



Inquiry into Billboards for Outdoor Advertising in the ACT

To: The Standing Committee on Planning and Urban Renewal, ACT Legislative Assembly

We are a group of friends who have come together to offer comments and observations to the Inquiry. We would note that a short description of the background to the Inquiry, as well as some information on current definitions and regulations, would have been useful to provide context and focus for comments. While it is unclear as to what the ultimate objective of the ACT Government is with respect to the inquiry, as community members we are all somewhat concerned if there is any proposal to allow the extension of the amount of advertising in the Canberra's urban or rural areas.

Community views on placement and construction


Without a doubt, one of the distinctive features of Canberra is the absence of billboards and the generally low level of advertising, especially in Civic and the Parliamentary Triangle. Canberra was probably one of the pioneers in this respect due to its establishment as a national capital quite late in history. Canberra's fairly minimal advertising certainly adds some gravitas to its position as a capital, as well as giving other advantages that will be discussed.

We have each lived in Canberra for a number of decades, but also experienced growing up in, and visiting, other Australian and overseas cities.

Each of us have all had visitors comment on the lack of advertising in Canberra. Sometimes it seems the absence is a bit of a shock, and possibly is why some visitors describe Canberra as 'cold', until they realise that they have become habituated to visual and cultural pollution from where they came. However we find that it doesn't take long for them to appreciate the cleaner and quieter lines of the city. The lack of distraction is especially appreciated by tourists who want to drive in the city and surrounds.

As residents, we definitely appreciate the visual and cultural amenity that results from the lack of billboards, though would note that there are several trends that are a bit worrying, such as the very large advertising on Action buses. Huge billboards at the airport (presumably on Commonwealth land) hint at how undesirable they can be even without the flashing lights and moving images that seem to be the next stage of evolution of billboards. Fyshwick is more than busy enough in terms of advertising.

More importantly, the city is already losing a lot of its visual amenity because of current developments such as light rail and the resultant road changes and building development along the corridors. We can see there being further pressure to plaster our light trains, bus and light rail shelters/platforms with more advertising.

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In more concrete terms, we as drivers most certainly benefit from the lack of billboards near our roads. Advertising of all forms is specifically designed to attract attention, and each advertiser is in a technological race to lure eyeballs from competition that is also getting more desperate to attract those eyeballs.

Hence it makes sense to reduce advertising billboards and thereby decrease the number of distractions that drivers face. Indeed, if research were able to estimate the decrease in accidents which no doubt result from less distraction and attribute a dollar value to the potential lives saved, injury lessened, time saved, infrastructure repair avoided, etc, the cumulative total would more than likely completely overwhelm any advertising revenue gained by the government.

Hence, in terms of the revenue that tempts governments to allow more advertising, we consider that the likely increase in driver accidents would negate this in the larger picture. We also do not want the ACT Government to become dependent on the revenue from yet another undesirable activity, and as has happened with pokies, and effectively lose its ability to wind back the clock on advertising billboards

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*I think that I shall never see
A billboard lovely as a tree
Indeed, unless the billboards fall
I'll never see a tree at all.*

Ogden Nash