

By Gerald Mischke

How foolish does Bill McGuire think St. Paul is? After giving him and his development partners millions of dollars to help develop the Midway soccer stadium site, he wants the city to give him even more.

When the City Council agreed to help pay for \$18 million in infrastructure improvements around the soccer stadium, one significant benefit for the Midway neighborhood was the elimination of five billboards on the old bus barn property. The Metropolitan Council, which owns the bus barn site, agreed to that in the ground lease that was signed in 2016. A few months later (but only now revealed to the public), an amendment was made to the ground lease between the Met Council and the city of St. Paul, without the knowledge or agreement of the City Council, that turned over control of the billboards at St. Anthony and Snelling avenues to McGuire.

The strange thing is, McGuire doesn't even want the billboards there. What he really wants is a two-sided digital billboard at St. Anthony and Pascal Street, which will give people who live directly across the freeway the view of wonderfully bright digital advertising messages that can change every 12 seconds.

Of course, there are a few problems standing in McGuire's way: St. Paul's sign ordinance, Chapter 64 in the zoning code. It defines "billboard"; identifies them as nonconforming uses, which should prevent the creation of new billboards (and the moving of old ones); but does allow billboard companies to erect new "dynamic" digital billboards if the billboard is located within 330 feet of I-94 or I-35E north of I-94, is at least one mile from any other billboard with a digital (LED) display on the same side of the freeway, and is not visible from the window of any residence.

To receive a city permit for a digital billboard, the billboard owner must agree to permanently remove other billboards in the city. For each square foot of

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digital billboard, six square feet of illuminated billboard or eight square feet of non-illuminated billboard must be removed along with the billboard structure.

There are people working for the city who not only want to smooth the way for Dr. McGuire to make more money, they want to allow new digital billboards on the old Macy's department store in downtown where the Minnesota Wild now have their practice facility. On August 1, there is a public hearing in City Hall to scrap major parts of the sign ordinance so that a few millionaires and billionaires can make even more money. This is a textbook example of what is wrong with how things are decided in St. Paul. Where were our elected representatives when these decisions were made? Where are they now on this issue?

When it comes to billboards, St. Paul has made real progress. In the last 20 years, nearly 200 billboards have been removed. There are still 431 billboards in the city, and 44 percent of them are in Wards 1 and 4, the wards that surround the new soccer stadium. So people in the Midway have more than their share of this form of visual blight. I doubt Mr. McGuire cares. Certainly, the Met Council doesn't.

So why do I care? And why should you? The last time something like this happened—when digital signs were added to two sides of Xcel Energy Center—an outdoor advertising company sued the city and was then allowed to build additional billboards.

Would St. Paul residents be adversely affected by new flashing digital displays downtown and in the Midway? If these billboards go up, how many other billboards will come down as per the sign ordinance? More to the point, how many more billboards will go up because of the changes to the sign ordinance? Until we know the answers, why are we rushing to change what has

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been working for the past 20 years? And what exactly is St. Paul getting from this deal other than more distracted drivers and flashing signs?

My problem isn't really with Bill McGuire. He's a businessman, and he'd be a fool to turn down a chance to make more money from the city. My problem is with unelected officials and staff with the Met Council, the St. Paul Port Authority and the city who seem to have forgotten who they are suppose to serve. And in their haste to change the sign code for a few, will no doubt create more harm for the rest of us.

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