

Political billboards in N.J. are a thing of the past



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BY JEFF BRINDLE

COMMENTARY

Conventional billboards as a tool of political advertising have been declining lately.

Though they have long been used in New Jersey campaigns, the \$174,194 reported in the legislative contest of 2009 was the lowest for the decade.

But will that change with the onset of digital billboards?

Kris Ankarlo writes in *Campaigns and Elections* magazine, “digital billboards are a rapidly growing part of the commercial media arsenal, popping up along roads all across the country.”

While political types do not as yet include digital billboards in their bag of advertising tricks, Ankarlo says that “outdoor advertising executives are actively working to change [that] ahead of the 2012 election cycle.”

Digital billboards technology offers genuine opportunities for local, state, and national candidates to get their message out to the voters.

This type of advertising is getting less expensive and digital messaging can be changed quickly to focus on immediate news events.

Because numerous digital billboards are spread throughout a geographical area, messages can be targeted to highlight parochial interests.

Campaigns could also monopolize the messages flashed digitally by purchasing all of the advertising segments. This would allow for the repetition of a candidate’s position on an important issue.

Digital billboards offer opportunities for the future as well. Ankarlo says that campaigns could use “wireless technology to advertise directly to drivers passing specific digital billboards or alerting supporters of nearby volunteer opportunities.”

Opportunities do exist for campaigns via digital billboards. However, there are considerable downsides that could discourage political operatives and candidates from taking advantage of them, particularly in a densely populated state like New Jersey.

First, there are safety concerns, such as traffic-congested urban/suburban New Jersey.

Besides talking and texting on cell phones, against the law but often ignored, digital billboards would constitute another distraction to drivers.

Community groups would likely oppose digital billboards as environmentally and aesthetically harmful. Homeowners, whose property would lie in close proximity to digital billboards, not only would find them a nuisance but would be concerned about the impact on their property values.

And, if this were not enough to dissuade political pros from utilizing digital billboards, the fact is that this type of advertising would not do anything more for a campaign than broadcast, online, or a variety of other forms of digital advertising could do.

So at least for New Jersey it would seem that outdoor billboard advertising is a thing of the past, despite the fact that they are coming into the digital age.

I could be wrong but it is doubtful that this expenditure will appear on campaign finance reports submitted to the Election Law Enforcement Commission any time soon.

Jeff Brindle is the Executive Director of the New Jersey Election Law Enforcement Commission.

The opinions presented here are his own and not necessarily those of the Commission.