

Harbor Commission declines to take action on controversial billboard

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The Crescent City Harbor Commission on Tuesday flirted with the idea of terminating a lease with a media company over a billboard on its property that has generated controversy.

After some of the commissioners received complaints, even a threat of vandalism, against a California Endowment billboard ad, Harbormaster Charlie Helms brought the issue to commissioners.

The port leases land to Outfront Media, which owns the billboard. The billboard depicts seven people of differing ethnicities, all wearing facemasks touting political slogans, including "Universal Health Care," "Black Lives Matter," "Dreamers," and "End Racism."

However, Helms explained that the Harbor District has no legal right to terminate the lease with Outfront Media, which provides space for five signs at about \$16,000 annually.

Helms reported that the Harbor District's lease with Outfront Media began in June 2019 and lasts for five years. Beginning June 1, 2023, Outdoor Media will increase its annual rent to \$17,557.92.

Helms pointed out to the commissioners they have no plans for the land the billboard sits. He added a second, similar billboard by the California Endowment in on Highway 101 near South Beach.

“To me, we’re getting paid \$16,000 a year for dirt,” Helms said. “We don’t have to do anything in the way of maintenance of the signs. They don’t have anything up that is pornography or anything else. It’s good earnings for the Harbor District with very little time invested.”

While Commissioner Rick Shepherd was amenable to asking Outfront Media to remove the billboard, the others did not wish to wade into political waters. Commissioner Wes White indicated taking action could be seen as an infringement on freedom of speech and potentially open the harbor district to a lawsuit.

“This body is supposed to be apolitical. That clearly is a political sign,” White said. “We’re supposed to be an apolitical organization and if we start messing with a sign that’s political in nature, we’re no longer apolitical for those reasons.”

California Endowment is a non-profit organization created in 1996 when Blue Cross of California acquired the for-profit subsidiary WellPoint Health Networks. California Endowment website touts that it has more than \$3 billion in assets, which it has used to fund the \$1 billion Building Healthy Communities initiative. The program invested in 14 California communities including Del Norte County.

However, the initiative’s message on the billboards generated negative comments, including by Del Norte County Supervisor Roger Gitlin on his Facebook page July 25.

“Inserting the very serious COVID-19 pandemic dilemma into politics, the California Endowment has mixed partisan, divisive opinion with public health in erecting this billboard(s) entering Crescent City,” Gitlin wrote. “The billboard is exclusionary and insulting to Del Norte County and changes no minds, further polarizes us and widens the Grand Canyon-esq gap between our diverse cultures. This shameful display should be taken down immediately and continued funding for the California Endowment should be re-considered.”

Harbor Commission Carol White expressed her concerns over the free speech restrictions “incites imminent lawless action component” listed in Helms’ report.

“There have been people threatening to get out there and spray paint it,” White said. “It didn’t just tick off one group of people. There’s quite a few different organizations that are not happy about it being up there.”

She added she’s referred her constituents with complaints to Outfront Media and California Endowment.

Shepherd initially backed asking Outfront Media to remove the billboard but was not in favor of terminating the lease between them.

The other commissioners favored taking no action with Brian Stone saying this could lead down a slippery slope.

“We have been accused in the past by the public of doing things which were not in the best interest of the harbor — basically mismanaging the harbor,” Stone said. “For us to try to terminate this lease at this point in time would, one, open ourselves up to the possibility of liability over freedom of speech, and two, to breaking a lease without having a reason.”

Jim Ramsey said he didn't see the billboard as political, noting that the California Endowment was the group that paid for the advertisement and he didn't want to give up Outfront Media's revenue to the port.

"No one has complained to me about the sign," Ramsey said. "And if someone has threatened to spray paint it, hopefully the sheriff will catch them."