

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2012 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

House Bill 415 (Delegate Serafini, *et al.*)
Environmental Matters

State Highway Administration - Signs on Highway Rights-of-Way - Permits

This bill authorizes the State Highway Administration (SHA) to issue a permit for an outdoor advertising sign located within a State highway right-of-way. Signs approved with this authority are exempt from an existing prohibition and penalty associated with placing or maintaining a sign within a State highway right-of-way.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: While the bill does not *require* SHA to issue permits, to the extent SHA uses this permitting authority, Transportation Trust Fund expenditures and permit fee revenues increase in FY 2013 and future years to investigate sign requests and issue permits. The number of permit requests received by SHA and the number of permits ultimately issued under the bill cannot be reliably estimated at this time.

Local Effect: The bill is not anticipated to have a significant effect on local operations or finances.

Small Business Effect: Potential meaningful.

Analysis

Current Law: Subject to specified exceptions, a person may not erect or maintain any outdoor sign outside the limits of any municipal corporation and within 500 feet of a State highway unless the person has a permit issued by SHA for that sign. Chapters 466 and 467 of 2011 prohibit the placement or maintenance of signs on State highway rights-of-way without SHA authorization and establish a civil penalty of \$25 per commercial sign for violations.

A person may not erect or maintain any outdoor sign along or near any federal aid primary highway, unless the person has been issued a permit. Federal law and regulations require states to control advertising on the sides of federally funded highways. Failure to control the outdoor advertising could result in the loss of federal highway aid.

A State highway's right-of-way is at least 40 feet wide. Any person who removes, damages, or defaces any SHA sign, signal, or marker is guilty of a misdemeanor and subject to a fine of up to \$100.

Chapter 318 of 2011 prohibits SHA from issuing outdoor sign permits for signs along or near a scenic byway located on a federal aid primary highway.

In accordance with federal regulations, a highway right-of-way must be devoted exclusively to public highway purposes and state highway departments must keep the right-of-way free of all public and private installations, facilities, or encroachments, except (1) if a state highway administrator finds it is in the public interest and will not impair the highway or interfere with the free and safe flow of traffic; (2) a state highway administrator approves it as constituting a part of a highway or as necessary for its operation, use, or maintenance; or (3) if it is an informational site established and maintained in accordance with specified federal regulations.

Background: SHA is responsible for more than 5,200 miles or approximately 16,800 lane miles of road, 2,500 bridges, 3,500 small stream crossing structures, and 80 miles of sound barriers. It also has responsibility for planning, designing, constructing, and maintaining these roads and bridges to safety and performance standards while considering sociological, ecological, and economic concerns.

Federal and State laws require SHA to regulate signs within State highway rights-of-way and outdoor advertising signs on private property adjacent to State roads. SHA is responsible for official traffic safety signs and informational signs that are either required by State law or authorized by SHA permit. SHA prohibits private signs along State highway medians and rights-of-way and reserves State property for official traffic control signs or devices.

Numerous federal and State requirements impact how and where outdoor advertising occurs along highways. In addition, many local zoning and sign ordinances dictate the size, illumination, and location of signs. Some local jurisdictions prohibit new off-premise outdoor advertising signs altogether. When SHA does issue permits, the requirements vary depending on whether the sign is for a business located on the property on which the sign will be placed (on-premise) or for businesses located elsewhere (off-premise). SHA sign permit fees range from \$10 to \$35 per sign, and the permits must be renewed annually.

Small Business Effect: Small businesses benefit to the extent they request and receive SHA permits that they would not receive otherwise.

Additional Comments: Although the bill does not *require* SHA to issue advertising sign permits, SHA advises that the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration has expressed concern about the proliferation of advertising signs and that failing to control advertising could lead to the loss of 10% of most federal highway aid.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: None.

Cross File: SB 360 (Senator Shank) - Judicial Proceedings.

Information Source(s): Baltimore City; cities of Bowie and Takoma Park; Kent, Montgomery, and Worcester counties; Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts); Maryland Department of Transportation; Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - February 17, 2012
ncs/lgc

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