

EDITORIAL

Boston should embrace electronic billboards, but only where appropriate

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FOR MANY people, electronic billboards conjure up images that might seem out of place in Massachusetts, like the flashing neon lights of Times Square or the flickering gaudiness of the Las Vegas strip. To others — like some commercial property owners — the idea brings up a different image: the money that could be made from a well-placed digital display looping through expensive, eye-catching ads 24 hours a day.

A handful of these billboards already exist in Boston, and their numbers will soon grow as companies like Ohio-based Orange Barrel Media and media giant Clear Channel Communications Inc. make plans to install more in the three areas where they are permitted: around Fenway Park, in the Theatre District, and near the South Boston Waterfront. The MBTA is also considering a proposal to convert 18 of its billboards to an electronic format. At the same time, the state is weighing revisions to its billboard regulations to cover the electronic versions. As both the state and city consider these new forms of advertising, each should strike a balance that encourages the cutting-edge displays where they are appropriate, while ensuring that the large screens don't clutter the visual landscape.

Fortunately, the displays that exist in Boston already strike that balance. For example, when it's not broadcasting advertisements or information for conventioners, the 80-foot-high video display outside of the Boston Convention and Exhibition Center cycles through 17 different video installations made by Massachusetts artists, whose eye-popping works would fit in just as well on the walls of the Institute of Contemporary Art. Similarly, two screens outside of the Boston Harbor Islands Pavilion present abstract images created from data collected from tides and wind speeds on the islands

themselves. Far from being urban blight, each of these billboards enhances its environment because its content balances commercial opportunity with art and public service.

That doesn't mean electronic displays should be erected just anywhere. Boston should continue to restrict their placement to appropriate neighborhoods. There's no need for flashing marquees on Beacon Hill, for example. Likewise, the state should allow municipalities to limit them if they wish. The state should also ensure that any electronic billboard placed next to a road can't display moving images that could distract drivers.

Another worthwhile proposal would require display owners to show electronic art or notices for arts-oriented events for certain periods of time each month. Even without such a requirement, billboard owners should opt in anyway. Promoting local events and artists would help ease the concerns of their critics, and, more importantly, enhance the urban experience for everyone else.