

Appellate court hands L.A. a legal victory on digital billboards

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Shown is a billboard owned by Lamar Central Outdoor in North Hollywood. Lamar had hoped to convert the sign into a digital format. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

A three-judge panel handed a major defeat Thursday to an advertising company that had sought to invalidate the city's prohibition on new digital billboards in Los Angeles.

Baton Rouge, La.-based Lamar Central Outdoor had challenged the city's 2002 sign ordinance, which bars new billboards from being approved outside of designated sign districts. The law also prohibits existing billboards from being converted to digital formats.

A Superior Court judge sided with Lamar, saying the city's restrictions on "off-site signs" -- those that advertise products not available for purchase at the sign's location -- violate the state Constitution's guarantee of free speech.



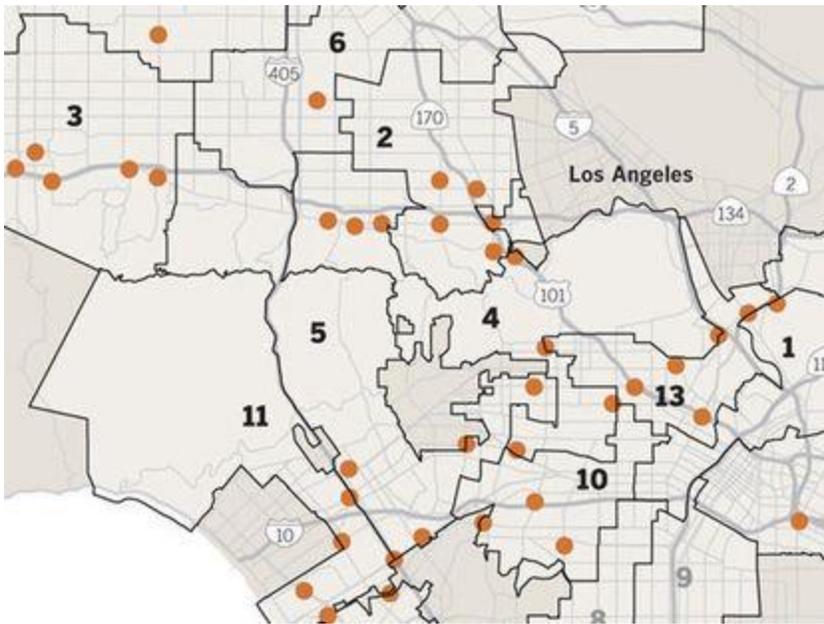
Judge rejects Los Angeles' billboard ban

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The 2nd District Court of Appeal overturned that decision this week, saying cities can have different rules for off-site and on-site signs without running afoul of 1st Amendment principles.

City Atty. Mike Feuer hailed the ruling, saying it reaffirmed the power of cities across California to control the proliferation of new billboards. "Had the court ruled in the other direction, we would have seen an uncontrolled avalanche of billboards erected throughout the city of Los Angeles," he said.

Representatives of Lamar did not immediately respond to requests for comment.



Digital billboard legal battle

Roughly a decade ago, L.A.'s political leaders faced a major backlash over the council's decision to allow scores of billboards to be converted to digital formats.

Neighborhood activists called them a new form of visual blight, saying the signs were shining into homes and distracting motorists. After an extended court battle, dozens of those signs were turned off.

Lamar's legal action had raised the prospect that those signs could return. In its lawsuit, the company had demanded that city officials give it permission to convert 45 of its signs in Hollywood, Silver Lake, Tarzana and other communities into much more lucrative electronic formats.