

Business often gets lost in the blink of a sign

By Craig Galbraith

A small high-technology software firm decides against relocating to Wilmington, citing the evident lack of community pride. A tourist is recently overhead telling a friend that our area is trashy looking and they don't plan on returning next year. Even I drive the back roads to avoid the commercial clutter and visual abuse of Monkey Junction, Oleander Drive and Carolina Beach. Greater Wilmington appears on the verge of committing economic suicide.

Competition for knowledge-based employees, high-technology industry and the tourist dollar is fast and furious. Communities are now like products; they must be intelligently planned, built and packaged. In the modern world of economic development there is simply no room for mistakes anymore.

And like any product, perception is everything. Few entrepreneurs, managers, engineers, or tourists want to live or play in a community that visually screams a lack of community pride on every street corner. The core drivers of economic success will simply move someplace else.

Economic development research is unanimous - beauty is good business. Community ambience is the most important factor in entrepreneurs' decisions to start, relocate, or expand their businesses. Tourists want beauty and safety.

And word gets out fast. A nice place to live and play becomes an instant draw.

But it is also remarkably easy to destroy a community's economic future. One of the fastest death blows is weak commercial sign control.

Research at UNCW has shown that communities with a high percentage of computerized digital signs, temporary blinking signs, interior lit signs, menu boards, billboards, sign misspellings, banners, and window signs are ranked 20 to 40 percent lower in attractiveness for business location and tourism.

For these communities, the proliferation of sloppy, temporary, and dangerous signage can cost hundreds of millions of dollars in lost business relocations, lost tourism, and lost employment.

The worst offenders are the new computerized signs that use the warning colors of red and yellow.

Not only are they devastating to economic development, but eye tracking studies show they are dangerously distracting for drivers. Because these bright digital signs compete with school bus stop lights, car brake lights, and traffic signal lights they have been banned in most progressive communities - but amazingly they continue to proliferate in New Hanover County.

Sure, business needs signage, but it can be visually attractive, non-obtrusive, and sometimes even artistic. Look at the remarkably successful tourist com-

munities of Hilton Head in South Carolina and Laguna Beach in California, or the high technology clusters around San Diego, Austin and Boulder.

Controlling unattractive signage, picking up litter, prohibiting cheap strip malls, requiring landscaped buffers, and eliminating graffiti are the most important economic development tools available to cities, particularly for those trying to develop and enhance knowledge based employment and tourism.

And best of all, it doesn't cost anything. It is a completely free economic development incentive. Simply pass the appropriate regulations, and then strictly enforce them. Some studies even suggest that crime can be dramatically reduced by making an area attractive and clean-looking.



Research at UNCW has shown that communities with a high percentage of unattractive signs are ranked 20 to 40 percent lower in attractiveness for business location and tourism.

The bottom line? Nationwide, cities and towns with strong commercial sign and beautification ordinances typically enjoy booming economies and low crime rates. Those strapped with weak controls almost always suffer from declining employment and low wages.

So the next time you are distracted by the bright digital signs in front of local drug stores, real estate offices, storage facilities, and pawn shops, think of the hundreds of tourists who won't be back next year. And the next time you drive past the banners, menu boards and temporary signs at our major intersections, think of the lost employment from the high-technology firms that might have relocated to the area.

The evidence is clear. Community beautification and aggressive sign control is simply good business.

And what about those local elected officials who don't seem to understand the importance of enhancing visual ambience? Can they actually be anti-tourism, anti-technology employment, and anti-community safety? I hope not, but how else can we explain what's happening to many of our commercial streets?

Craig Galbraith is the GlaxoSmithKline Faculty Fellow in economic development, technology entrepreneurship and hospitality management at UNCW.