


EDITORIAL

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Editorial: Billboards plan is a blot on NASED

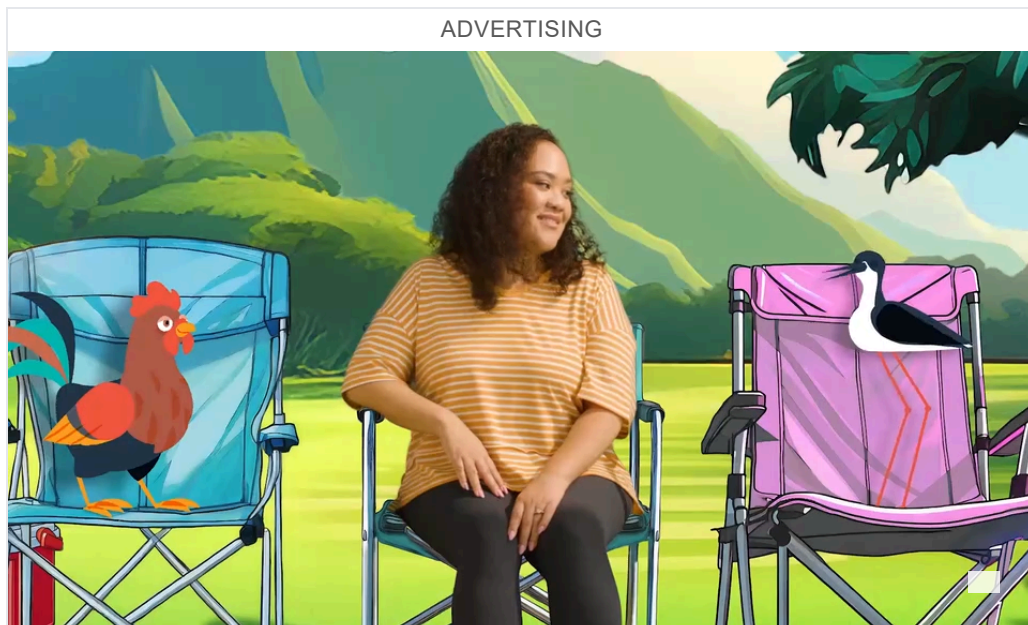
Today

Hawaii is one of only four states to maintain a ban on billboard advertising, a novel rule that contributes to the isles' uniquely idyllic character. Residents and visitors have enjoyed a lush landscape free from the visual blight of large commercial-bearing installations for nearly a century, but the progressive regulation that first took effect in 1927 faces a new challenge as Honolulu builds out a reinvigorated stadium district.

Senate Bill 2353 would add to the state's billboard law a carve-out specifically for the New Aloha Stadium Entertainment District (NASED), one that stands out among existing exclusions for property placards, retailer identification, political campaign signage and a variety of public service announcements, among other innocuous permissions. It would, for the first time, authorize the construction and maintenance of digital outdoor signs — billboards capable of displaying images and messages — purely for advertising purposes.

This raises immediate concerns of light pollution and driver distractions, and more speculative worries of billboard creep into areas beyond the bounds of the 98-acre NASED. SB 2353, as written with close to zero limiting parameters or guidelines, does not pass muster.





Fortunately, legislators are listening to the public. In a House Economic Development and Technology Committee hearing Thursday, Stadium Authority Vice Chair Andrew Pereira was asked specifically whether the proposed signs will affect areas beyond the NASED complex. He confirmed they would not, but failed to cite specific affordances in the master plan that might protect against ill-placed signage. Pereira did note a draft master plan will not allow for large car lots or red-light districts, and said developer Stanford Carr has plans to build a sports museum and Hawaiian music hall of fame to ensure that the “host culture is celebrated.” Excellent, but digital billboards are most definitely not in keeping with the island spirit.

Pereira estimates digital billboards could bring in about \$2 million to \$3 million a year, needed funds for a project that is already underway. The state is kicking in \$350 million in seed money to dismantle Aloha Stadium and build a new facility, along with the residential housing, retail and office space, and hotels that make up a mixed-use district. According to the NASED website, the economic impact of construction is estimated at more than \$2 billion. Stadium revenues and “other sources” will be tapped by the developer to fund operations and maintenance costs for the stadium’s first 30 years, after which time the state



will take over responsibility. Other sources of revenue — non-tax revenue — must be found, and advertisements of some sort could be an answer, but the arrangement needs careful consideration.

In written testimony, The Outdoor Circle, the nonprofit responsible for Hawaii’s billboard ban, lists a host of reasons to oppose SB 2353 “including safety concerns, the protection of Hawaii’s visual environment, the preservation of county land-use authority, and the precedent created by statutory exceptions.” Unlike the barebones bill, Outdoor Circle comes bearing evidence in the form of studies outlining the negative impact billboards have on distracted driving, a major issue that receives no mention in SB 2353.

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Also, the group rightly states that the proposal overrides local sign regulations in a departure from traditional land-use authority, creates dubious precedent by altering existing billboard law and degrades Hawaii’s scenic and valuable vistas. All true, and all disconcerting.

Legislators must revisit SB 2353 and add limiting language addressing the many concerns voiced by the public and groups like Outdoor Circle, if they choose to move ahead at all. An obvious fix would place restrictions on where billboards can be located within NASED — preferably far from the periphery and facing in toward the district center. Physical dimensions, display attributes and commercial content guidelines must also be clearly stated.



Even with safeguards in place, allowing digital billboards in a state-controlled space sets bad precedent and could enable unwanted proliferation — it would place revenue and fund-seeking over Hawaii’s one-of-a-kind character. And as conscientious legislation goes, that’s never a good sign.



2 COMMENTS

