

What's Happening

IN CALIFORNIA ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

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The City of Los Angeles has about 11,000 billboards. For some years the City has been trying to control their spread. In November it tried something new. It declared a six-month moratorium, a temporary stop to new billboards.

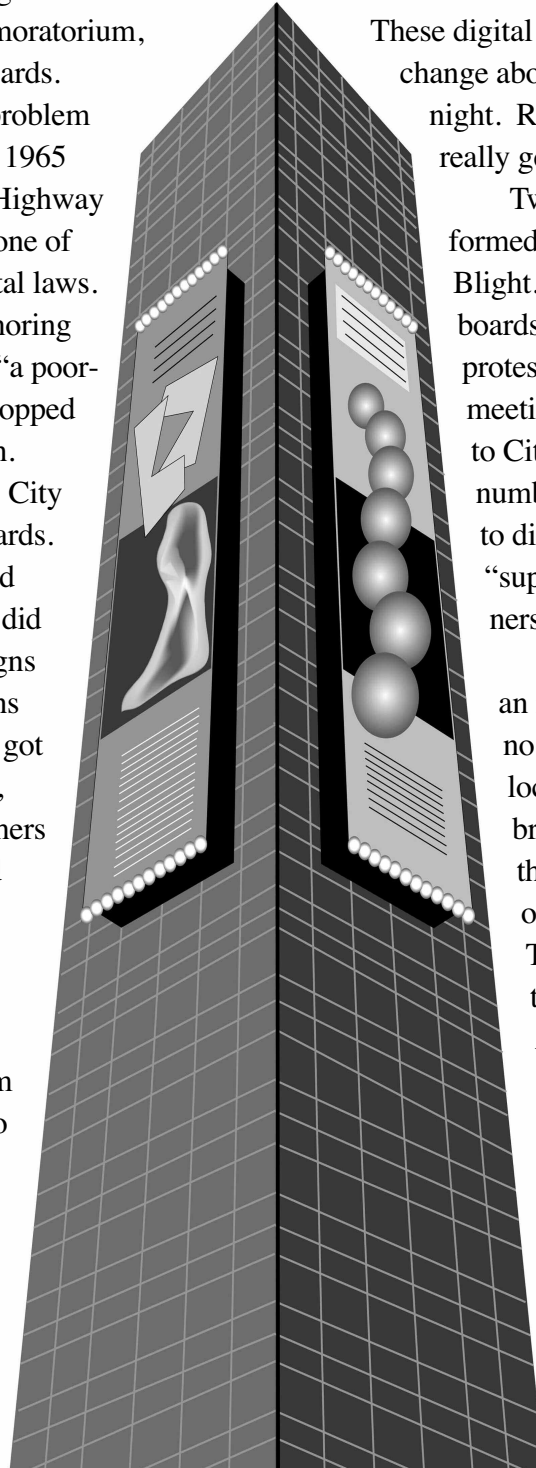
Billboards have been a problem in the U.S. for many years. In 1965 the U.S. Congress passed the Highway Beautification Act. That was one of the country's first environmental laws. President Johnson said that ignoring natural beauty made America "a poorer nation." That law has not stopped the spread of billboards though.

In 2002 the Los Angeles City Council prohibited new billboards. It also ordered an inventory and inspection of existing ones. It did allow the possibility of new signs in new "sign districts." Citizens argued then that, if companies got to put up some new billboards, they should have to remove others from neighborhoods. That did not happen.

Two large advertising companies took the City to court. They claimed that the City was limiting their freedom of speech. They were trying to protect their profits, of course. They pay a fee of only \$100 to put up a new billboard. In return they receive tens of thousands of dollars per month for the ads that a billboard displays.

In 2006 Los Angeles

LA Fights the Spread of Billboards



settled several lawsuits. It allowed two companies, CBS and Clear Channel, to change 840 regular billboards to digital ones. They have changed about 50 so far.

These digital billboards show bright ads that change about every 10 seconds all day and night. Residents complain that it never really gets dark at night anymore.

Two years ago a few citizens formed the Coalition to Ban Billboard Blight. The organization fought billboards in court. Its members also have protested on the street and attended meetings to express their frustration to City officials. They object to the number of billboards and the change to digital ones. They also object to "supergraphic" ads, huge vinyl banners that hang on buildings.

The City still does not have an inventory of billboards. It has no record of where they all are located, nor how high, large or bright they are. Worse than that, the City has given permits for only 7,000 of the billboards. That means that more than one-third of the billboards in Los Angeles are illegal.

The moratorium will give the City time to form new regulations. It needs to make fair and consistent ones. They would allow the billboard industry to do business. They also would protect neighborhoods and save some views of Los Angeles's natural beauty.

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BIOGRAPHY

DENNIS HATHAWAY

PRESIDENT, COALITION TO BAN BILLBOARD BLIGHT

Dennis Hathaway grew up on a farm in Iowa. Of course there were no billboards there. Now he lives in Los Angeles though, where they line many boulevards. In 2006 he and two others started an organization to control their spread. Mr. Hathaway is now president of the Coalition to Ban Billboard Blight.

Even though they lived on a farm, Dennis' family had a strong sense of community. His parents paid attention to problems in the community and the nation. They believed that if citizens speak out, government can help them.

Dennis did well in high school, but getting started in college took some time. He quit community college after a semester. Instead he went to California and worked for a year and a half. When he returned to Iowa, he tried college again. Because his high school grades had been good, Iowa State University accepted him. There he earned a degree in English.

For five years Mr. Hathaway worked as a newspaper reporter. He covered trials and the courts. He also got involved in politics. He joined protests against the war in Vietnam. During the 1968 presidential election, he made phone calls and knocked on doors. However, he decided to return to California.

Mr. Hathaway worked as a carpenter. Then he ran his own construction business until

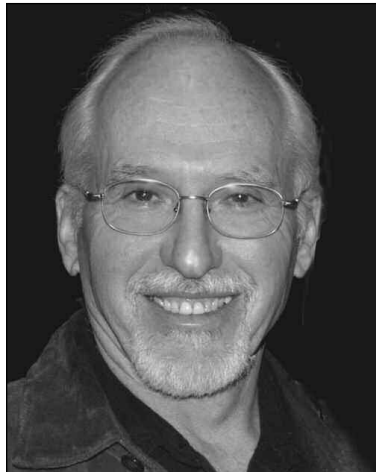
the mid-1990s. When he quit working, he volunteered for a program that helps troubled young people. Then he ran a housing program for low-income families until 2004. He learned a lot about zoning laws. He also served on his neighborhood council in Venice.

He had not thought much about billboards. He did know that the city had banned new ones though. When he saw three new ones near his home, he knew that they were illegal. When he met others who disliked the spread of billboards, they formed the coalition. Working for the coalition is like having a full-time job.

Mr. Hathaway puts his skills to good use in the coalition's

fight. He is familiar with courtrooms and he understands zoning laws. His ability to write and speak well has helped too. He has written an opinion article for the *Los Angeles Times*. He has participated in dozens of meetings with coalition members and city officials. He also manages the group's Web site.

Dennis Hathaway still likes to read, and he works during presidential elections. He also enjoys being outdoors. He has been to the top of Mt. Shasta and Mt. Whitney, and to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. When he is home, he wants something of the outdoors too. He wants to see sky and clouds, and he is willing to fight for it.



"Our family felt that people should work to make the world a better place."

Background Information

The moratorium can be extended in three-month increments.

Billboards are often also called “off-site signs.” Outdoor advertising is a \$7.2 billion industry.

Certain areas of Los Angeles are billboard jungles. In Venice, for example, there is a 4 1/2-mile stretch along Lincoln Blvd. that has 84 billboards, two of which are digital.

Planning Commissioner Michael Woo has called for a tax or fee on billboards. The money would go into a special fund to fight billboard blight.

Now Los Angeles is facing more than 20 lawsuits from billboard companies.

Santa Monica, near Los Angeles, has a ban on billboards and other forms of outdoor ads. Cities around the U.S. also have used moratoriums, including Fayetteville, NC, and Pittsburgh, PA. One outdoor advertiser sued Knoxville, TN, because it banned digital billboards within the city limits.

Since the settlement in 2006 Los Angeles has issued permits for 95 billboards to be changed to digital displays.

In 2005 Los Angeles reached a separate settlement with Vista Media. The company agreed to take down 500 signs that it had put up without permits. According to the building department report, not one of those 500 billboards has been removed.

The City’s two sign districts are in Hollywood and along Interstate 10 downtown. Eleven have been proposed. The original idea behind sign districts was that communities with special characteristics, such as Hollywood, could have new forms of signage in exchange for removing billboards.

In August the director of the California Department of Transportation asked the Federal Transportation Department to allow advertising on the state’s 692 digital highway signs. Federal law limits use of those signs to Amber Alerts and other public information. By using the signs for ads, the State would be violating the Highway Beautification Act, and could lose 10 percent of the federal highway funds it receives.

The Highway Beautification Act required some junkyards along Interstate or primary highways to be removed or screened from view. Congress strengthened the law in 1975 and again in 1991. Nonetheless the number of billboards has grown from 330,000 in 1965 to an estimated 500,000.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Why do you think many residents of Los Angeles dislike billboards and digital displays in their neighborhoods?

Comprehension:

- What has Los Angeles done since 2002 to control the spread of billboards?

Beyond the Text:

- Tell whether you think the billboards where you live are appropriate.
- The president of the Coalition to Ban Billboard Blight describes the fight against billboards as “David vs. Goliath.” What does that mean?
- How do you think Los Angeles might go about taking inventory of its billboards?

Vocabulary

Article-specific: billboard; moratorium; inventory; fee; lawsuit; coalition; blight; vinyl; permit; regulation

High-use: environmental; to ignore; to prohibit; inspection; to claim; profit; resident; to protest; frustration; to object to; consistent

Sources

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National Public Radio “All Things Considered” November 11, 2008

New York Times November 6, 2008

www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local October 17, 2008

LA Weekly October 16, 2008

Coalition to Ban Billboard Blight
www.banbillboardblight.org

Scenic America www.scenic.org

CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English - Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development / Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking