



The Birmingham News

Group wants more limits on billboards

Monday, September 11, 2006

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A group that aims to preserve natural beauty along Alabama's roads has set its sights on billboard advertising across Jefferson County, with a plan to give residents more say in where the signs are built.

Scenic Alabama is proposing an amendment to the county's sign regulations that says the County Commission must approve all new billboard permits, a process that would require a public hearing.

Now, county regulations allow new billboards to be built in designated areas if old ones are torn down elsewhere and that leaves growing areas and new highways like Corridor X vulnerable to billboard clutter, said Lisa Harris, Scenic Alabama's executive director.

It also creates a problem for cities that prohibit billboards when the signs are set up on unincorporated pockets of land near the cities' borders, Harris said.

"A city can try its best to maintain the appearance it wants and then have those efforts stymied," she said.

Scenic Alabama wants to keep the existing regulations in place but add the County Commission approval to give city governments and residents a voice in the process.

The group first proposed an amendment that would prohibit new billboards but decided that requiring a public hearing likely has a better chance of gaining county approval, Harris said. But Scenic Alabama has not ruled out seeking the prohibition, she said.

Harris spoke about the effort at a recent Hoover City Council meeting and plans to meet with mayors and councils in other cities to drum up support. She also has met with commissioners and other county officials.

May consider proposal:

Planning officials are now focused on a flood plain ordinance and other zoning cases, said Guy Moore, Jefferson County's deputy director of land development. But he said they may eventually consider Scenic Alabama's proposal.

Concerns about all types of signs, including billboards, come up continually, Moore said. Although he is happy with the existing regulations, he said there may be room for improvement.

In 1993, a cap was placed on the total square footage of billboards allowed in the county, but it doesn't prohibit new billboards outright. If someone wants to put up a new billboard, they must present documentation that shows the same amount of square footage was removed elsewhere.

Scenic Alabama, established in 1996, is involved in billboard issues across the state, Harris said. In recent years, representatives have helped Jasper draft a sign ordinance that puts more controls on billboards that likely will pop up at interchanges along Corridor X. They also helped Daphne draft a sign ordinance that prohibits billboards.

Earlier this year, Scenic Alabama's lobbying helped kill a bill in the Legislature that would have allowed billboards that don't meet current guidelines to be rebuilt, Harris said.

Electronic sign:

The group has wanted to address Jefferson County's sign regulations for a while and was spurred into action following the erection of an electronic sign at an Ashley Furniture store just outside the city limits of Hoover, Harris said.

The sign, which has drawn criticism from Hoover residents and city officials, is being used as a billboard because it allows advertising for off-premise companies. Store owner Allen Marks tore down billboards elsewhere in the county so he could do it. Hoover prohibits new billboards but has no authority over the company's land.

Lamar Outdoor Advertising, which manages about 90 billboards in Jefferson County, is opposed to Scenic Alabama's proposal to require public hearings before the County Commission, said Rhett Enzor,

the company's vice president and general manager in north central Alabama.

There is no need for the requirement because the county already has strict regulations in place, Enzor said.

Billboards help a variety of businesses, from car dealers to furniture stores, Enzor said. "I don't believe they would be doing business with us unless it was beneficial," he said.

Across the United States, billboards are gradually being removed from the landscape, as state and city governments enact restrictions, said Bill Brinton, a Jacksonville, Fla., lawyer who serves on the board of Scenic America and as chairman of Citizens for Scenic Florida.

Four states known for tourism - Alaska, Hawaii, Maine and Vermont - do not allow billboards, he said. Meanwhile, there are similar measures by city governments, including Jacksonville, which has seen more than 1,000 billboards removed over the past 20 years.

Started in mid-1980s:

The movement started in the mid-1980s when a civic organization recommended a number of changes for the area, including a reduction in the number of billboards. Rules were enacted that prevented new billboards from being built and required the removal of a substantial amount of billboards.

As a result, Jacksonville is much more attractive than it was 20 years ago, when billboards were on every major corridor and in neighborhoods, Brinton said. Not even the business community wants to turn the clock back, he said.

"Beauty is good for business," Brinton said. "The billboard industry tries to paint beautification efforts as being bad for business, and the exact opposite is true."

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