

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Billboard Amendment Bill Dies in Committee

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**A billboard from a company called Smart Signs in St. Thomas. By. ERNICE GILBERT/
V.I. CONSORTIUM**

A bill that would have allowed billboards to be erected closer to the edge of highways has died in the Committee on Government Operations and Consumer Protection, after testifiers spoke against it.

Bill No. 34-0237, sponsored by Senator Genevieve Whitaker, if passed, would have allowed for changeable electronic variable message signs, digital billboards and smartboards to be placed within 10 feet from the outer edge of highways. The current regulation calls for a distance of 25 feet from the edge.

Legislators voted on Monday not to bring the bill forward after all but one of the testifiers supported the amendment.

Ken Peters, a partner of Rock Vision Media spoke in place of company owner Jose Rosario and said that there are factors other than distance that should determine whether a billboard is intrusive or not.

"There are factors that really determine intrusiveness and danger to the public and the drivers and it's more than just distance. There's brightness, movements, and quality of image besides the distance and also the size of the billboards."

"Our position is that there should be some regulation on brightness as well as movement, as well as placement. However, just because you're 25 or more feet or 10 feet or less from the edge of a highway, doesn't necessarily make it safe or unsafe. What makes it safe is specific location and evaluation of such as well as the brightness of the sign," he explained.

His enthusiasm was not shared by Ray Martinez, the Police Commissioner who submitted testimony to suggest that the current legislation and the Department of Public Works rules and regulations to guide billboard use were sufficient.

"It must be pointed out, billboards and advertising devices have their benefits, however studies also show these signs distract drivers resulting in increased traffic fatalities. On this premise, VIPD is opposed to decreasing the established twenty-five feet setback to within 10 feet from the edge of the roadway. Further minimizing this setback, the irregular terrain on all islands, and signage size, will have a detrimental effect on vehicular and pedestrian safety," Mr. Martinez said.

Lenny Finley, the owner of Smart Signs agreed that 10 feet from the edge was "way too close" to erect billboards.

She told legislators that, "For approximately 4 ½ years, my company has been in compliance with the law as written. We need to ensure that all billboard companies are on the same level playing field. We believe that they should be setback from our roadways by a number greater than 10 feet to maintain a safe distance from the edge of the road and limit the distraction that it may cause to drivers. The law as written is adequate and should not be adjusted without proper regulations"

In the end no senator offered a motion to vote on the bill which Whitaker said was in support of small businesses.