

Testimony given by Barbara Zartman

**TESTIMONY FOR PUBLIC ROUNDTABLE ON PR 14-178, CONSTRUCTION CODES AMENDMENTS
APPROVAL RESOLUTION OF 2001**

Wednesday, May 16, 2001

**Committee on Consumer and Regulatory Affairs
Council of the District of Columbia**

(Preliminaries and courtesies, C100 historical reference)

The Committee of 100 was troubled by the prospect of large billboards returning to the Federal City, disguised as “special signs.” The great care that has been taken to protect monumental treasures in the nation’s capital, to protect our historic neighborhoods, to retain residential character of increasingly strong communities – all are undermined by the presence of towering, lighted advertisements.

On (date) the Trustees formally voted to oppose these newly renamed billboards. These highly intrusive advertisements will overwhelm streetscapes and view sheds, changing the character of the District’s public places.

An excellent review of the current state of these billboards has been done by two of our Committee members, acting as concerned citizens. They document the ways in which these new signs will be incompatible with residential use, will dwarf the small businesses that obey the law and use no more than 24 square feet of signage, and will violate the District’s obligations under the Highway Beautification Act.

There are administrative problems with the proposal before this Council Committee today. The proposed standards for aesthetics are just three (and I am pleased to see they would preclude messages being painted on rocks and trees). There is envisioned in this proposed regulation stunningly wide latitude for the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, just as there is in the underlying “special signs” regulations. Virtually unfettered will be DCRA’s discretion to approve a very wide variety of signs in a very wide variety of places. This includes some places that seem to be protected in the regulations, but are in fact left vulnerable through loopholes and latitude for judgment.

Enforcement is, of course, the other major stumbling block for this scheme.

As each of us knows, illegal and nonconforming signs have been placed all over the District, in historic districts, in public space, and on public property. DCRA does not have the capacity to enforce the existing regulations; these new billboards are going up illegally already, and their impact is vastly greater than that of an extra window sign in a convenience store. There needs to be a stronger system of incentives, fees, and fines to undergird the regulation of signage of all types in the District.

The Committee should reject these new proposed regulations, and ask the Mayor to rescind the previously enacted additions to Chapter 31 (Special Construction) of Title 12 (Building Code) covering these “special signs.”

Council should seek a review by the Office of Planning of the present state of signage and enforcement, including those “special signs” already approved but not installed and those illegally installed. The findings should inform a carefully considered legislative plan from this Committee for protecting our public places, our historic communities, our land-use goals, and the beautiful vistas of this special Federal City.

