

Digital billboards spur conflict

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September 22, 2008--A digital billboard on the south side of Highway 70 at the St. Charles Rock Road exit. (Sarah Conard)

Digital billboards — the latest flash point in a decades-long fight between outdoor advertising firms and highway beautification advocates — are making some inroads in the St. Louis area.

One of the signs, which switch every few seconds from one static ad to another, began operating in July along the south side of Interstate 70 west of Lambert-St. Louis International Airport in Bridgeton.

Another went up Tuesday in East St. Louis, where several interstates converge.

At least three are planned for St. Charles, where the City Council recently passed guidelines for the new signs.

How many more the metro area will get depends partly on lawmakers in Jefferson City. The billboard industry expects to again next year ask the Legislature to permit more signs along federal and state highways in Missouri to be converted to digital than are allowed now.

Such a measure failed in this year's session. The restriction is one reason Missouri hasn't seen as many of the high-tech signs as some other states. So far, 30 to 40 are posted across the state; Illinois has about 100.

Industry officials laud the digital signs' flexibility.

"These things are instantaneously changeable," said Bill May, executive director of the Missouri Outdoor Advertising Association.

Moreover, he said, "instead of having one advertiser on a sign face, you can have six."

Leaders of Scenic Missouri, a group that has worked for years to limit billboards, say the digital signs exacerbate visual clutter.

"They not only are part of the landscape; these things are so bright and dominating, they really are the landscape," said John Regenbogen, the organization's executive director.

He also contends that the changing digital images are a safety hazard because they distract drivers.

Bridgeton's mayor, Conrad Bowers, says he also had "great reservations" related to traffic safety when Lamar Advertising Co. first approached his city about replacing its traditional sign on I-70 with a digital version.

He said he changed his mind after learning that federal and state agencies allow them in some locations.

He said he also liked the signs' involvement in the Amber alert system, which puts up notifications about abducted children. The sign also can be employed in other emergencies. The city also gets to use one of the sign's time segments to promote a municipal golf course and other amenities.

The new St. Charles ordinance calls for digital billboards to give the city five hours a month of ad time for public service messages. City officials are unsure when the signs will go up, but two firms say they're applying to replace signs on I-70, Highway 370 and at the interchange of I-70 and Highway 94.

The St. Charles ordinance requires each digital ad to hold steady for 10 seconds, longer than the Missouri Department of Transportation and Bridgeton's 8-second standard. Illinois also has a 10-second rule.

Regarding safety, billboard companies cite industry-funded studies by the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute and an engineering firm in Philadelphia that indicated no hazard because of the signs.

Regenbogen of Scenic Missouri noted that the methodology of those studies was questioned by a review commissioned by the Maryland Transportation Department. He suggests that cities ban or delay action on digital billboards until a Federal Highway Administration study is completed on whether they pose a safety risk.

At issue in the Missouri Legislature are federal and MoDOT directives passed in 2002 prohibiting digital conversion for billboards that don't conform to new state rules on spacing and size.

Joyce Musick, MoDOT's outdoor advertising manager, says about 7,900 of the state's 9,500 or so billboards are "nonconforming." They can stay up but can't be replaced if taken down by high wind or road construction.

The legislation that failed this year, among other things, would have allowed many "nonconforming" signs to be upgraded to digital use. Musick estimated that about half would have qualified for conversion. Other estimates are higher.

Because conversion costs as much as \$500,000 per sign, May of the billboard industry group said companies would apply digital to only a fraction of qualifying billboards. He predicted that no more than 100 additional digital signs would pop up in the first five years after passage.

Some communities, including Kansas City and Columbia in Missouri, have banned the new digitals. Kansas City's council acted after several of the signs were erected. The ban was sought by a citizens group with aesthetic and safety concerns.

Regenbogen isn't aware of any cities in the St. Louis area that have followed suit. He said, however, that some municipalities' restrictions on new billboards in general would make it difficult to win approval of digital signs.

Standing apart from the debate is the large ad sign outside the Lumière Place casino on I-70 in downtown St. Louis. It has flashing and moving images, which aren't allowed on free-standing digital billboards in Missouri.

The casino sign is exempt from the law because it advertises only goods and services on its premises.

About 1,100 of the nation's 450,000 billboards are digital, said Jeff Golimowski, a spokesman for the Outdoor Advertising Association of America.

"We're expecting the number to grow by several hundred per year," he said.