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SUBMISSION ON BILLBOARDS

The Griffith Narrabundah Community Association (GNCA) is grateful for the opportunity to make comment on the inquiry into billboards.

Recommendations

The GNCA believes that:

1. there appears to be little desire among the public for Canberra to look more like Las Vegas or the Parramatta Road, and consequently the need for any relaxation of existing rules on outside advertising is moot;
2. existing rules about the placement of billboards should be enforced;
3. the use of sandwich boards be monitored and enforcement action taken if these begin to significantly impede pedestrian traffic;
4. arrangements be put in place to ensure the speedy removal of corflutes after an election; and
5. the Government should commission an appropriately designed, rigorous and peer reviewed Cost Benefit Analysis study to identify all the costs, as well as the benefits, of any increase in outdoor advertising before reaching any decision to permit an increase in outside advertising.

Discussion

In the following discussion "billboard" refers to "a large outdoor advertising structure, typically found alongside busy roads". Billboards are generally fixed in place but signs painted on the sides of trucks, vans, or placards mounted on trailers or flat-bed trucks, can serve to make such billboards mobile. Another form of outdoor advertising is the "sandwich board", which is "a type of advertisement composed of two boards (holding a message or graphic) set up in a triangle shape, hinged along the top, and small enough to be easily moved by one person." Sandwich boards are typically used in areas of heavy pedestrian traffic and advertise nearby businesses. A third relevant form of advertising sign is the "corflute", named after the cheap plastic sheeting the placard is generally made of, usually a sign about 600mm by 900mm mounted on a stake and generally used to advertise a party or candidate during election campaigns.

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It appears that the Chief Minister is of the view that the existing restrictions on outdoor advertising in the ACT should be relaxed, apparently because the existing rules are increasingly being challenged by billboards on trucks, utes and motorbikes, banners draped from buildings, and the advent of "digital" or electronic billboards. (See Canberra Times article of 25 January 2017 at:

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

The GNCA is not aware of any great enthusiasm for a significant expansion of billboards in Canberra. A relatively small number feel that some expansion in the number of billboards would liven up Canberra, but it appears that the majority are happy for things to stay as they are. The general belief is that billboards are largely banned in the ACT. There appears to be a lack of enthusiasm or support for those occasions where the Government has relaxed this rule and permitted its own agencies to erect billboards, such as the various signs exhorting Canberrans to be better (or at least safer) drivers.

The GNCA believes that many members of the public share the view that the number of billboard or quasi billboard advertising seen around Canberra is increasing. However, together with this there is a (perhaps unworthy) suspicion that the Government's new found enthusiasm for some relaxation of the rules on billboards may be related to a desire for increased revenues from this source. Some would point out that there is no need to change the applicable rules to earn some money from billboards – just use the existing team of parking inspectors to fine those who currently breach the rules against billboards by parking a truck or ute by the side of the road.

A problem similar or related to the increase in billboards is the proliferation of sandwich boards on footpaths, drawing attention to nearby businesses and/or the services that they offer. Fortunately Canberra has wide footpaths, so normally these do not present a major problem, but too many signs combined with too many people could quickly turn this form of advertising into a problem. And sandwich boards outside pubs and restaurants advertising today's specials could almost be argued to be sanctioned by ancient tradition. A judicious policy of fining egregious offenders would serve to provide a source of civic revenue to offset the disturbance afforded to the public.

Some feel that the proliferation of corflutes is an eyesore and that their use should be reduced if not banned. On the other hand some form of advertising could be argued to be an essential part of the democratic process, and the GNCA would not wish to restrict these so long as they do not endanger pedestrians or motorists. However, a greater enforcement of rapid removal after elections could be desirable. Perhaps legislation could be introduced requiring all corflutes to be removed within say 48 hours of the closing of election booths, with a fine for the candidate or party endorsed by any corflutes found still on display after the end of this period.

Supporters of a relaxation of current controls on billboards might claim that a preference for more or fewer billboards is merely an aesthetic choice. And that as such a preference for fewer billboards should consequently carry little weight in any consideration of possible routes to increase government revenue. On the other hand, some would argue that Billboards not only take up public space (*i.e.* the unleased public land on which the billboard is standing, and for which (one would hope) the ACT Government charges an appropriate rent, but also by their presence intrude themselves into the viewers line of sight, expropriating as it were the otherwise generally pleasant views around Canberra and consequently reducing the viewer's amenity. It seems unlikely that the fees charged for erecting a billboard would cover this type of loss.

However, this is more than an aesthetic choice. Successful advertisements are by design intended to be eye catching, and for motorists eye catching equates to distraction. The more a driver is distracted the greater the chance they will be involved in an accident. This is a real problem and some jurisdictions ban advertisement in specified areas as a matter of road safety. The advent of electronic or "digital" billboards, which can change the sign as a driver moves by, and which are therefore even more effective at catching attention through triggering motion sensors in the brain, only aggravates this problem.

Given this real road safety issue and the very real cost of motor vehicle accidents, both in terms of material damage and even more associated health costs, it would be appropriate for the Government to only move with extreme caution on any proposal to increase the amount of outdoor advertising permitted around Canberra. The GNCA recommends that, if the Government wishes to follow this course, it first commission an appropriately designed, rigorous and peer reviewed Cost Benefit Analysis to identify all the costs, as well as the benefits, of any increase in outdoor advertising. To fail to do so, and to relax the existing rules without a proper analysis would be irresponsible.

The GNCA thanks the Committee for the opportunity to present our views.

Yours sincerely

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David Denham
Secretary

19 June 2017