

Published: 05.10.2005

Flashing billboards ruled out

Governor cites Arizona's stake in astronomy

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PHOENIX - Saying it would harm astronomical research, Gov. Janet Napolitano vetoed legislation Monday that would have permitted illuminated and flashing billboards along Arizona roads.

She said the legislation generated complaints from neighborhood associations as well as officials of the state's observatories that the signs would create light pollution. That, said Napolitano, threatened the work done by astronomers.

"Such research has not only scientific, but economic value," the governor said.

She said more than \$1 billion has been invested in Arizona astronomy. That includes \$150 million recently spent by an international consortium to build state-of-the-art telescopes, and an \$84 million astronomy research grant awarded last year to the University of Arizona.

"We should be doing more to enhance this research, and reap these scientific and economic rewards," Napolitano, a Democrat, wrote.

Current state law already allows for signs with flashing and changing messages - but only if the sign is on the property of the business being advertised.

The state Department of Transportation has taken the position that free-standing billboards of this type cannot be constructed along state roads. But a state hearing officer questioned that assumption.

To remove any question, House Bill 2461 was designed by Young Electric Sign Co., a Chandler company that makes the equipment and software for these kinds of billboards.

Company lobbyist David Jones said the legislation would not have overridden local ordinances. He said cities and counties would have remained free to restrict, or ban, the signs.

That option was unacceptable to several of the astronomers who opposed the bill. They said a statewide ban was needed.

For example, Jeffrey Pier, director of the U.S. Naval Observatory in Flagstaff, wrote to lawmakers that the lights from Phoenix already are "a growing menace to astronomy here," more than 120 miles away.

"The influence of lighting practices and choices in the metropolitan Phoenix area, as well as throughout the state, have very wide-ranging effects," Pier wrote. "It simply cannot be treated as a local problem."

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