



## Alcohol advertising ads as a public revenue stream?

By Aaron Byzak

July 11, 2013

Cities across the country face shrinking tax bases, forcing municipalities to get creative and monetize every asset possible without raising new taxes or fees.

The latest public revenue stream: partnerships with outdoor advertising companies to build digital billboards on public land and share in the revenue.

The city of Vista caught on to this idea and plans to move forward a proposal for two digital message boards on State Route 78, which sees about 131,000 average daily vehicle trips. The boards would face both directions, scrolling through various messages every eight seconds, to communicate “up to 15 percent of display time for public service messages.” The remaining 85 percent of advertising time would be eaten up by paid commercial messages expected to generate a projected \$300,000 to \$400,000 in revenue for the city within the first few years.

It may sound like a clever way to create a new means to communicate with the public, while also generating some extra revenue. But as currently proposed, Vista would not prohibit alcohol advertising on the billboards, which increases youth exposure to persuasive images and messages.

When public agencies own a piece of property on which advertising will be constructed and displayed, they are able to control the location, design and operation, as well as the content and appearance of the messages.

Recently, the Los Angeles Public Safety Committee moved forward a proposal to ban alcohol ads from city-owned or -controlled property.

**Alcohol Justice, an advocacy organization, and the Los Angeles Coalition to Ban Alcohol Ads on Public Property noted in a report to city officials that alcohol is the No. 1 drug of choice among youth of all ages.**

According to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, alcohol-related crashes, violent crimes and deaths cost the county more than \$10.9 billion annually. After such compelling evidence, the Los Angeles Public Safety Committee moved to ban alcohol ads from city-owned or -controlled property.

Alcohol-ban advocate and Councilmember Richard Alarcon said after the decision: “Banning alcohol ads from city-owned billboards is both the morally and fiscally responsible choice for Los Angeles.”

In fact, it’s the responsible choice for every city in California. In 2010, underage-drinking related incidents cost the state \$6.8 billion, according to the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation.

Alcohol is an estimated \$116 billion-per-year industry in the United States. Underage drinkers alone are responsible for 20 percent of all alcohol consumed and 19 percent, or \$22.5 billion, of alcohol-industry revenues.

Locally, more than 15,500 drivers were arrested for driving under the influence in San Diego County in 2011, and alcohol contributed to the injury or death of more than 1,800 residents in 2009.

As with tobacco advertising, at least two dozen research studies have found that youth exposure to alcohol marketing can increase the likelihood that young people will start drinking alcohol earlier, and if they already consume alcohol, that they will drink more.

The connection is undeniable. For every dollar spent on alcohol advertising, the percentage of underage drinking jumps by 3 percent and, notably, markets with less alcohol advertising show a corresponding dip in underage drinking.

Other governmental agencies have already stepped up to ban alcohol advertising on public property, including the North County Transit District, the San Diego Metropolitan Transit System, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the city of Sacramento (for digital billboard agreements) and the city of Philadelphia.

Clearly, localities can foster a strong connection between policy decisions and public health outcomes. Vista demonstrated a similar commitment by incorporating a “healthy Vista” element in 2011 when it updated its General Plan — receiving the support of the drug- and alcohol-prevention community.

Yet, a recent city of Vista staff report for this new outdoor advertising message board plan concluded there would be no impact or conflict with any land-use plan despite the apparent disregard for the “healthy Vista” policy by the city’s planning department.

Cities must remain afloat and mindful of the public dollars and cents needed to maintain a quality level of service. But any city expecting the revenue from alcohol advertising to make up for the priceless cost of human lives is kidding itself.

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