

20 June 2017

Ms Caroline Le Couteur MLA
Standing Committee on Planning and Urban Renewal
GPO Box 1020
CANBERRA, ACT 2601
Via email - Committees@parliament.act.gov.au

Dear Ms Le Couteur,

UnionsACT submission to Inquiry into Billboards

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the ACT Legislative Assembly inquiry into billboards.

UnionsACT is the peak council for the ACT's union movement, representing 24 unions and over 33,000 union members. Many tens of thousands more have their conditions of employment shaped by the work and representation performed by our affiliates. As the independent voice for working people in the Canberra region, we have a strong interest in the issue of outdoor advertising and the privatisation of public space.

UnionsACT strongly supports the existing restrictions on billboard advertising. This restriction preserves public spaces from commercial advertising (a pernicious form of privatisation), protects jobs in the tourism industry, promotes social inclusion, maintains the aesthetics of our 'Bush Capital' and has other economic benefits.

Form of privatisation

UnionsACT is concerned at the increasing privatisation of public assets, a pernicious form of neoliberalism that prioritises the benefits of a few business over the interest of the public at large.

Public spaces are public goods. These public spaces have an intrinsic benefit that create social, economic and environmental value. Public spaces would be effectively privatised if restrictions on billboards were removed. This occurs where the general, public enjoyment of a space is restricted to commercial use and benefit by an advertising company.

Furthermore, privately managed outdoor advertising is undemocratic, as it grants commercial interests, rather than duly elected or appointed representatives, the power to determine what can be publicly displayed.

Economic benefits to restrictions

Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of Canberra's economy, employing over 16,000 people. The growth of this industry, which is linked in great part to

our city's natural beauty, is supported by the absence of commercial outdoor advertising.

We believe there would be far greater economic benefits to Canberra for the existing restrictions to remain.

Commercial advertisements counter to public policy

In many instances, commercial advertising is counter to public policy. For instance, the ACT Government spends considerable funds on promoting healthy eating, yet significantly more money is spent by corporations to advertise junk food. This carries across almost every area of public policy, where commercial advertising undermines or directly counter-poses the ACT Government's social inclusion and economic justice agenda.

Public health impacts

There is growing evidence that advertising of certain products has negative public health impacts. They produce a form of 'visual pollution'.

Advertising of junk food, sugary foods, and sexualised depictions of women and men can impact the incidence of chronic health conditions and the mental wellbeing of young people. Billboards depicting unhealthy food, or sexist images of women, are pervasive in other cities. The impact of mass advertising on public health is an area about which there is growing knowledge.

Aesthetics

Urban environments have a powerful impact on communities; this is also the case for working people who use and enjoy public spaces. By and large, out-door advertising reduces the aesthetics and amenity of the areas they are installed in. As a planned city, Canberra has a 'natural' urban beauty, arising from its geographic position and the design of the city itself.

In other cities where there are no restrictions on billboards, buildings and city-scapes are obscured by advertising. This advertising is rarely installed in a manner that complements the design or amenity of the spaces in which they are installed.

Billboards are generally concentrated in low-income areas, either residential areas or workplace/industrial areas. This reflects the low value placed by advertisers and regulators on the amenities of working class neighbourhoods.

Limits on existing restrictions should be strengthened

In recent years, there has been insufficient action by the Government to prevent the undue expansion of outdoor advertising. Examples of the spread of outdoor advertising into unregulated 'grey areas' include:

Bus-stop advertising

UnionsACT is concerned that advertising deals done with global advertising companies such as AdShel and JC Decaux are not in the public interest, and undermine the existing restrictions on billboard advertising. It is unlikely that this deal is in the public interest; rather, it is likely that there is far greater net benefit to AdShel.

Building display advertising

Recently, building developers have started to advertise new apartment developments on large display advertisements, hung from the sides of buildings. Other large building-owners, such as the Canberra Centre and the Convention Centre, have likewise skirted regulations against billboards.

Real estate billboards

Semi-permanent real estate ads are common across Canberra. While these may be lawful, they present the same negative impacts of larger, more permanent billboards.

Public benefit if restrictions are reduced or removed

UnionsACT opposes the removal or reduction of restrictions on billboards in Canberra.

Further, UnionsACT supports strengthening existing restrictions, to close loopholes that allow for other forms of outdoor advertising.

Nonetheless, should the ACT Government decide to change or remove the restrictions, we strongly believe that the management of advertising space should not be granted to a private, commercial company.

Instead, spaces could be made available for non-profit community groups and activities. If billboards are installed, they should be public assets, managed by the ACT Government, or by a non-profit organisation, in the public interest.

Furthermore, as the nation's capital, the ACT should be an exemplar of democratic engagement. Therefore, if there are to be billboards installed, local neighbourhoods should be genuinely consulted over the content of the advertising. This would allow residents to prevent objectionable advertisements being displayed in their neighbourhoods.

UnionsACT also believes that existing contracts with Adshel, for bus-stop advertising, should not be renewed. Once this contract expires, the existing advertising space could be managed by the ACT Government, or a non-profit organisation, or the advertising infrastructure could be removed completely.

No restrictions on political advertising

UnionsACT notes some commentary linking the issue of political election advertising (in the form of corflutes) and the restrictions on billboards. UnionsACT does not support any additional restriction on political speech or advertising. UnionsACT does not support additional restrictions on the placement of roadside corflutes during election periods.

Conclusion

There is a strong case to maintain and strengthen restrictions on billboards and outdoor commercial advertising. UnionsACT believes that the existing restrictions are beneficial. Increased public advertising would not support the ACT Government's existing commitments to social inclusion, public health and responsible economic development.

We again welcome the opportunity to make this public submission to the Assembly inquiry into billboards.

Yours sincerely

Alex White

Secretary

UnionsACT