

The Urban Loop: Scenic Corridor or Billboard Magnet?

By: [Andrew Brod](#)

Brod, Andrew (2002). The Urban Loop: Scenic Corridor or Billboard Magnet? *Greensboro News & Record*. November 3, 2002

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Article:

Tomorrow night the Greensboro City Council will vote a second time on whether there will be billboards along the Greensboro Urban Loop, also called Painter Boulevard. The Urban Loop will eventually form a 40-mile ring around the city of Greensboro.

A month ago, the council voted 5-4 to allow billboards in what was characterized as a compromise measure between those who want the Urban Loop to be a scenic corridor and those who want to put up billboards. Tomorrow's re-vote will decide the issue.

The compromise, which was proposed by representatives of the outdoor advertising industry, sounds good. It would allow billboards to be placed only within a half mile of an interchange, as long as they are 1,000 feet apart and meet several other conditions. However, as council member Sandy Carmany noted a month ago, "With 21 interchanges, that's half of that 40-mile loop."

Proponents of the compromise tend to be proponents of billboards. Their arguments are based on the idea that signage is important for economic development along highways. Without information about local businesses, the argument goes, ventures along the Urban Loop will be hurt.

Are billboards along the Urban Loop really a good idea for the Greensboro economy? No, for a number of reasons.

Reason 1: The commercial importance of signage is hardly an absolute fact. It depends on the nature of the roadway. For heavily used through-highways, billboards are indeed important means of conveying information to travelers. However, this is much less true for urban bypasses, where most of the travelers will be daily commuters.

Therefore, comparing signage on rural interstate highways to that on the Urban Loop is like comparing apples and oranges.

Rural interstates aren't the only places where billboards can make sense. Urban planners understand that sensible and informative signage can be part of an urban neighborhood's character. And as one planning expert put it to me, "signage works best when there are a lot of curb cuts."

But in spite of its name, the Urban Loop won't be urban, and it certainly won't be a neighborhood. It will be a limited-access expressway, with interchanges an average of two miles apart. Not many curb cuts there.

Reason 2: Economic theory implies that things in short supply tend to have a high value, and things that are plentiful tend to have a low value. In spite of the best efforts of the city's planning department, scenic corridors are relatively rare in Greensboro. In contrast, there are plenty of billboards around town.

Therefore, adding a little scenic preservation promises to add a lot to our community well-being, while reducing slightly the large number of billboards will hurt us relatively little. It won't even hurt the outdoor advertising companies much.

A 1997 report by the Leo Burnett advertising agency clearly favors outdoor advertising as an important medium. But it notes that "people dislike out-of-home advertising that degrades the overall appearance of a location, a building, or the environment in general." This seems most likely to happen when the road is supposed to be a scenic corridor, doesn't it?

Reason 3: Hey, weren't we supposed to be focusing our energies on economic development in *downtown* Greensboro, not along the city's fringe? Let's face it: the economic development about which billboard proponents are so concerned is sprawl development.

A recent study by Smart Growth America ranked the Triad as the second most sprawling metropolitan area in the country. Whether one believes that precise ranking, it's pretty clear that sprawl is a reality here in Greensboro. And one of the facts of life in a sprawling metro area is that you don't have to work hard to get businesses to set up shop along the urban fringe.

So to all those who are concerned about economic development along the Urban Loop: Don't worry--if it's going to happen, it'll happen with or without billboards.

Reason 4: Action Greensboro and the Greensboro Connects campaign are working hard to get us to think of Greensboro as a special place. And yet (speaking of rankings), the billboard compromise threatens to rank us #3 in the Triad in roadway beautification.

Some years ago Winston-Salem banned billboards on the I-40 bypass around that city. In north High Point, U.S. 68 is free of billboards precisely because the road provides many visitors with their first impression of the city as they come in from the airport. Neither of these corridors appears to be hurting economically.

In fact, we have our own example. There are no billboards along Bryan Boulevard, and I doubt anyone would argue that business has been thwarted in thriving northwest Greensboro. Have city council members been flooded with calls from commuters urging them to please allow billboards on Bryan Boulevard?

Reason 5: One of the stated purposes of the compromise proposal was to help small businesses advertise themselves. But the compromise will not accomplish that. Restricting where billboards can be sited will make the smaller number of locations more valuable than if there were no restriction. I don't particularly mind that, because I think outdoor advertisers *should* pay a lot for their use of a public good like scenery. But the higher prices will mean that only larger businesses will be able to afford to advertise in that way.

I suppose the city of Greensboro could fix prices for outdoor advertising along the Urban Loop (if that's even legal), and then hold lotteries to determine which businesses get to advertise on the billboards. That's unlikely to happen, but otherwise this compromise plan simply won't work as advertised.

So where does all this leave us? The billboard proposal that got preliminary approval last month will almost certainly do nothing significant for the local economy as a whole. It also does nothing for the economic development of our downtown, which everyone has been saying is our primary economic goal. It won't help small businesses, as has been claimed. And it risks marring a scenic corridor around Greensboro that could, if we let it, speak well of our city and its self-image.

Here's a real compromise. Let's continue to allow billboards everywhere else in the city *except* on our designated scenic corridors. Then let's confirm that the Urban Loop will be a scenic corridor and stick to it. Let's allow our scenic corridors to advertise that Greensboro is a confident and economically vital city.

We will hardly be lacking in billboards, and there will still be plenty of business for outdoor advertisers. On our scenic corridors, drivers can be informed about local businesses in the same way they have been for years on many interstate highways, with smaller government-maintained signs.

Let's not turn the Urban Loop into High Point Road before it's even built.