

SYNOPSIS OF PROBLEM WITH OFF-PREMISE SIGNS

There are laws on the books which clearly forbid off-premise commercial signage in unincorporated Pierce County-- whether in right-of-way or on private property. These laws do not govern over political signs (with the exception of the highway areas protected under the [Scenic Highway/Scenic Vista Act](#) – see maps [here](#)), however ask any risk management specialist and they'll tell you that the signs do indeed pose potential hazards (and potential lawsuits) given the fact they obstruct visibility; wooden sticks are easily dislodged from the ground and can (and do) become "flying objects" in heavy winds; etc.

Pierce County allocated \$168,000 in the 2008 budget to continue with their illegal sign removal program. As a person who has worked on this issue for over two years, and who is on the IPL (interested parties list), I was surprised and disappointed to find that several County Council members, without notification to the IPL, snuck sign-related items into the Rules & Operations meeting of 06-23-08. Apparently they extended an invitation to the T-PC Association of Realtors, as made evident by the Association's Spokesperson, Catherine Rudolph, who once again appeared before the committee thanking them for their support in figuring out how they (the real-estate and development industries) can find solutions to their needs for off-premise sign advertisement. The MBA was also apparently informed, as per a comment made by Ms. Rudolph.

I've been baffled at the Executive Departments' 8-year decision to not fully enforce the sign laws—and by the Council's failure to force the issue with the Executive. The first "reason" the department claimed for their failure was a lack of funding to pay for enforcement. The Council responded by funding \$55,000 in 2007 for a pilot program (in which 55 square miles of roadways were cleared of thousands of illegal signs). Another \$5,000 was allocated to form an ad hoc committee which met for 4 weeks to discuss the issue, and came to no consensus. Then, after the pilot program and the ad hoc committee concluded, the \$168,000 was issued to Public Works for the full-time 2008 program.

Although this was a good thing, Public Works has opted to not issue the allowable fines to offenders (\$250 per day/per sign), and instead just clear them from the right-of-ways. If the allowable fines were imposed, the clean-up program would not only pay for itself but would also add hundreds of thousands of dollars into the coffer, and to boot, once word got out that PC was serious about enforcement, the program would eventually run itself out of a job.

Instead of doing the right thing by charging the lawbreakers, the taxpayers are made to bear the burden by footing the bill- and by having to continue enduring the visual blight on our communities. Furthermore, in response to a request of certain councilmembers for Public Works to change their SOP to allow offenders whose first and last names appear on their signs to have a 10-day window to retrieve their signs. This, they say, will require the council fund \$70,000 to pay for one FTE to be available to offenders 40-hours a week. Guess who'll pay for it?

I gotta ask, when contraband is confiscated in other lawbreaking situations, do the offenders get off without charges, without a fine, and have the luxury of retrieving their contraband without even a slap on the wrist? I don't think so.

Additionally, Councilmember Roger Bush has introduced a proposal to change the sign laws [R2008-41] to allow ONLY the real-estate and development industry to post off-premise advertisement signs—and other members of the council are entertaining proposals to appease these for-profit industries. If passed, all other commercial industries in Pierce County will have the right to sue the county as proven by *Ballen v. City of Redmond*- the case which proved that government cannot grant freedom of speech rights to one commercial industry while depriving others of the same rights.

If you want to improve the appearance of your community by eliminating illegal off-premise sign clutter—and/or if you agree that illegal, off-premise signs obstruct visibility of legal signs—and/or if you disagree with our government favoring special interests groups "needs" over the taxpayers needs—and/or if you don't mind any of the above though believe that off-premise signage for all for-profit industry should be permitted, then please, exercise your rights—and your civic duty, and contact the County Council and tell them so.

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