

EDITORIAL

ISLAND VOICES

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Column: Billboards mar isle vistas, character

By Diane Harding and Winston Welch

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A billboard advertising CinemaScope sits prominently on the side of Kuhio Theater in 1954. The sign was taken down after The Outdoor Circle asked Consolidated Amusement Company to remove it that year.

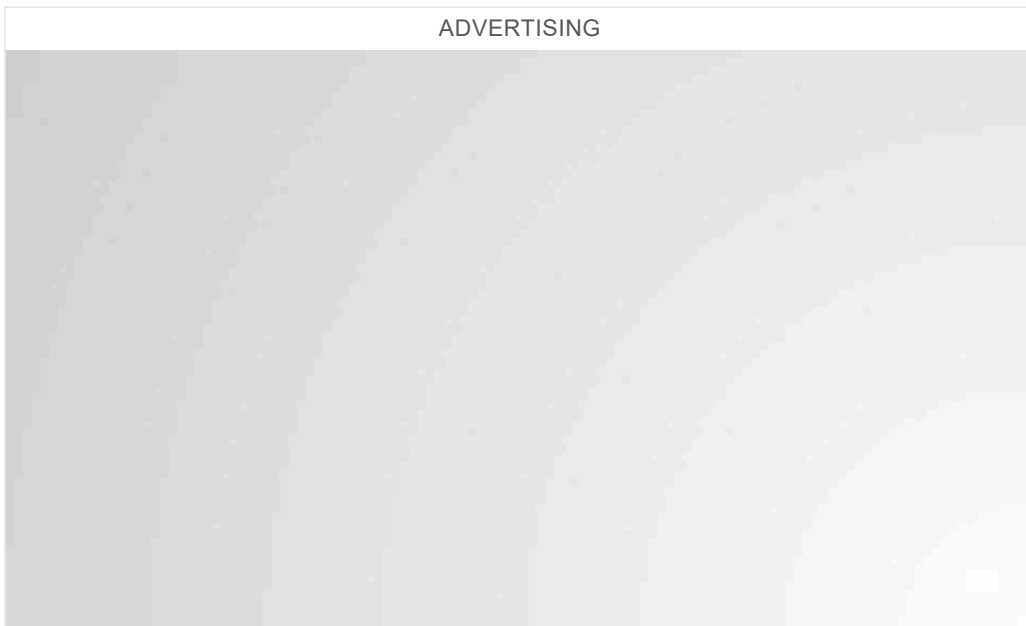


Visitors arriving in Hawaii notice something unusual almost immediately, even if they cannot quite explain it. From the

moment travelers leave the airport and look toward the mountains or Diamond Head, the landscape remains visible rather than crowded by billboards or commercial signs.

That absence is not accidental. It reflects a deliberate public policy that Hawaii adopted nearly a century ago.

As recently reported in the Honolulu Star-Advertiser (“[Digital signs sought for stadium zone](#),” March 5), Senate Bill 2353 asks the Legislature to weaken that long-standing policy by authorizing digital outdoor advertising devices in the New Aloha Stadium Entertainment District.



Supporters often describe such proposals as modernization. In reality, Hawaii’s outdoor advertising restrictions were never an accident of outdated law. They were a deliberate policy choice about what kind of place Hawaii would be.

The bill would authorize digital outdoor advertising displays in the state’s stadium district, an area already defined by complex traffic movement.



These displays are designed to capture attention through bright, electronically changing images placed near roadways where

drivers must already navigate multiple lanes, merging traffic, and nearby freeway ramps. Researchers have examined the safety implications of such displays for decades, particularly the risks associated with driver distraction.

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SB 2353 should not be viewed in isolation. In recent legislative sessions, proposals have repeatedly surfaced to expand commercial advertising into public civic spaces. Measures such as SB 2074 and earlier legislation including SB 583 have sought to authorize corporate naming rights and exterior branding on public facilities such as the state stadium and convention center. Policy shifts affecting public landscapes rarely remain isolated. Once commercial branding appears prominently on public infrastructure, similar proposals quickly become easier to justify elsewhere. Expansion occurs one exception at a time.

SB 2353 also raises a governance concern. The bill overrides Honolulu's carefully constructed sign regulations and would require the City and County of Honolulu to permit signage it has deliberately chosen to restrict. Article VIII of the Hawaii Constitution recognizes county authority over local matters, including land use and zoning. Replacing local planning judgment with a statewide mandate weakens that long-standing principle of home rule.

The history behind Hawaii's signage laws explains why these protections exist. In the early twentieth century, commercial signs appeared across many of the islands' most visible landscapes. Diamond Head was scarred by large



advertisements. The Pali carried view-destroying soap promotions. Punchbowl bore whiskey billboards larger than life.

Concerned residents organized to address the rapid spread of billboard advertising. The Outdoor Circle was founded in 1912 by residents determined to protect Hawaii's landscapes from the spread of billboard advertising. After 15 years of sustained advocacy, the last billboard company operating in Hawaii was purchased and dismantled in 1927, and the Territorial Legislature codified the prohibition on billboards that same year.

Today, Hawaii's highways and public spaces remain largely free from the billboard corridors common in many mainland cities. The absence of large commercial signage contributes to the distinctive sense of place that residents and visitors value. In a world where commercial signage dominates many landscapes, Hawaii's uncluttered views remain part of what makes the islands feel different.

More than a century ago, civic reformer Charles Mulford Robinson offered advice that still resonates. Invited to Honolulu in 1906 to help guide the city's development, Robinson urged local leaders not to imitate mainland cities but to cultivate Hawaii's own character: "Do not dream of what other cities may have done ... develop your own individuality, be Hawaiian."

Nearly a century ago, Hawaii made a simple but enduring decision: the public landscape would not be treated as commercial advertising space. That choice has helped preserve the distinctive visual character that residents and visitors continue to value today. It remains a legacy worth protecting.

Diane Harding is president of The Outdoor Circle; Winston Welch is the group's executive director.

