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## PROPOSAL WOULD PERMIT BILLBOARDS TO SPREAD / PLANNING COMMISSION ORDINANCE ON CITY COUNCIL AGENDA TONIGHT

Clements, Barbara  [The News Tribune](#). *The News Tribune* [Tacoma, Wash] 07 May 1996: pp. B.1.

### Abstract (summary)

Tonight, the City Council will consider a proposal allowing billboards in commercial areas where they're now banned, including the Westgate and James Center areas.

But Councilman Bob Evans said the proposal was tucked into a larger ordinance... Show all

### Full Text

A new chapter in the billboard battles might be opening in Tacoma.

Tonight, the City Council will consider a proposal allowing billboards in commercial areas where they're now banned, including the Westgate and James Center areas.

But Councilman Bob Evans said the proposal was tucked into a larger ordinance at the last moment. He said he will try to delay or amend the measure.

Otherwise, Evans predicted, "We'll have a whole slug of new billboards."

In 1988 after a bitter debate, city officials capped the number of billboards in the city at 325.

Though the new proposal might not mean more billboards - there are about 300 within the city - it could mean bigger ones in more visible commercial areas, Evans said.

Owners can "bank" a billboard site if they take a sign down and don't replace it with a new one.

Using this procedure and the new proposal, sign owners could take down old signs in neighborhoods, add up the square footage and erect a bigger sign in a commercial center, city planner Robin Meyer said.

The proposal is amid changes to the city's municipal code to comply with the state's Growth Management Act.

The city Planning Commission included the language this year at the urging of Paul Cyr, a former Pierce County councilman who's now a consultant for a billboard company.

On this issue, Cyr was under contract with Sun Outdoor Advertising, Evans and Meyer said. Sun Outdoor owns 90 of 325 billboard sites within the city. Ackerley Communications owns 230, while the Puyallup Tribe of Indians owns several.

Cyr could not be reached for comment Monday.

Meyer said city staff members objected to the billboard proposal, but commissioners voted to include it anyway. Evans said he was unaware of the provision until Friday, when a city employee pointed it out.

"There's so much language in the ordinance, unless you read every word, it goes right by you," Evans said.

He said if the proposal passes as is, it will hurt attempts to stop more billboards from popping up along Interstate 5 on Puyallup tribal trust land.

Pierce County Prosecutor John Ladenburg and other local officials are trying to stop more billboards from appearing along the freeway near Tacoma and Fife.

Now, about a dozen billboards are up, and tribal members have applied to build about 20 more.

Ladenburg has argued that the County Council and Tacoma should fight the matter in federal court if an agreement cannot be reached. Tribal members counter they've followed federal law as it relates to billboards.

Tacoma Mayor Brian Ebersole said he has written the Bureau of Indian Affairs to protest any more billboards going up on tribal land in the city.

He said he would try to delay a vote on tonight's ordinance until the council can review the billboard section.

"Generally, I don't like billboards," he said. "They clutter up the landscape."

Ebersole said he might consider a proposal requiring billboard owners to take down two or three signs in residential areas in exchange for placing one in a commercial center.

But the one-to-one trade proposed in the ordinance doesn't pass muster, he said.

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## NEW BILLBOARD RULES WOULD PHASE OUT BIGGEST SIGNS / PANEL PROPOSES LIMITS ON NEW SIGNS IN TACOMA; OLD ONES COULD STAY - FOR NOW

Suttle, Gestin; The News Tribune. *The News Tribune* [Tacoma, Wash] 11 June 1997: .1.

### Full Text

Tacoma would be wiser to let billboards die a slow death than to mow the m over with strong regulations, according to planning commission recommendations made Tuesday to the City Council. The commission has been studying the city's sign code for a year. Some p eople have urged the commission to outlaw billboards altogether, while others have said the city should stay out of the controversy.

Tacoma Mayor Brian Ebersole has referred to the existing 300 or so billboards in the city as ugly and obnoxious.

**The commission is suggesting that Tacoma follow the lead of Everett and several other cities, and simply adopt regulations that would make many existing signs illegal.**

The commission's proposed change to the sign ordinance include:

- \* Limiting the size of a sign to 300 square feet. Currently signs are limited to 672 square feet. Signs would be limited to a maximum height of 12.5 feet and a length of 25 feet. Currently the maximum is 25 feet in height and 50 feet in length.
- \* Restricting billboards to no closer than 250 feet to a residential area, church or school, historic district or any publicly owned space, such as a playground or park. Current law says no billboard should be within 100 feet of such locations.
- \* Limiting billboards to a minimum of 375 feet from any shoreline area. Currently the limit is 150 feet.

The newly illegal signs still could stay up indefinitely, until certain changes were made to trigger the ordinance, said city planner Robin Meyer.

The regulation "will have the impact over time of actually moving signs, or removing signs" from the city, said Planning Commission Chairman William Elford.

But it may take several years before anyone notices a change, Meyer said. If the commission recommendations were adopted today, he said, "No billboard in the city of Tacoma would go away" tomorrow.

If the council passes the recommendations, many - if not most - billboards would become illegal, Meyer said.

Those illegal, or "nonconforming" signs would be allowed to stay until the property owner tries to make certain changes, Meyer said. When those changes are undertaken, the sign owner would have to dismantle the illegal sign, or change it so that it complies with the city code, he said.

The changes that would affect the signs include:

- \* Attempts to put up a new sign. For each new sign the property owner wishes to erect, he would have to dismantle an equal number of existing signs. The new sign or signs would have to comply with the new city ordinance.
- \* Remodeling a building where a sign on the roof exists. All "nonconforming" roof signs on parts of the building being remodeled, or expanded, would have to come down or be changed. This would apply only if the remodeling project would expand the building by at least 10 percent, or increases the building's value by at least 10 percent.
- \* Changes to existing signs. The illegal sign either would have to come down or be made legal when the sign owner makes a change to the sign, such as repairs beyond routine maintenance. This would not apply to adding a new billboard face.

Commissioners are not recommending that the city outlaw billboards outright, because state law requires the city to compensate billboard companies and the underlying lease holder for the loss of such billboards.

Meyer estimated such compensation would cost the city \$40 million to \$60 million.

None of the proposed regulations would apply to billboards erected on tribal property. Those are not under

Tacoma's jurisdiction, Meyer told the council.

The issue likely will go before the City Council on July 1, when public testimony will be taken. If the council approves the proposed ordinance at its July 8 meeting, the law would go into effect July 24.

The current billboard moratorium, which prohibits any changes to existing billboards or permitting of new ones, expires July 31.

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## RULES COULD MAKE BILLBOARDS OBSOLETE

*The News Tribune* [Tacoma, Wash] 23 June 1997: .6.

### Full Text

When it comes to getting rid of unsightly billboards, Tacoma's planning commission has the right idea: If you can't beat 'em, enjoin 'em. The commission figures it would cost the city \$40 million to \$60 million to buy billboards outright and compensate landlords on whose property the signs are located. So it's recommending that the City Council follow the lead of Everett and other communities by adopting regulations that will phase out the signs over time. The council could vote on the measure July 8. It's important the council adopt the new rules before a moratorium on new billboards expires July 31.

The proposed rules - which would tightly restrict billboards' size and location - would make about 300 billboards in Tacoma "nonconforming." (Signs on Puyallup tribal trust land would not be affected.) But they wouldn't come down any time soon. Only when a sign or the property is substantially changed would the billboard either have to be removed or brought into compliance with the new, stricter regulations. And the only way a billboard company could erect a new, legal sign on a piece of property would be to tear down the existing, noncomplying one.

Over time, that will rid the city of the worst billboards - the big ones, those located in desirable locations that eventually will be developed, and those near residential areas, churches, schools, parks and playgrounds.

That approach to billboards was based on ordinances adopted in Everett and Edmonds that have been successful in reducing the number of billboards within city limits.

There is a down side to this slow-death approach to billboards. Most billboard companies pay rent to property owners, and in many instances that income is greater than other rents the property generates. The new restrictions could be a disincentive for the owner to improve or develop the property because it could mean losing the billboard income.

In the long run, however, improving the city visually will enhance property values - giving owners more incentive to develop or improve their properties. Although Tacoma may never be completely billboard-free, the council should begin the only cure the city can really afford.

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## LIMITING BILLBOARDS IS GOOD BUSINESS

*The News Tribune* [Tacoma, Wash] 13 July 1997: .6.

### Full Text

Across America, billboards are coming down or being prevented from ever going up. All billboards have been removed in Vermont, Hawaii and Maine. Alaska's constitution prohibits them. New billboards haven't been allowed in Rhode Island since 1990, and Oregon has a statewide cap on the signs. Numerous cities, including Houston and San Diego, ban new billboards.

Don't these communities realize that billboard restrictions hurt local business and the local economy? At least that's what the billboard industry would have everybody think, and it's snookered some in Tacoma's business community into believing it, too.

On the contrary, there's evidence that removing the visual clutter created by billboards is a boon to communities, particularly those that hope to increase tourism. For example, tourism expenditures rose 50 percent and the number of visitors rose 10 percent in Vermont two years after that state's last billboard came down. Houston; Raleigh, N.C.; and Williamsburg, Va., are among the cities that reported impressive increases in sales after tough new billboard restrictions or bans were enacted.

There's no guarantee billboard restrictions would have similar results in Tacoma, where the planning commission has recommended a new ordinance modeled after laws already in effect in Everett and Edmonds. But other communities' positive experiences suggest that at the very least, billboard restrictions won't hurt local business.

Under the proposal the City Council will consider Tuesday, any new billboards would have to meet strict size and site guidelines; existing billboards that don't meet those new guidelines would have to be removed or brought into compliance if a change were planned for the sign or the property on which it's located. Over time, that is expected to sharply reduce the number of billboards in the city, although the ordinance would not apply to signs on Puyallup tribal trust land.

The billboard industry has reacted to the proposal by enlisting the local business community and nonprofit agencies to run interference. It has convinced some business owners that their signs would be affected along with billboards. That is not the case. As for the nonprofits, one reason billboard companies provide sign space to these organizations is so they'll have sympathetic allies pleading their case before lawmakers. Philanthropy is not the prime motivator.

Billboard restrictions are proving effective all over the United States, and they'll also improve Tacoma by creating a more attractive community. The City Council should move quickly to adopt the new restrictions before the current billboard moratorium lapses July 31.

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## WELCOME ACTION ON BILLBOARDS, CELL TOWERS

*The News Tribune* [Tacoma, Wash] 25 July 1997: .8.

### Full Text

The Tacoma City Council showed courage Tuesday with its near-unanimous vote to toughen the city's laws regulating billboards. The action will pay off with aesthetic dividends for the city - although it will be years before improvements are visible. Despite heavy pressure from billboard companies and their supporters to maintain lenient rules pertaining to outdoor advertising, the council approved tight restrictions on size and placement that eventually could drastically reduce the number of billboards within city limits. Most existing billboards will be out of compliance with the new law; by the year 2007 they will either have to be brought into compliance or removed. Signs on Indian trust land are not affected.

The billboard companies' heavy-handed tactics didn't help their cause. They enlisted local businesses and nonprofit groups to lobby for them, and reportedly showed little inclination to discuss any alternative but the status quo.

One only has to look at the in-your-face monstrosity at the corner of Center Street and South Union Avenue to understand why it was so important not only to draw the line on new signs but to get tough on existing ones.

Other much-needed action on the aesthetic front is also taking place. A group composed of community leaders, city staff and representatives from the cellular phone industry is working on proposed regulations governing construction of new cell phone towers. There are already 32 applications in the pipeline, and many more are expected.

Earlier this month the City Council imposed a six-month moratorium on new towers in order to buy enough time to come up with an effective ordinance. It must address such issues as where towers can go, how big they can be and whether competing companies should be required to share tower space.

Top priority should be strictly limiting placement of towers in residential neighborhoods - despite industry representatives' insistence that they don't hurt property values. A reasonable question to ask would be whether any of these representatives would want one in their own yard or next door.

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