



A.C.T. LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE OFFICE	
SUBMISSION NUMBER	83
DATE AUTH'D FOR PUBLICATION	27/6/17

Submission to the Inquiry into Billboards

Personal submission of: Ben Keen Langley of [REDACTED]

Executive summary

- The current legislative framework provides appropriate and desirable outcomes by keeping Canberra free of distracting and aesthetically unpleasing billboards.
- There is a strong and widely held dislike of billboards in the ACT community which would render any expansion of billboards deeply unpopular.
- Efforts should be directed into enforcement of the current framework to prevent the use of dangerous and distracting dynamic displays (such as mobile LED traffic announcement style billboards).
- Advances in technology means that classical static billboards are an outmoded and ineffective way for businesses to reach people.
- "Livening up urban areas" would be better achieved in other ways than deregulating billboards.
- If billboards are expanded in the ACT, is there sufficient resourcing and regulatory frameworks to ensure the safety of any new billboard construction?

Unlike many major metropolitan areas in Australia and around the world the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has heavily restricted the use of outdoor advertisement, otherwise known as billboards. This lack of prominent advertisement has contributed markedly to Canberra's aesthetic character and charm as a 'bush capital'. This reputation is a key selling point in both Canberra tourism and in attracting people to live in Canberra. As advertisements, billboards are incentivised to threaten this aesthetic by competing for attention by producing ever more distracting and intrusive signage. This would be to the ACT's detriment as it is quite probable that any marginal economic benefits that an expansion of billboards could offer will be offset by the diminishment of Canberra's aesthetic reputation. Moreover, billboards are almost universally unpopular among the general public in Canberra. There is a strong feeling that Canberra is better off without large numbers of advertisements. Given this sentiment any change to the law would inevitably be seen as the triumph of special interest groups over the general will of the people to the detriment of the ACT.

In the last decade the enforcement of the relevant statutes has been increasingly lax. This has resulted in many unscrupulous businesses circumventing the law by erecting temporary billboards. These often take the form of dynamic LED traffic notification style billboards that display moving graphics in an attempt to attract attention, often by major roads. These

styles of billboards have been shown by Dukic et al. to hold driver attention for significant periods of time, while Cooper et al. demonstrates that there have been a statistically significant increase in accidents around electronic billboards in the study area.¹ These two studies are emblematic of the academic consensus that electronic billboards are distracting to drivers and pedestrians in a way that causes a demonstrable increase in accidents. The committee should carefully consider if such devices are appropriate for deployment around ACT roads in relation to term of reference 1.C and E, and B. While the evidence is most clear in relation to electronic billboards even static billboards can be distracting, especially considering that the attention economy incentivises the creation of the most distracting billboards. The committee may want to consider if the wide scale deployment of billboards on the roadsides in the ACT is in the public interest.

A further problem with billboards is their relevance in the modern age. With the advent of targeted digital advertising there are serious questions as to the commercial benefits of billboards compared with other less invasive forms of advertisement. While no doubt there are businesses that are either unable or unwilling to engage with the digital medium, or who wish an additional vector for advertising the value of this to the broader city given the singular impacts of this form of promotion. The argument that billboards "liven up" urban areas is also suspect. While there are instances of extremely creative billboards the vast majority of billboards are functional and merely add to the urban clutter. If the Legislative assembly wants to improve image of urban areas there are many better ways than opening the flood gates of advertisers. As a frequent traveller, I can personally attest to the creative and aesthetic bankruptcy of almost all billboard style advertising across the world. If the goals behind reference term 3.C. are to be achieved a better solution would be to partner with entities on a case by case basis to create interesting and creative installation in urban areas that may also serve some promotional purpose. This would ensure both a high quality of advertisement and the aesthetic character of the ACT is maintained.

Another factor of the billboards is the safety framework. As the ACT has not widely adopted outdoor advertisements it has not had to develop, implement and fund a comprehensive system for the safe install, maintenance and removal of billboards. The dangers of an underregulated industry can be seen in the deaths of three people in Melbourne last year attributed to an improperly installed sign.² If the Inquiry does approve an expansion of billboards in the ACT then there should be a system put in place to ensure that these structures are not a danger to the public. While the ACT has rigorous legislation regarding

¹ Cooper, S., S. Cooper, B. Chakravarthy, C. Anderson, and S. Hata. "424 Motor Vehicle Collision in Relation to the Proximity of Electronic Billboard in a Large Urban Setting." *Annals of emergency medicine* 58, no. 4 (2011): S322-S22.

Dukic, Tania, Ahlstr, ouml, Christer m, Christopher Patten, and Carmen Kettwich. "Effects of Electronic Billboards on Driver Distraction." *Traffic injury prevention* 14, no. 5 (2013): 469.

² [http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-04/melbourne-sign-company-fined-\\$250,000-over-fatal-wall-collapse/7139404](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-02-04/melbourne-sign-company-fined-$250,000-over-fatal-wall-collapse/7139404)

temporary and permanent structures there will none the less be an associated cost caused by the added administrative burden of overseeing any significant expansion in this area as well as developing specific guidelines and regulations as needed.

In conclusion, my recommendation to the inquiry is that billboards in the ACT should continue to be tightly regulated. In coming to its decision it is my hope that the inquiry will consider the broad scope of the issues underpinning the debate and resist the easy narrative proposed by billboard proponents of freedom versus government regulation. If an expansion is deemed necessary it should be only in areas where it will not affect the aesthetic qualities of Canberra (perhaps along some major highways). Regardless of whether or not traditional billboards regulation is maintained or relaxed the restrictions of digital billboards for anything other than government business should be banned due to their proven effect on public safety, and there should be a proactive approach to safely installing and maintaining any new billboards. While billboards may seem not to be of the utmost importance compared with other issues of territory government I believe that the report of this inquiry may prove to have a dramatic effect on the future character of the ACT.

If the Inquiry has any questions or requires further information I will be happy to testify in person or submit further documentation.

Regards Ben Langley.