

A Submission to the Standing Committee on Planning and Urban Renewal inquiry into Billboards in the ACT

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Committee Secretary Standing Committee on Planning and Urban Renewal

I write to argue for the strengthening of the current controls and constraints on commercial billboards in the ACT.

In particular, I note that the rise and rise of social media and technological change means that businesses now have unprecedented capacity to target potential customers (including customers within the geographic proximity of particular businesses) and in turn this substantially lessens any rationale which might previously have existed to allow physical advertising via billboards and the like.

Moreover, business is a major beneficiary of the growing numbers of tourists in the ACT, a great number of which are attracted by the general attractiveness of 'the bush capital'. The existence of commercial billboards needs to be assessed not just in relation to the amenity or rationale for a particular billboard in a particular location, but against the negative externalities generally arising from the accumulation of billboards in a seemingly ever-expanding number of suburban and residential locations. I cite the use of bus stops for advertising as just one egregious example.

There is a persuasive argument that the commercial benefits to Canberra's business community of a billboard free environment would outweigh the individual benefits to businesses of the capacity to advertise their business and wares.

I note too that much of the public advertising which occurs appears to be equivalent to the public 'tagging' which graffitiists indulge in, often with the same lack of aesthetic appeal as graffiti. This is particularly the case at the airport, where many visitors to the city first arrive. The regulations which allow billboard advertising at the airport should in my view be reconsidered.

In relation to term of reference 3, I do not accept that the so called 'new technologies' related to billboard advertising make any substantive difference to the overwhelming negative impact of the activity. Nor do I accept that advertising can 'enliven' urban areas.

Finally, it is my submission that the committee should give serious consideration to the disaggregated but nevertheless important and cumulatively significant public interest in living in settings free of commercial harassment. We all accept that individuals should have the capacity to block or prevent commercial firms ringing our phone numbers, yet we seem oblivious to the infringement of citizens' rights to live free from visual harassment by commercial interests.

A level playing field based on outlawing billboards which is effectively enforced will not disadvantage commercial interests. The benefits to the community of a billboard ban would vastly outweigh the costs.

In conclusion, it is my firm view that the ACT should strengthen its current controls and ban billboard advertising throughout the ACT in its entirety.

Michael Dillon



20 June 2017

The Committee resolves to inquire into billboards for outdoor advertising in the present — Ninth — Assembly, including into:

1. Current rules and practices concerning billboard advertising, including:
 - a. the rationale for existing regulations in the ACT;
 - b. the terms of the existing regulations in the ACT;
 - c. the effectiveness of the existing regulations and enforcement measures in the ACT;
 - d. a comparative analysis of billboard regulation in other jurisdictions; and
 - e. the definition of 'billboard' when compared with definitions for other signage;
2. Community views on placement and construction of billboards;
3. Merits and challenges of establishing designated areas for billboard advertising, including:
 - a. impact on business and community organisations;
 - b. use of new billboard technology; and
 - c. potential to enliven urban areas;
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; and
5. Any other relevant matter.

The Committee will report to the Assembly by the last sitting day of October 2017.