

More U.S. communities banning 'television on a stick'

March 28 2010, By Larry Copeland

As the United States cracks down on texting while driving, more than a dozen cities around the nation have banned what some consider a growing external driving distraction: digital billboards.

Digital billboards change images every four to 10 seconds, flashing multiple messages from one or more advertisers on the same sign. Opponents such as John Regesnbogen of Scenic Missouri deride them as "television on a stick."

Several communities have banned digital billboards outright, the most recent being Denver earlier this month. Other places have put a moratorium on them pending a federal study on whether they distract drivers. At least one other city and two states are studying moratoriums.

"The digital billboards are a [distraction](#)," says Fred Wessels, an alderman in St. Louis, which just approved a one-year moratorium on such signs.

"If they weren't distracting, they wouldn't be doing their job," says Max Ashburn, spokesman for Scenic America, a national nonprofit group that seeks to limit billboards.

Research on the issue is mixed. A Virginia Tech Transportation Institute study in 2007, financed by the billboard industry, found that they aren't distracting. A review of studies completed last year for the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, however, concluded that they "attract drivers' eyes away from the road for

extended, demonstrably unsafe periods of time."

"There's no doubt in my mind that they are not a driving distraction," says Bryan Parker, an executive vice president for Clear Channel Outdoor, which owns about 400 digital billboards. He cites industry-sponsored studies of collisions before and after digital billboards were installed in Albuquerque, N.M.; Cleveland; and Rochester, Minn., that found no correlation.

"We've looked at that very carefully," says Bill Ripp, vice president of Lamar Advertising, which owns 159,000 billboards, 1,150 of them digital. "We don't want to cause any unsafe conditions for drivers."

Digital billboards are a fast-growing segment of the outdoor advertising market. Since a federal rule against them was eased in 2007, the number of digital billboards has more than doubled to about 1,800 of 450,000 total billboards. At least 39 states allow them. They cost an average \$200,000 to \$300,000 apiece, according to the industry group Outdoor Advertising Association of America.

In 2007, the Federal Highway Administration relaxed a rule against digital billboards, saying they don't violate the 1965 Highway Beautification Act's ban on "intermittent," "flashing" or "moving" lights. FHWA is researching the signs, using eye-trackers inside volunteers' vehicles to determine whether drivers look at the billboards and for how long. The study is to be completed this summer.

There is little current data on whether greater distractions for drivers come from in-vehicle or external factors.

The Department of Transportation, which is leading a national push against [texting](#) while driving, says that 5,870 people were killed in distracted-driving crashes in 2008. The department has not determined

how many of those deaths involved an electronic device, another distraction such as eating or tuning the radio, or something outside the vehicle such as a digital billboard.

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