Mary C. TRACY, executive director of Scenic Philadelphia and president of Scenic America, is a thorn in the side of the billboard industry.

Her activism started 25 years ago, when, as a stay-at-home mother, the former public-school teacher rallied her neighbors to fight an illegal billboard in Overbrook Farms.

"I really believe that residents and visitors should be treated as citizens, and not as consumers," she said yesterday afternoon, before going up to her Washington Square roof deck to take in a view of the city she loves.

"Our public space is our public space, not a place that you can hawk products.

"If you have a mall and want to plaster it with advertising and lights and hands with globes stretching from the sidewalks, so be it. But you don't own the outside."

Tracy, now widowed, was born in Port Richmond, grew up in the suburbs and attended Catholic schools, where "we had rules, and if you broke them, there were consequences."

That's why she's so adamant about challenging what she says is a city policy of refusing to enforce its own outdoor-sign laws.

"I didn't have to grow up looking at billboards. Why should my children or the children in my neighborhood or across the city have to look at this?"

In 1990 she organized SCRUB, the Society Created to Reduce Urban Blight, joining with other civic groups and with North Philadelphia ministers who wanted to get rid of scores of billboards selling alcohol and tobacco in mostly black neighborhoods.

SCRUB, now called Scenic Philadelphia, pushed for a new outdoor-advertising bill in 1991 that Tracy said removed 1,000 billboards and prevented new ones from going up.

In her spare time, Tracy plays fiddle in an Irish band, the Irish Mist. She enjoys sailing on the Delaware River, which she can see from her rooftop deck. But if she turns north toward Market Street, she sees the new digital signs atop the Lit Brothers Building flashing day and night.

City Council is expected to vote Thursday on a bill that Tracy is trying to stop: It would give one company, Catalyst Outdoor Advertising, exclusive rights to erect six-story structures called "urban experiential displays."

Tracy calls them "huge televisions on a stick."

Stay tuned.

- Valerie Russ
Mary Tracy’s work with the national Scenic America she sees other cities and states shunning billboards. It was the city of Houston that went from 15,000 billboards to 1,500. Through SCRUB PHiladelphia removed 1000 so called 8 sheets and prevented new billboards going up.