

Billboards

Nothing has ever produced the sight pollution that billboards do. There are few with messages that would be considered important or pictures that would be considered attractive. They are eyesores.

If Iron Eyes Cody wept because of the trash thrown at his feet, imagine how he would sob at today's landscape littered with billboards, many with tattered paper hanging, others with outdated events that are allowed to hang for months after the event was held.

In Cheyenne, there is a two-sided small billboard on Ames, by the underpass, with campaign signs still campaigning for Drew Hill and Rick Kaysen. It isn't their fault. They didn't pay for their message to hang five months *after* the election.

Because of the litigation involving a colossal billboard which was built at Pershing and Seymour, in the parking lot of Lennox Auto Body, the issue of just how ugly and unnecessary these monstrosities are has been rejuvenated.

When you drive into a city, especially Cheyenne, from any direction, the roadside is cluttered with billboards, some of them blank. There should be laws that require the dismantling of unnecessary billboards, both in rural and urban areas. If the billboard company can only sell billboards for one month out of six or two months out of six, there is no need for those billboards. Take 'em down.

No city can claim great concern for the "beauty" or presentation of their city until they address the blight of billboards. And Cheyenne hasn't done that. In spite of what appeared to be an effort in 2006 to reduce the number of billboards, what the City now says they intended to do was not what it appeared. They do not want to reduce the numbers by attrition or lack of use, they want to either retain the number in existence or increase that number - depending on when you ask them.

Several new huge billboards have been constructed in recent years. Again, in spite of the underused and unused billboards, if better locations can be secured, the billboard companies are willing to risk the larger, brightly lit billboards. And, just like the ground level billboards called bus benches, they are resigned to leave the same message up month after month because of an inability to market the space. Dated events are the most noticeable. Those panels will remain in place for months after the event was held.

Whether the paper and application has deteriorated or not, billboards with new business messages, such as the Whispering Chase complex, already have billboards that are in disrepair. Because Cheyenne no longer has a local billboard company, those signs are seldom and infrequently repaired or replaced.

Even billboards on the most heavily traveled streets must not have much value. Notice that many of the messages are PSAs or for groups that may or may not

have to pay for use of the billboard.

At a very great expense, you wonder why political candidates rent billboard space. If you did a study, you'd find that billboards almost never make a difference in a political race. There is no evidence that the visibility of a billboard makes a difference in any business, campaign, product or service. And because the billboard is considered offensive to many, the results can be counterproductive.

If someone can point to a truly "great" city that has the proliferation that Cheyenne has, I'd like to be informed.

The wall-sized billboards at the Colorado state line are nothing more than revenue producers for the provider. Heading south, the messages encourage motorists to take their money to Colorado. Coming back toward Cheyenne, some messages encourage motorists to avoid Cheyenne. And no one can convince me that there is a compelling need for so many giant message boards, placed within feet of each other. Coming north at night brings motorists face-to-face with one of the ugliest light pollution scenes while still far into Colorado.

A disturbing fact about the seemingly illegal billboards allowed in Cheyenne, after the sign ordinance had prohibited additional billboards in "the zoned area," is the one in the parking lot at councilman Patrick Collins' Bicycle Station. Of the people who knew that such a new billboard was against city code and should have questioned the development office as to why they had issued a permit for the improper sign, Patrick would be one of ten who should have known better.

The billboard companies pay large fees for the right to lease the billboards they construct and that's why they seek placement on busy streets - and the bigger billboards on heavily traveled streets bring the highest fees. How much revenue might a landowner expect from a billboard on Dell Range? Probably a few thousand dollars a year. The sign on the 180 viaduct coming into the downtown from the south costs \$500.00 a month for each panel and there are two panels per side. At \$2,000.00 a month (when fully rented), the billboard company can certainly afford to pay the landowner \$3,000.00 or so a year for the location.

When the plaintiff in the lawsuit against the billboard placed on Pershing called it "ugly," he couldn't have been more right. It is no reflection on the message to call these billboards ugly by themselves. When they are lighted until midnight, give or take an hour or so, they are more readable but they also more offensive.

Where will it end? When will it stop? The city governing body is now changing the sign ordinance so an unlimited number of billboards will be permitted - at least unlimited colossal ones. To replace a tiny one on Ames with a wall-sized one on Dell Range adds to the blight. It's not an even exchange.

CORRECTION

The City of Cheyenne Planning Commission meeting on the Sign Ordinance change is Monday, April 6, 2009 - at 6:00 pm in City Council Chambers.

Some may disagree with my take that the City would allow as many billboards as those companies would place "in the zoned area," but I cannot fathom this last group doing anything that might hamper or delay anything they considered "growth" or "progress."

My take on the problem they created for themselves is that, while trying to make a minor issue more difficult (off-premise signs), they made it impossible to add more billboards - not even being able to replace an old tiny sign with a new, larger billboard. And my argument, and I think it is supported by Wyoming Supreme Court decisions, is that the City is now stuck with what they did. Not what they *tried* to do - but what they did.

Remember, this is a group that declared the area of downtown that includes the Albany Restaurant and Bar and The Wrangler a "blight" so they could divert money intended for Cheyenne's needy to the remodeling of the old train depot. They would do anything - take any action - to accomplish what they considered to be growth or progress. So, unless someone who was at the meetings swears that the intention of that city council was to prohibit any additional billboards and they just worded the effort poorly, I will believe they made a mistake that they must live with. There is another story in this issue telling about another mistake I believe an earlier city council made that one day will come back to haunt the new group.

They made decisions for favored developers so they could proceed with construction after the builder had been caught building to a plan that had been rejected. They accommodated him on that four-plex project and another wherein he built units too close together to sell them separately. They change the rules to accommodate the interest. They believe that unlimited billboards somehow demonstrates growth instead of decay. They believe that billboards in the most inappropriate locations are appropriate decisions. They want to be Fort Collins North but have missed how the Colorado city limits billboards, size and color of them.

"How's Rick doing?"

I've been asked that question several times already. "Rick," of course, is the new mayor, Rick Kaysen.

I won't judge the competence of a new mayor after less than three months in office. I continue to believe, as I expressed before the 2008 general election, that Rick Kaysen has the experience, the qualifications, the temperament and the ability to be a good mayor. What we will learn as time goes on is whether he also has the determination. (*Note: I first used "courage." Rick was a dog handler in Vietnam. He has the courage.*)

If he wants to maintain a love relationship with the daily newspaper and those I derisively refer to as "the Chamber-types," it will not be possible for him to be a good mayor - and certainly he would never approach being a great mayor.

Chamber-types are not members of the downtown chamber of commerce. They are people who believe everything told them by those supportive of growth at any price, progress at any consequence.

A good mayor has to be sceptical of what he's told by the LEADS group, a largely ineffective band of Do-littles who are supposed to play some role in economic development in Laramie County. The Wyoming Business Council does but one thing well - pay large salaries to an excessive number of people to produce few visible results. And the Downtown Decimation Authority? If Rick hasn't noticed, after being CEO of Cheyenne Light, Fuel and Power Co., just how badly the downtown has been destructed under the current DDA leadership, it won't improve.

What I've seen/heard of Rick so far has been very encouraging. While he's had his "growing pains" problems chairing meetings of the City Council, that was to be expected. And not having Robert's Rules of Order memorized was also expected. What I've heard (from people with issues addressed directly to the mayor) is that he has an open mind, that he does not let his office girls make decisions for him, that he is responsive to the needs of constituents, and that he is decisive.

So long as he is the puppeteer and not the puppet, he has everything necessary to be a very good mayor. Let us hope.

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