

Vandals Vs. Billboards Vs. The Law

EDITOR'S NOTE: Miss Weiss is a 1967 graduate of Clarenceville High School and is finishing her senior year at Michigan State University.

By RHODA WEISS

Armed with axes and saws, "Billboard Bandits" have descended upon Michigan roadways.

The State Highway Commission estimates more than 80 billboards have been cut down by unscrupulous persons along Michigan's freeways in recent weeks.

Many of these signs cut down were illegal.

THE ACTS of these highway scoundrels stem from lax enforcement of the Federal Highway Beautification Act of 1965. Adopted by Michigan in 1968, the state law prohibits signs erected since 1968 and located within 660 feet of the right-of-way of interstate and primary highways, except in certain commercial and industrial areas, both zoned and unzoned.

Billboard owners and the State Highway Department have removed fewer than 100 signs.

Lack of funding is the main reason for the slow progress made in removing the signs.

Congress authorized \$97 million over a three-year period, beginning in 1971, to start taking down signs across the country; but Michigan's share has been minimal.

"This is primarily because Michigan does not have a law acceptable to the federal government to qualify for funds," says Jay Bastain, assistant supervisor of roadside development.

ANOTHER PROBLEM is the confusion in the present law as to the legality of highway signs. The state law does not prohibit all billboards less than 660 feet of the highway.

According to Karl S. Vasloff, assistant attorney general, the law permits billboards within the required distance if they follow other requirements of the law.

"Billboards that advertise the sale or lease of property on which the signs are built or advertise businesses on a property can be put up anywhere," Vasloff said.

A minimum size of 250 square feet is required, he said. Billboards within municipal limits must be spaced 150 feet apart.

"Billboards outside municipal limits can only be located within 3,500 feet of the boundaries of existing business locations," Vasloff added. "They must be spaced at least 300 feet apart on primary highways, 500 feet apart on interstates."

TO COMBAT this problem, measures to control billboards in the state have been introduced.

One such bill is primarily

the work of State Rep. Raymond J. Smit (R-Ann Arbor).

The bill is intended to remove 85 per cent of the signs from the expressway system within eight years and most of them sooner. It will also result in the removal of signs scattered through the countryside along other state highways.

"Prompt action is needed to stop the growth of the disorganized billboard jungle, which is disfiguring the state," Smit said.

Smit said that he recognizes that it is not possible to completely eliminate signs, because travelers need to know where goods and services can be obtained.

"We have been careful in the bill to permit adequate signs on business premises while eliminating confusing advertising features such as flashing lights and strings of flags," he added.

The present state law is difficult to enforce and has not been effective, he said. After four years, there are more signs and billboards along state roadways than ever, and the situation is getting worse.

ATTY. GEN. Frank J. Kelley has also introduced an anti-billboard measure in the Legislature.

"The bill provides that signs only be around businesses," Vasloff said. "A space between signs of 20,000 feet would be required, and all signs must be set back 1,000 feet from a freeway or primary highway."

A difference between the existing law and Kelley's bill is that the present law fails to set a limit on maximum size, whereas Kelley's measure gives these specifications.

Kelley's law also proposes a permit system, Vasloff said, "requiring an owner to divulge information and post a \$50 bond for each sign to guarantee compliance with the law."

The Highway Department would be given the right to designate scenic and historic areas in which all billboards would be forbidden.

BOTH BILLS are in the House State Affairs Committee, whose chairman is

Rep. Josephine D. Hunsinger (D-Detroit). Public hearings concerning the regulation of outdoor advertising billboards began last week in the state House chambers.

A specialist in landscape architecture believes that although billboards have a place in commercial zoning, signs distract from the countryside.

Joseph T. Cox, Michigan State University professor, said that the landowners are not getting the entire picture when they agree to let advertisers place billboards on their property.

"When advertisers put up

billboards," Cox said, "they are probably having detrimental effects to property, causing the land to be run over by trucks and causing problems to fences."

Studies made indirectly by safety hazards with billboards, Cox noted.

He pointed out the billboard on a highway which faces the driver on the opposite side of the road. One such billboard has "M2?" printed in large letters. The driver has to look carefully to see the small print also on the billboard: "I never look at billboards."

WHAT IS the fate of the

billboards bandits caught in the act?

As yet, their fate is uncertain. Those accused have filed a motion in court, claiming their malicious destruction of property charge is not a misdemeanor because the signs were illegal.

They may beat the charge. Under the state law which makes willful destruction of a sign or billboard a misdemeanor, destruction of "illegal" billboard is exempted.

"Any person who shall willfully tear down, destroy or in any manner deface any signs, billboards or notices are

not in any violation of any general law of the state or municipal ordinance," the statute reads.

MEANWHILE, the Highway Department is surveying Michigan's entire 1,425-mile freeway system in preparation for continuing its legalized removal programs this year.

"People have been asked to remove the illegal signs in some sections," said John Woodford, deputy director and chief engineer of the Highway Department.

"This is especially true on I-

96 between Lansing and Farmington," he added.

More than 125 billboards line this area of I-96. Twenty-five per cent are gasoline advertisements, 34 per cent advertise motels and restaurants, and the remainder refer to automobile sales, insurance, food and other areas.

The billboard choppers, certified and uncertified, have a tremendous job ahead of them. Michigan has more than 40,000 highway signs dotting the roads. But no one, including the Highway Department, knows exactly how many are illegal.

Health Merger Still Far Off

The contemplated merger of the City of Detroit and Wayne County Health Departments, a topic of discussion for several weeks, still is far from becoming a reality.

"As I see it," said John McCann, chairman of the County Commissioners Health, Education and Welfare Committee, "it would take several years to do the job if we had the money. And we haven't the necessary funds now."

In company with John S. Stock, acting director of the county department, McCann (D-Livonia) stated that the chief hope for the merger may come from a plea to the Kellogg Foundation.

"WE ARE asking for a grant that would enable us to study both health boards and the best methods by which they could be merged. And with the money, too, we could employ the type of person to make the necessary evaluations."

Contrary to the belief of

many persons, the proposed merger would save little in the way of tax money, according to Commissioner McCann.

"Both boards are understaffed now," he said, "so

we couldn't reduce the manpower in the field. There might be a decrease in the administrative staff—but not much."

The merger may bring

about a smoother operation because the activity would be under one head. But that's the extent of the improvement."

And acting director Stock nodded his assent.



TWO MEMBERS of the Farmington Artists Club show paintings which will be in the club's spring exhibit this weekend. Marilyn Jenks is exhibit chairman and three-time "best of show" winner, and Allen Mrook is president-elect of the club and winner of numerous awards. The exhibit will be held in the Farmington Masonic Temple, Grand River at Farmington Rd., April 29, 30 and May 1, from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m., and May 2, from 12 noon to 5 p.m. Paintings will be auctioned Sunday afternoon between 2 and 4 p.m. Both Mrs. Jenks and Mrook are planning one-man exhibits this spring.

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