

April 9, 2012
City Centre Coalition
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Transportation Committee
City of Ottawa
110 Laurier Avenue W.
Ottawa, ON K1P 1J1

Dear Councillors,

The City Centre Coalition is composed of representatives from several urban Ottawa community associations as well as a students' association and a safe cycling group. We are focused on transportation planning issues in Ottawa. We are writing to you to officially register our concerns with and our opposition to the proposal by the Ottawa Convention Centre (OCC) to erect large, digital, advertising billboards on its south-facing wall. We are also opposed to the National Capital Commission's decision to allow the billboards for the duration of a three year pilot project.

The OCC plans to erect massive, electronic advertising within a historic, residential and traffic intensive environment. These billboards will impose significant traffic safety issues on busy bridges and roadways in the central core.

In an effort to receive approval from the NCC and the City of Ottawa, the OCC is characterizing the installation of the billboards as an "art wall". This is disingenuous. The OCC presented the specifics of their digital billboards plan to the NCC Board on June 30, 2011. The details of the plan include¹:

- installing two, massive, digital billboards on the south wall of the OCC - the size of the billboards will be 94 and 129 square metres (collectively 223 square metres)
 - 12 times the size of permitted billboards in the City
 - 3 times the size of the Ikea wall sign
- projecting full motion video and animation, complete with title bar that may include scrolling text
- broadcasting commercial and promotional advertising the majority (67%) of usage time, including:
 - national brands, automotive, wireless, hotel, business equipment, energy providers, financial services, airline, media/print
- operating between 6:00 a.m. – 11:00 p.m.

In their presentation to the NCC, the proponents of this project used the high traffic vehicle volumes on adjacent arterial roads as one of the reasons for justifying the proposed 3-year trial.

Significant Traffic Safety Risks for Vehicles, Cyclists and Pedestrians

The location of the huge advertising billboards proposed by the OCC will introduce potentially significant traffic safety risks to drivers, cyclists and pedestrians. The billboards will be highly visible from busy bridges and roadways with mixed operation of large volumes of heavy vehicle, cyclist and pedestrian traffic, including:

- Mackenzie King Bridge (proposed OCC billboards loom directly over bridge with on-street cycling lanes)
- Colonel By Drive (visible for 200 metres from proposed OCC billboards)
- Laurier Bridge (visible from 200 metres of proposed OCC billboards with on-street cycling lanes)

The proposed size and animated content of these billboards introduces serious distraction hazards. Independent behavioural studies² have definitively shown that drivers look away from the roadway for prolonged intervals when presented with large, intensively lit and dynamic displays.

¹ NCC Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, June 30, 2011

² See attached table of references

The City of Ottawa appears unaware that for safety reasons, an increasing number of jurisdictions have imposed bans on digital billboards including Hawaii, Alaska, Maine and Vermont. Moreover, the cities of Vancouver, San Francisco, Austin, San Antonio, Denver and Tacoma do not permit any digital billboards whatsoever. And while Edmonton and Calgary are now in the process of imposing greater restrictions, Michigan has also recently introduced a statewide moratorium.

Why would the City of Ottawa provide an exemption to the OCC and approve the billboards – which will be located within a busy, traffic intensive area -- when other cities are moving to protect citizens against driver distraction and the traffic safety risks that large digital billboards impose?

- In light of the potential traffic safety risks, any suggestion that broadcasting occasional public service announcements or special events from the advertising billboards somehow justifies their existence is unacceptable to our communities. If the City permits the proposed OCC billboards, they'll need to explain to residents why they're allowing large, animated billboards at the same time the Ottawa Police are cracking down and issuing tickets to distracted drivers using cell phones.
- Clearly, with the City promoting multiple modes of transportation operating in a mixed environment on its roadways and in particular planning to use Laurier Ave as a major east-west cycling spine route , it would be irresponsible to permit large, distracting digital billboards at the proposed OCC site – it would be unsafe.

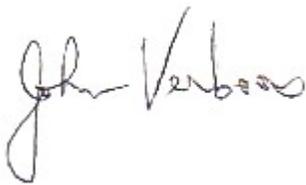
Conclusion

The City Centre Coalition requests that the Transportation Committee takes seriously these safety concerns and advocates with Planning Committee and City staff to deny any application and/or waiver request brought by the Ottawa Convention Centre to erect large, digital advertising billboards on its south wall.

The City of Ottawa must ensure that the OCC Board and its Management Team is not permitted to negatively impact driver, cyclist & pedestrian safety. We look to the Transportation Committee for leadership on this issue.

As leaders of our affected communities, the City Centre Coalition requests a meeting with you to discuss the specific, serious and negative impacts the OCC's digital billboards pose to traffic safety for drivers, cyclists and pedestrians within our neighbourhoods. .

Sincerely,



John Verbaas (Chair)

/cc Russell Mills, Chairman of the Board, National Capital Commission
/cc Marie Lemay, CEO, National Capital Commission

References:

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