that community attitudes to advertising differ depending on the technology used.

3c. Potential to enliven urban areas

It is true that areas of Canberra, including in the City - where I live - were notably more lively and active in previous decades. It is also true that, when these areas were more active, there was still a ban on billboard advertising. The notion that the imposition of more billboard advertising would enliven these areas does not

therefore seem to be based on any evidence.

4. Ways in which elements of billboard advertising could be regulated in the ACT to limit environmental or aesthetic impact, including number, size, location, advertising periods and content

The simplest and most effective way to regulate all elements of billboard advertising would be to reaffirm a commitment to the longstanding ban and then lower the threshold for what constitutes an outdoor advertisement so that distinctions between technology, size or number are irrelevant.

This would both simplify the regulations and improve the efficiency of its governance, as administrative resources would not have to be taken up determining the "aesthetic impact", location or size of a proposed billboard.

If an outright ban cannot be achieved, the emphasis should be on allowing as few exceptions as possible to the ban so that the regulations are no longer stretched.

1 - <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/canberra-life/canberra-home-to-the-highest-quality-of-living-worldwide-website-numbeo-reports-20160721-gqb9gn.html>

2 - <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/act-may-relax-its-ban-on-billboards-20170125-gtyc7g.html>

3 - <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/andrew-barr-we-will-consult-and-hear-all-canberrans-not-just-the-noisy-20170519-gw8wnt.html>