

March 19, 1962

CONGRESSMAN'S REPORT

by Rep. Morris K. Udall

BILLBOARDS OR SCENERY -- WHICH WILL IT BE?

During a critical phase of the Civil War, Lincoln was bothered for an hour on some trifling matter. He said it reminded him of the crying boy aboard a large ocean ship on an urgent mission who shouted for the captain to stop. When asked the reason., he stated that he had dropped his apple overboard.

First things should come first and much of the legislative process is deciding the relative importance of competing ideas and interests.

America's new Interstate Highway System will total 41,000 miles -- only 1 per cent of the nation's entire road system. But it may carry as much as 20 per cent of our motoring public. Many miles of this amazing superhighway already cut across Arizona's unparalleled scenery. More miles are now being built and still more are to come. In fact, our state, with only six-tenths of 1 per cent of the population of the United States has 2.8 per cent of the Interstate mileage.

CONGRESS ENCOURAGES STATES

The expected heavy concentration of people on the Interstate system could not fail to attract the attention of the influential billboard industry. Last year I supported a bill by which Congress extended until June 1963 the time when states can take advantage of a "bonus" section of the Highway Act. The section is designed to encourage states to limit signs along the Interstate. States which adopt "no billboard" statutes can collect an additional 1/2 of 1 per cent of the project cost. (The federal government is already paying 95 per cent of the cost in Arizona and other land-grant states as against 90 per cent elsewhere.)

Federal specifications call for elimination of commercial signs within 660 feet of the right of way, except for adjacent businesses which are permitted to advertise themselves within 50 feet of their premises. Pertinent information about road services, hotels and historic sites is listed on directories immediately off the parkway. Exits which serve nearby motels or restaurants or services are always clearly marked.

(The bonus is not paid if the Interstate is built on right of way acquired prior to July 2, 1956. Nor is it paid for construction in incorporated or unincorporated areas zoned commercial or industrial. It has been estimated that only 65 per cent of the 41,000-mile Interstate System would be subject to federal billboard restrictions even if every state adopted them.)

16 STATES HAVE ACTED

So far, 16 states have signed up for bonus agreements: Maryland, North Dakota, Kentucky, Nebraska, Wisconsin, New York, West Virginia, Maine, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Hawaii, Delaware, Washington, Ohio and Vermont.

When Congress debated extension of the "bonus" law last year, the billboard lobby offered strong opposition. The Arizona outdoor sign industry wired me:

"We opposed the federal intervention and bonus inducements to the states in 1958. The sign industry ... feels that proper controls of billboards should remain with the state and local governments without interference or pressure from Washington ."

On the other hand I received telegrams and letters from many Arizona conservation groups and private individuals urging me to support Senators Neuberger (D-Oregon) and Cooper (R-Kentucky) who led the fight for extension of the bonus provision.

UP TO LEGISLATURE

With passage by Congress this controversy now moves to the Arizona Legislature. Unless an "anti-billboard" measure is passed by 1963 Arizona taxpayers will lose out. The Arizona billboard interests have allied themselves with persons who own lands along interstate routes. The principal argument they make is that an anti-billboard law would deprive farmers who happen to own adjacent lands of rentals they receive from billboard companies. Of course, the present situation does not help the vast majority of farmers whose lands are off these superhighways. In any event, I would estimate that the total billboard rentals received by farmers in Arizona are a small fraction of the \$2 - \$3 million bonus our state would receive over the course of the Interstate construction.

Recently a bill was introduced in the Arizona Legislature to impose a \$10 tax on persons who deposit unsightly junk car bodies within sight distance of public highways. To me the billboards are a much more serious problem.

There is increasing interest in making our highways beautiful. I hope my constituents, and especially the newspaper editors of my district, will study this over-all problem and let their state legislators have their views pro or con.

A WEIGHING OF RIGHTS

There must be a weighing of the rights of people who own land along Interstate routes with the right of people to view a beautiful countryside uncluttered by signs. On this issue I stand with President Kennedy who said: "The Interstate Highway System was intended among other purposes, to enable more Americans to more easily see more of their country. It is a beautiful country. The system was not intended to provide a large and unreimbursed measure of benefits to the billboard industry, whose structures tend to detract from both the beauty and the safety of the routes they line. Their messages are not, as so often claimed, primarily for the convenience of the motorist whose view they block. Some two-thirds of such advertising is for national products,

and is dominated by a handful of large advertisers to whom the Interstate System has provided a great windfall."

As a famous newspaper columnist sometimes inquires, "How do you stand?"