

Report from May 8, 2013 Town Hall Discussion of Proposed Changes to Ann Arbor Sign Ordinance

Prepared by Chuck Warpehoski, June 17, 2013

Summary

Attendees at the May 8, 2013 town hall were resistant to any increase in billboards in Ann Arbor and wary of the introduction of digital billboards to the market. When surveyed, participants gave the "no digital" options a slim majority of votes compared to a "swap" scenario in which digital billboards would be allowed in exchange for a reduction in the total number of billboards in the community.

Meeting Details

On May 8, 2013, Council Members Anglin and Warpehoski hosted a town hall discussion at Downtown Home and Garden which included a discussion of the proposed changes to the City's sign ordinance. Over forty people attended, including a large contingent from Adams Outdoor Advertising.

Discussion included:

- presentation of current and proposed sign ordinances;
- audience questions and opinions on the ordinance and on billboards in general; and
- representatives of Adams Outdoor Advertising presenting the case for conventional and digital billboards and addressing questions and concerns from the audience.

The overall comments during the meeting were critical of billboards in general and wary of allowing digital billboards.

Attendees were asked to fill out a short survey to gauge community preferences regarding three possible scenarios:

- The existing sign ordinance (6 votes)
- The proposed revision to the sign ordinance (8 votes)
- A "swap" program that would allow conversion of existing billboards to digital contingent on removing other billboards (12 votes, including one from an Adams employee)

In addition to the quantitative data, some participants shares comments on their surveys:

- "Reduce Billboards"
- "I don't trust that any change would be strong enough to keep digital billboards out. I'd

rather risk having 2 more billboard faces in the long run than weak language that allows digital billboards somehow. In short, what we have keeps digital out, why risk it?"

- "The fewest, the better!"
- "I would like fewer billboards"
- "No new billboards"

Other issues arose during the conversation and subsequent communication with participants:

- **Light measurement:** One participant addressed the difficulty of measuring illumination relative to ambient light and encouraged that the City develop a sophisticated and neighborhood-friendly approach to such measurements.
- **Traffic Safety:** Adams shared data regarding the traffic safety in Washtenaw County since they introduced digital billboards on I-94. Adams' data show that accidents decreased in the vicinity of the digital signs in the years following their installation. Participants noted that this timeframe also corresponds to the recession, during which traffic volumes may have decreased, making it difficult to fully interpret what factors affect crash frequency.
- **Representativeness of sample:** One participant followed up with the meeting with the concern that "I feel the attendees of public meetings are not representative of the young and vibrant city as a whole that tends to welcome toward new ideas and change." This comment highlights the need to constantly strive to listen to and engage all perspectives and to recognize the limits of engagement based on self-selected participants.

Appreciation

Thank you to:

- Mark Hodesh of Downtown Home and Garden for hosting the event,
- Wendy Rampson and Planning Department staff for creating an excellent summary document of the current and proposed sign ordinance,
- representatives of Adams Outdoor Advertising for sharing their knowledge and perspective on the issue, and
- the community members who took two hours from a lovely spring evening to voice their opinions and participate in Ann Arbor's civic life.