



Let's allow a few digital billboards

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Editorial

Fairway Outdoor Advertising, which owns 54 billboards in Durham, is expected to soon ask City Council to allow it to change some of its billboards into lighted, digital models.

The idea has caused consternation among those who say the digital billboards will be bright, ugly and dangerous for drivers. Supporters contend the modern displays are attractive, bring in increased tax revenue and provide a public service.

Anyone who hasn't seen the digital billboards should take a ride to Greensboro and Winston-Salem some evening to check them out. We would feel differently if the lighted billboards were positioned off the Blue Ridge Parkway, blocking a scenic mountain vista. But in an urban setting, along a four-to-eight-lane highway where there are already other billboards, we don't find them egregiously ugly or distracting.

Fairway has not submitted a formal proposal yet, but it will likely ask City Council to let it replace some billboards -- 25 percent has been mentioned -- with the digital variety. City Council might want to start with a lower number -- say 10 percent, which would mean five billboards -- to judge the reaction before allowing more. Council could also request prior approval of the sites.

The upside for the city, as Fairway points out, is that the lighted billboards are expensive and will generate more tax revenue. The company also pledges to donate space to local nonprofits. That's possible because the electronic screens allow multiple advertisers on a single billboard, with the display changing every few seconds.

Current rules prohibit any new billboards from being added to Durham's total, which a recent state study put at 89. The company is also asking to upgrade some of its traditional billboards instead of letting them deteriorate, which seems reasonable.

Opponents argue passionately that lighted billboards are a dangerous distraction for drivers, but studies are inconclusive. Digital foes also worry that billboards will disturb residential neighborhoods. City Council and Fairway should take those concerns seriously when deciding where to place the displays.

We understand that a sudden proliferation of dozens of digital billboards might be more than the community wants or needs. But we don't think allowing a few in select locations would be harmful. Some people actually find them attractive.

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