

2019 Wisconsin Bill LRB 2251**“Billboard Reform Act” would prevent new billboards along highways**

Our roadside scenery, the view from the road, is impacted, both positively and negatively, by many man-made buildings and structures. One of the biggest negatives is the great number of billboards along our highways, especially those with bright, alternating, electronic messages. Billboards don't exist in harmony with natural scenery like farms and forests. They are intended to grab your attention with a commercial message, and that ruins your enjoyment of the peaceful beauty of our state. This is not a new problem and it won't be fixed overnight, but the Billboard Reform Act is intended to take some beneficial steps.

Most importantly, the Billboard Reform Act prohibits new off-premises advertising signs known as billboards along state and federal highways. This bill stops new assaults on our scenery, and over time it will reduce the number of billboards in our state, as changes in land uses and widening of highways require removal of billboards and as billboards eventually reach the end of their natural useful lifespan.

Secondly, and also important, the Act improves regulation of existing billboards. The 1965 Federal Highway Beautification Act intended that “non-conforming” billboards be taken down when normal deterioration brought them to the end of their useful life. But re-building beyond normal maintenance has kept very old billboards standing beyond all expectations. “Non-conforming” billboards don't conform with current state law, mostly because they stand in unzoned agricultural and natural areas. The Scenic Bill requires the DoT to maintain improved, accurate inventories of billboards and to enforce the original intent of state and federal laws in regard to maintenance.

The Scenic Bill also ends the cutting of trees and vegetation solely for billboard visibility. Trees and vegetation provide numerous public and private benefits besides scenic beauty, such as noise reduction, light screening and erosion control.

To understand the value of this bill, you need to consider recent developments and new realities of the age that we live in.

(Please remember that the term “billboards” refers only to off-premises advertising signs along roads and not to signs on the premises of any business.)

Technology has rendered roadside billboards irrelevant to the traveling public. Smart phones and dashboard GPS are in widespread use. These devices provide better and more complete information than any billboard could, including a comprehensive directory of nearby services and precise directions to get you there.

The idea that billboards are necessary to doing business was never entirely valid. Many cities in this state simply don't allow billboards because they are a nuisance. Seven states in the US now limit or prohibit the use of billboards. Of these, four states (Maine, Vermont, Alaska and Hawaii) ban billboards entirely and Michigan has a cap on the number of billboards. Hundreds of cities around the country have their own prohibitions.

Many cities in the State of Wisconsin have been improving their sign ordinances and limiting size and placement of billboards to keep their communities attractive. This bill would strengthen the efforts by municipalities and towns to control the proliferation of billboards within their jurisdiction.

It costs the DoT multi-millions of dollars each year to buy out billboards to make way for highway widening. By allowing no new billboards, this bill will begin to reduce this expense to taxpayers.

Billboards are visual pollution, more detrimental than beneficial to all those who live, work or vacation in our uniquely beautiful state.

Billboard blight has been with us from the beginning of the highway age, and they are getting bigger, taller and more intrusive. We the people have the right to determine how we want our state to look and now is the time to take action.

Citizens for a Scenic Wisconsin is an organization of people interested in protecting and enhancing the attractiveness of our environment, natural and manmade, in the state of Wisconsin.