

Local Victory for Digital Billboards: A Four-Point Plan to Win

By **Bill Hickman**

(On May 8, 2008, the city council in Tulsa, OK, voted to amend a local ordinance to allow digital billboards with eight-second static displays. Billboard attorney Bill Hickman, a member of the team advocating the ordinance change, highlights lessons learned.)



Tulsa, OK—Changing an ordinance to allow something new – in this case digital billboards – is never easy. Looking back on the outdoor industry's victory in Tulsa, we think a four-point plan paved the way to success.

- 1.) Organize your team and be sure to include OAAA as a component.
- 2.) Educate decision makers and the press. Explain what a digital billboard is, and just as importantly, what it's not.
- 3.) Secure the high ground, by making the case that digital billboards help the community.
- 4.) Win the safety argument.

The first step was to educate decision makers (Sign Advisory Board, Planning Commission, and City Council). We were

surprised by the confusion about digital billboards, and knew that confusion could derail our progress.

Likewise, we reached out to inform the press about digital billboards, and provided background materials.

Be ready to explain the difference between digital billboards, conventional billboards, tri-visions, Las Vegas-style signage, and on-premise signs.

The OAAA digital billboards video (available at www.digitalooh.org) helped us, and we showed other video clips as well.

We compared a digital billboard to a digital photo frame (static pictures that rotate to other static pictures).

It's human nature to wonder "what are others doing?" This is a strong dynamic when local officials face a proposed ordinance change and safety is an issue.

Former Tulsa Mayor Jim Inhofe, now a U.S. Senator, sent a letter saying that federal policy accepts digital billboards. "The proposal under consideration by the City of Tulsa conforms to federal standards," the senator wrote.

In particular, an OAAA summary of regulations implemented by various other jurisdictions highlighted the broad acceptability of digital billboards.

We coordinated evening visits for decision-makers to measure the brightness of digital signs (on-premise and off-premise digitals in another market) using a tool that measures brightness.

Experts also helped make our case. A technical rep from Daktronics explained lighting and brightness. Philadelphia-based engineer Michael Tantala explained his analysis of accident data shows that digital billboards are not correlated to accidents.

A key part of the plan was to highlight the benefits of digital billboards. Council members were impressed with the numerous letters from other federal, state and local public officials discussing the value of transmitting public safety information. Without this capacity for immediate communication, citizens may not know of imminent threats.

The current issue of *Relocation* magazine named Tulsa as one of the nation's Top Ten Cities. We are honored that this city – founded by progressive pioneers and oil mavericks – has embraced the latest technology for billboards.

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