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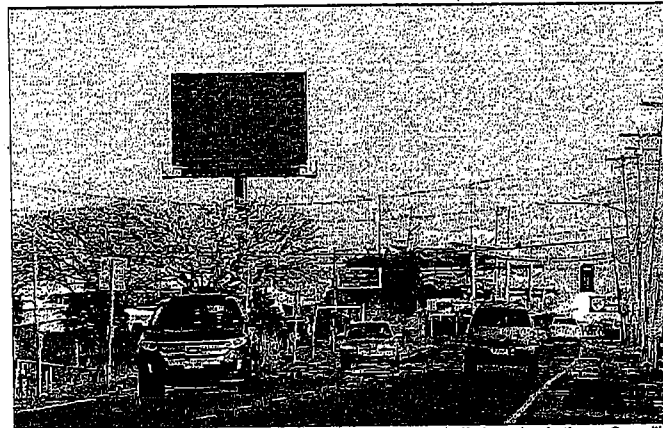
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3/21/12

Our View: New Margate Causeway billboard



Staff photo by Anthony Smedlie

Sullyng the view

■ A new 50-foot electronic billboard along the Margate Causeway may be legal, but it is still an affront to the natural surroundings.

Well isn't this a shame.

One of the great, unheralded joys of living at the Jersey Shore is driving over the many causeways between the mainland communities and the barrier islands. The wide-open views of coastal salt marshes and bays provide a stunning panorama. And as novelist Pat Conroy once wrote about similar salt marshes in his native South Carolina, their ever-changing beauty, which varies with the time of day and time of year, can teach you more about the color green than you thought was possible.

Sadly, some of these causeways are dotted with billboards. Mostly, they are relatively small, wooden billboards. But this new billboard on the Margate Causeway is an unfortunate game-changer.

Fifty feet high, it towers over the marshes and existing structures, sullyng the view for miles around. Even worse, the side facing Northfield will have an especially distracting electronic LED display.

New Jersey's zoning and environmental rules are constantly under attack for being too strict, but there was apparently nothing stopping the owners of Gifford Marine from getting approvals from Egg Harbor Township and leasing the site to Jersey Outdoor Media, which erected the sign. Fifty-foot billboards are a permitted use in the township's marine zoning district, and state rules under the Coastal Area Facilities Review Act apparently did not apply to the upland site.

But it's still a travesty, an eyesore and an affront to the natural surroundings, if you ask us.

Richard Levitt, a Northfield Planning Board member whose home overlooks the marshes, agrees. This giant new sign is now an unexpected and unwelcome part of his view.

One of the oddities of this area is that the Margate Causeway, which connects Northfield and Margate, is actually in Egg Harbor Township. So it was township rules that applied and township planners who approved a sign that no one in Egg Harbor Township can see from their homes.

And if one land owner was allowed to put up a sign like this, others will be allowed, too. How nice. Someday the Margate Causeway could have all the appeal of an interstate highway.

Levitt said EHT should have been more sensitive to its Northfield and Margate neighbors. Perhaps. But an even better approach would be for the township to reconsider the zoning along the causeway to prohibit such large signs. Now that really would be neighborly.

Margate Causeway billboard / One man's battle

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Posted 3 months ago

OK, we promise this is the last editorial we'll write about the 60-foot tall electronic billboard that was erected on the Margate Causeway in March 2012.

At least we hope it's the last time we write about it.

The mammoth billboard - which sullied the view of pristine salt marshes for miles around, was initially erected without the required state permits, and that nonetheless breezed through the Egg Harbor Township Planning Board - is now gone.

In an August ruling, Superior Court Judge Julio L. Mendez ordered the sign demolished, and the owner of the billboard, Jersey Outdoor Media, took down the sign in late November.

That was a victory - a big one - for anyone who cares about the uninterrupted beauty of coastal marshes and the rules governing development in wetland areas.

And there is one person to thank for this big win - Northfield resident Richard Levitt, who spent several hundred thousand dollars of his own money to fight the billboard in court.

How often do you hear of someone doing that?

Levitt and his attorney, Stephen Hankin, put together a detailed case that, among other things, noted that the sign was illegally erected in wetlands without a required state wetlands permit and without a required Coastal Area Facility Review Act permit.

Levitt and Atkins have now settled the suit. Jersey Outdoor Media has agreed not to attempt to build another electronic billboard on the causeway. The state Department of Environmental Protection has agreed to revoke CAFRA and wetlands permits that were issued after the fact, when Jersey Outdoor Media agreed to move the billboard 24 feet and restore the illegally filled in wetlands. And Levitt has agreed not to attempt to recoup his legal fees from Jersey Outdoor Media.

So it's done. And Levitt, who has chaired Northfield's combined Planning and Zoning Board for more than 20 years, is a hero in our book. "My motivation was not just it didn't look

appropriate," he told staff writer Derek Harper. "But after my many years on the Northfield Planning Board, I just felt the process was not done correctly, and that just affected me at a deep level."

Whatever happened here, the approval process for this billboard was a sham. Indeed, Judge Mendez's demolition order was based on a ruling that the township did not follow its own ordinances when approving the sign.

And Levitt spoke up, ponied up and got the sign demolished.

Well done, Mr. Levitt. And thanks.

Our View: Margate Causeway billboard Lack of scrutiny

As more facts emerge, it's clear this sign did not get the scrutiny it warranted from Egg Harbor Township.

Back to the new 50-foot (or is it 60-foot?) electronic billboard on the Margate Causeway...

In March, we said this mammoth LED sign was terribly out of place on the scenic coastal causeway and an affront to the road's natural beauty.

Well, there have been some new developments in this story. And it turns out this sign may very well be an affront to the law, as well.

First, the developers — the sign is on property leased by Hackney's Boat Yard Inc. to Moorestown-based Jersey Outdoor Media in what is actually Egg Harbor Township — have been cited by the Department of Environmental Protection for "unauthorized development activities in the coastal zone" and "within a coastal wetland."

Last month, it was not clear if the project required a Coastal Area Facilities Review Act permit, which must be obtained before construction begins.

Now, it's clear that a CAFRA permit was indeed required — and that the developers did not have one. They have subsequently — and belatedly — applied for a CAFRA permit. The DEP also contends that the project needed and does not have a coastal wetlands permit.

Meanwhile, a Northfield resident who says the LED sign shines into the bedroom window of his home, has filed a lawsuit claiming, among other things, that the developers illegally filled in wetlands in order to build the sign.

This suit filed by Richard Levitt — who, as chairman of the Northfield Planning Board, knows a little something about these matters — also says that the sign is 60 feet tall — not 50 feet — which would put it over the allowable height limit under the EHT zoning ordinance. Levitt's suit further contends the sign is closer than 1,000 feet to the nearest other billboard, which would also be a violation of the EHT code — and that's whether the signs are measured from their nearest points or their midpoints, the suit says.

All of these claims will have to be adjudicated by the courts and the DEP. But this much is clear right now: The sign needed a CAFRA permit and did not have one. There's at least a question of whether it sits on illegally filled-in wetlands. And there is even a question of how tall, in fact, it is and how close it is to the nearest other sign — two issues that should be easily verifiable.

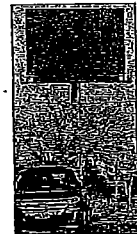
The Margate Causeway is a noncontiguous part of the township, which means there are no nearby EHT residents (or voters) who would have objected to the sign. And that raises this question: Would this out-of-place billboard have had such an easy ride through the EHT approval process if it were anywhere else in the township?

Clearly, this project did not get the scrutiny it warranted.

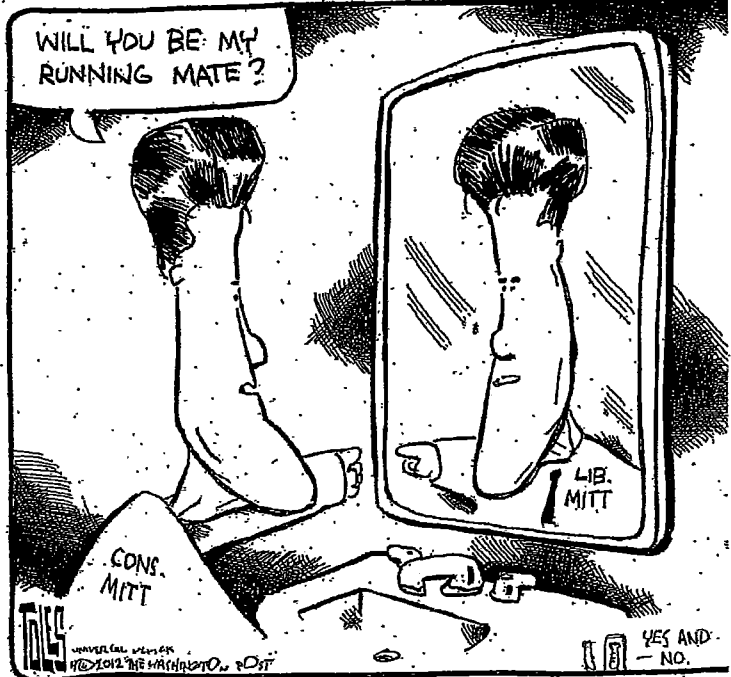
Thought for the Day

"Why shouldn't things be largely absurd, futile and transitory? They are so, and we are so, and they and we go very well together."

Georgo Santayana



Staff photo by Anthony Sencio, March 22, 2012



Voice of the People

Do restaurants realize the issues with BYOB?

Regarding the April 21 letter, "O.C. will enforce BYOB rules? Really?"

The letter writer nailed it right on the head when he said maybe the restaurant owners should think about increasing the quality of their food. When I go to a restaurant, like everyone else, I want to dine on something I don't normally make at home. So, if I go to one of about three or four Ocean City restaurants that surpass my expectations with a bottle of wine, I'm going to linger longer than normal, taking up a table that could be turned over faster to the next customer. As far as the city controlling underage drinking, if the police are having a difficult time, how do the restaurant owners figure they'll control it? They'll need to card the younger patrons. Have they thought about that? I'm sure they've heard of fake IDs. How will they control that? Are they prepared to be fined or worse yet, be shut down for allowing underage drinkers? How will they control the amount of wine/beer brought in by a patron? Will they need to hire bouncers?

I just can't figure how allowing BYOB would bring additional business to restaurants or the city as a whole. In the 22 years that I've lived in Ocean City and the 20-plus years I've vacationed here prior to that, it doesn't seem like the restaurants or stores are having a hard time getting customers.

ROSE LENT
 Ocean City

Force Congress to fix the capital-gains tax

Why not tax capital gains at the same rates as ordinary income — except with what you paid for the assets multiplied by an inflation factor?

For example, if you purchase a house at \$100,000 as an investment, and it rises in value to \$150,000 over perhaps 10 years strictly due to inflation, and then you sell it for \$175,000, you would pay tax on \$25,000, not on \$75,000, as you would now.

In effect, an inflation-adjusted capital gain reflects your true profit and ought to be treated like any other income.

Raising the basis of assets using an inflation factor would be an accurate measurement of profits (or losses, when applicable). Only those who now make out like bandits by paying a capital-gains tax of 15 percent on any accrued profits, no matter what bracket they are in, would balk at a more equitable restructuring of our tax code by our elected representatives in Congress.

However, there are not enough of those folks to override the will of an informed voting public. The operative terms here are "informed" and "voting." A well-organized grassroots effort to push Congress into doing the right thing wouldn't hurt either.

LAWRENCE UNLIGHT
 Galloway Township

ACIT staff makes the school special

Regarding the April 23 letter are special at Atlantic County.

Our sons also attend i County Institute of Technol. Our sons hated middle school, excellent students who gam terribly bored. If it hadn't be posted on the doorway to office that I somehow fou parent/teacher night, they have had the opportunity to I cannot praise the ACIT enough. From the superint guard at the annex who wel student every morning, the bers, administrators and te excelled in getting through dents.

If ACIT is picky in who it isn't a bad thing. I know for a everyone is cut out for the gram this school provides. dents whom my sons highl back to their regular. It because ACIT was "too to have been others who have to leave because they chose" tive instead of bucking dow ing. If some of these typee needed out by the applicati see absolutely no harm in th

There is good and bad th along with the expansion. that many more students w ed and that the offerin expanded to include new p. majors. The bad is that th dents will never know how was to be a part of a really s to be friends with all stud tions, as my sons were able

Bottom line, the letter wr The staff, teachers and ac are the biggest factor in the ranking, and the high rank school to pick and choose ti ous students.

EILE
 Egg Har

Voice of the People

Employing the disabled is good for everyone

Gov. Chris Christie recently declared New Jersey an "Employment First" state. This designation means that public and private organizations have a role in ensuring that their em-

ployees a sense of achievement, a level of financial independence and a sense of belonging. Work is a touchstone by which we often measure ourselves and measure others. The fullness of

that. With Employment First, benefits become the safety net that will supplement employment, not the other way around. Pa 84
 New Jersey has made great

Speeding troopers just trying to keep up

Regarding the April 24 story, "A.C. trip gets troopers parked," about state troopers escorting a high-speed caravan of sports cars down the Garden State Parkway from New York to Atlantic City:

Driving the highways of New Jersey while commuting to work, I feel I've seen it all.

I have been passed on both sides, by cara-

I contend the troopers were not essential.