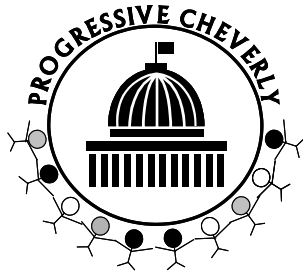


Progressive Cheverly

progressivecheverly.org



3117 Belleview Ave
Cheverly, MD 20785

October 5, 2014

Honorable Andrea C. Harrison
Councilwoman, District 5

Dear Ms. Harrison:

Progressive Cheverly writes in opposition to CB-73-2014, your proposed legislation allowing digital (LED) billboards. Billboards have long been viewed as public eyesores and driver distractions and new billboards are banned in hundreds of jurisdictions across the United States.ⁱ Our own county has banned new billboard construction since 1991.

Protecting the public good. Allowing digital billboards does not enhance the public good. They will still be visual blight and they will still serve as driver distractions, endangering drivers and pedestrians alike. In fact, the distractions and public safety risks can only be made worse by allowing the contents of digital signs to change every six seconds. Just because a new technology exists does not mean it should automatically be deployed.

Private profit vs. public benefit. Clear Channel Communications, the owner of the majority of billboards in the county will profit handsomely from a move to LED billboards. A recent National Public Radio story stated that: “The industry is erecting digital billboards as fast as it can, because companies can charge eight different advertisers for messages that flash consecutively on one sign. ⁱⁱ” It is not clear what the benefit is for the communities affected by those billboards.

Emergency response benefits. The argument that there is a public safety benefit because the billboards can display various emergency alerts needs to be carefully examined. Aside from the fact that there are already government-run digital displays on major highways to address public safety issues, the widespread use of social media and other internet-based forms of communication, along with “old-fashioned” means like radio and television serve to accomplish these emergency objectives. It is far from clear that these existing billboard locations would add in any measurable way to emergency outreach. If there is a need to expand the current number of existing traffic safety/emergency warning displays, then the right methods and distribution channels should be

carefully examined.

Light pollution. Outdoor signs also contribute to light pollution, the excess display of light at night that has demonstrated adverse affects on human health, public safety and wildlife.ⁱⁱⁱ If a move to digital signs is to move forward, and even if not, the outdoor advertising sign regulations should specify requirements that reduce glare for drivers and shield the light so as not to waste energy or light up the night sky.

Special exception requirement. The current version of the bill listed on the Prince George's County Legislative Information System states that an existing “Outdoor Advertising Sign may be altered, enlarged or extended without a special exception” under certain conditions.

Allowing such actions without review on a contentious issue like billboards should be unacceptable. We have been told that there is a more current version of the bill that now requires a special exception. (If accurate, the fact that the latest policy version that legislators are considering is not available to those who don't come down to Upper Marlboro every day is a separate problem that is in need of correction.) While requiring a special exception is an improvement, our past experience with special exceptions is that the wishes of the community often lose out to complex zoning rules and applicants able and willing to invest in talented zoning attorneys.

We appreciated the opportunity to talk with your Chief of Staff, who was most helpful in clarifying some of these issues. Nonetheless, our concerns as voiced above, remain.

Thank you for your consideration.

Norman Oslik
on behalf of Progressive Cheverly
Paul Thompson, Chair

norman.oslik@gmail.com
301.467.4461

cc.
County Council members
County Executive

i Scenic America scenic.org

ii NPR, Sept.6, 2014

iii International Dark Sky Association, www.darksky.org