DN Editorial: Whose bright idea?

Council vote OKing digital ad signs gives Center City the middle digit

Music notes festoon a proposed high-def, full-motion billboard on the Bellevue parking garage in an artist's rendering. A bill to allow such signs in a second Center City area comes up for a City Council vote this month. Catalyst Outdoor

POSTED: Friday, March 27, 2015, 12:16 AM

DAILY NEWS

LIKE A MURDER of crows or a gaggle of school children, City Council proved yesterday that it is highly responsive to shiny things with lots of color and movement.

By a 13-3 vote, Council approved a terrible bill that would allow for two giant digital billboards in downtown locations. These are high-definition, full-motion video displays that its sole proprietor, Catalyst Outdoor Advertising, describes as a "convergence of art, architecture and advertising."

Since "giant digital billboards" is not likely to win many fans, Catalyst has named them "urban experiential displays." The bill approved by Council yesterday has adopted this renaming wholesale, and references to "Urban Experiential Displays" or "UEDs" appear more than 100 times.

The word "advertising" never appears. Not once.
You know something is wrong with an idea when it’s called something bland and nonthreatening instead of what it is. Kind of like the term “IED” referring to homemade terrorist bombs.

Reliance on euphemism is only a small part of our problem, though we rail against it every time a movie theater shows us relentless commercials described as "behind-the-scenes features."

In fact, the ever-expanding encroachment of commercial messages on the landscape - via TV screens in cabs, elevators and gas stations, on buildings and bus wraps, is one of those elements of modern life that gradually chips away at civilization. It seems too late, too pointless to protest, although we should never give up claiming the right to peace from intrusive advertising.

But that our government has become increasingly complicit in this is troubling. This City Council in particular seems to love the idea. Council President Darrell Clarke has pitched for advertising on municipal property, and Council has complied.

The bill originally called for the digital billboards in numerous locations. Yesterday, Kenyatta Johnson changed his mind about including them in his district. Two remain, in Councilman Mark Squilla’s district - the Convention Center and Reading Terminal Market. Council members who consider downtown as their districts, instead of it belonging to the hundreds of thousands of residents and commuters who navigate Center City each day, and who must confront these things, are short-sighted.

Public space - especially in a growing city - should be sacred and not given away to the highest bidder. The Planning Commission and the Art Commission are charged with achieving a balance of elements to keep the city safe, vital and belonging to us all. The Art Commission must approve each display, but Council has stripped out Planning Commission approval for the giant digital billboard advertising and added insult to injury by charging the commission with providing "technical assistance and input to facilitate development of the UED in promoting the UED's purpose and goals."

In other words, Council wants the Planning Commission to promote the goals of a single business entity.

Finally, the financial benefit of the billboards is a pittance - $5 million during 25 years, and that goes to select groups. Not the general fund. Not the schools.

Is it contradictory to criticize this move and then complain about the fact that we are selling ourselves cheaply? Maybe. But an idea that will impact so many should be subject to...
more public deliberation. If we’re trading our public space, we should at least be getting something valuable in return. A "digital experience" isn't one of them.