

Lights, billboards, action?

By **JOHN WILEN**

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Don't look now — especially if you're driving — but the digital signs and billboards popping up in other parts of the state are a harbinger of things to come in this area.

“These signs are coming,” said Steve Anthony, PennDOT's highway beautification manager. “You'll see more and more of them.”

The northern Philadelphia suburbs don't appear to have any actual digital billboards yet. There are digital LED signs at the Henning's supermarket in Harleysville, Lower Salford Township, and in front of Abington Memorial Hospital, among other places. And there is a mechanical sign that rotates messages on Route 663 in Milford.

But the full-size 48-foot-by-14-foot digital billboards that have cropped up in Reading and the Poconos are on their way here, industry experts say.

“It's definitely where (the market) is headed,” said Michael Hudes, global director of digital media for Clear Channel Outdoor, which owns and operates regular nondigital billboards throughout the country, including in Philadelphia and its suburbs.

Billboards have gone through a number of evolutions in their history, from wooden signs that had to be physically painted over each time an ad was changed, to painted strips of paper that could be hoisted and pasted into place, to the stretched vinyl strips that make up the majority of the billboards you see today.

Big, digital screens are just the next step in the process.

And while they're much more expensive than today's billboards — estimates run from \$200,000 to \$600,000 for a digital billboard, depending on size and location, versus \$20,000 to \$60,000 for a nondigital billboard — the digital variety offers advantages that actually save operators money over the long run:

* Ad copy can be changed remotely from a personal computer, eliminating the need to print a new ad and pay a crew to install it;

* Ad copy can be changed immediately to reflect events or even to change a fast food advertiser's message based on which meal time is nearer. So, McDonalds can tout McMuffins in the morning and Big Macs in the afternoon on the same sign;

* More advertisements can be sold

on the same sign at the same time. Most digital billboards cycle through ads from eight different companies, showing each ad for about six seconds at a time.

Safety at issue

But the prospect of what look like a bunch of big TV screens popping up along roadways has raised safety issues in the minds of some observers, notably local governments and state agencies.

Most municipal governments have ordinances that ban the use of movement or flashing lights in signs. Those rules essentially will limit the new digital billboards to the display of a changing series of still images.

"Animated signs are prohibited in our zoning ordinances," said Jeff Vey, Milford manager.

Animation — and many other visual effects — are also banned by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation on any sign within 650 feet of a PennDOT-controlled roadway.

"If that sign is visible, it will need a (PennDOT) permit," said Anthony. "There are certain restrictions ... they have to abide by."

Those restrictions include:

- * Each message must be visible for a minimum of five seconds;
- * When messages change, they must do so within one second;
- * No visual "dissolving" or fading is allowed, and messages may not overlap;
- * No flashing or sudden bursts of light;
- * No animation, movement or "flow."

A patchwork of regulations

The PennDOT restrictions are by-and-large similar to ordinances passed by many municipalities for signs on businesses and local roads.

But Marc Jonas, an attorney with Eastburn & Gray's Blue Bell office who is familiar with billboard land-use and zoning issues, notes that municipal regulations vary widely.

"Every township and borough is its own little world," Jonas said. "Everybody is dealing with videos and flashing differently."

Lower Salford, for instance, prohibits signs that include flashing or rotating lights. Live action or movement isn't addressed.

"That, obviously, can become distracting to drivers," said Rob Reilley, director of building and zoning for Lower Salford.

But, movement is not expressly banned, Reilley said. Henning's sign displays a variety of text messages, including store specials and the time and temperature, over a cloud and sky background, Reilley said.

"The clouds might move a little bit over the background," Reilley said.

The township will monitor the sign, he said. If Henning's was to display live video or movement on it, township officials would have to make a "judgment call," Reilley said.

Henning's owner Bob Hennings was traveling and unavailable for comment.

Abington Memorial Hospital is allowed to show only text on its sign, said John Phillips, of the hospital's public relations and marketing office.

"It is all text and only text," he said.

Abington Township restricts the amount and type of text, and strictly prohibits video or movement, Phillips said.

Wave of the near-future

While area digital signs are small, few and far between at the moment, billboard industry insiders see them as the wave of the future. And that wave will soon wash over Bucks and Montgomery counties.

"I think it's just a matter of time," said Karen Goumakes, general manager of Adams Outdoor Advertising's Allentown office.

Pennsylvania is already getting a taste, thanks to Lamar Advertising, of Baton Rouge, La.

"At Lamar corporate, there is a big push (for digital billboards)," said Kevin Wells, sales manager at the company's Redding office.

Lamar operates digital billboards in the Redding, Pittsburgh, Harrisburg, Altoona and Scranton areas and in the Poconos, and is planning more. The company will eventually get to Bucks and Montgomery counties, Wells said.

"I know we would like to," he said. "We haven't really explored it yet."

Clear Channel Outdoor, a Phoenix-based subsidiary of San Antonio-based Clear Channel, recently installed seven digital billboards in the Cleveland area, and plans to roll out many more nationwide. Hudes said one of the biggest hurdles the company faces is getting local municipalities on board with the concept.

"We are actively working with the city (of Philadelphia) and the local municipalities to educate them as to the benefits of digital posting," Hudes said.

Those benefits include tying the signs into local and national emergency alert systems, such as the Amber Alert or Homeland Security alert systems.

Adams, based in Atlanta, also has designs on digital signs, but plans to wait until an area client specifically requests one, "rather than putting the cart before the horse," Goumakes said.

The three companies are split on their view of advertising rates for digital billboards. Goumakes, of Adams, thinks rates will be double, or about \$11,000 a month. Wells, of Lamar, says his company charges each digital advertiser less than it charges for a regular billboard ad because it can sell several concurrent ads for the same sign. And Hudes, of Clear Channel, says his company is charging digital billboard advertisers the same rates it charges for regular billboards in its Cleveland area test.

For their part, the State Police and the Pennsylvania Turnpike aren't terribly concerned about digital billboards.

Trooper Linette Quinn, with the State Police's Harrisburg office, said police have heard no complaints about the signs, and doesn't see them as any more of a distraction than any other type of advertisement.

"Ultimately, when you're out there driving, you're supposed to maintain control of your vehicle," Quinn said.

And Chris Hampton, a spokeswoman for the turnpike, said the highway system is no more concerned with the digital billboards than it is with any billboard.

"We don't like them," Hampton said of all billboards. "But we have nothing to say about them."

Lower Salford's Reilley notes that everything is relative. Many new cars have their own built-in distractions, he says.

"All the new vehicles have video screens on their dashboards," Reilley said.

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