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Outdoor advertising

Visual pollution

Advertising firms fret ⁽¹⁾ over billboard bans

" The ban on outdoor advertising in São Paulo is illegal and we will prove this ," says Paul Meyer , chief operating officer of America's Clear Channel Outdoor, the world's biggest outdoor advertising company . The councillors of Brazil's biggest city passed a law banning billboards last September , and Clear Channel is suing ⁽²⁾ to have it overturned .

Yet bans on billboards exist in other parts of the world , even America . In Europe , the Norwegian city of Bergen does the same and many others are imposing severe restrictions on billboards .

Even so, no big city had ever imposed a complete ban on billboards before São Paulo . The " Clean City" law also bans ads on taxis and buses and imposes strict limits on shop front signs . Previously , most of São Paulo's billboards had been erected without permission, although Clear Channel had spent some \$ 2m to comply with pre-ban rules on outdoor ads. São Paulo is now ad-free. Many of the 11 million inhabitants of the metropolis think their city is prettier as a result .

" This might only be the beginning " warns Jean-François Decaux , chairman of JCDecaux ,the second biggest outdoor advertising company . In his view local companies must work together to pull down illegal billboards .

For Robert Weissman of Commercial Alert , an anti-ad pressure group, São Paulo's move is excellent news . Public space must not be abused for private commercial purposes, he says . Yet Mr Decaux argues that outdoor advertisers pay municipal authorities good money for the use of public space . They sometimes provide cities with bus shelters, public toilets and so forth in exchange for the right to place advertisements on them .

Mr Decaux and Mr Meyer point out that the proliferation of illegal billboards is bad for business because it distracts attention from legal ones . And the more legal advertising there is, the more reluctant ⁽³⁾ city governments will be to part with the revenue and services it brings. São Paulo may well reintroduce advertising one day, for just those sorts of reasons . City governments, after all, are almost always short of cash .

Adapted from The Economist October 13th 2007

Notes :

(1) to fret = to worry

(2) to sue = to take to Court

(3) reluctant = unwilling