

Atlanta Forward >>

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Our region is an important part of a complex world. On these pages, we will bring you a wide array of viewpoints and insights on the issues you've told us are most important to you. We're committed to bringing you smart work by some of the best thinkers in metro Atlanta and beyond. We want to involve you in the conversation, too, so let us know what you think.

Today's moderator: Tom Sabulis

A 20-year veteran of the A.J.C., Tom Sabulis has covered news, politics and the arts during a career that has taken him to newspapers across the country. Since 2008, he has coordinated many of the newspaper's pro/con debates and first-person guest columns.

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TOPIC SCHEDULE

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TUESDAY CONVERSATION: TRANSPORTATION

Alcohol ad sales: Pros and cons

Alcohol advertising on U.S. transit systems

The industry watchdog Alcohol Justice (www.alcoholjustice.org) last year updated an earlier study that surveyed the alcohol advertising policies of 32 major metropolitan transit agencies, and city departments that control transit advertising, in the U.S. Some findings:

- Eighteen agencies explicitly ban alcohol advertising in agency policy, contract requirements, government policy, or a combination of these.
- Fourteen agencies including New York, Chicago and Atlanta allow alcohol advertising.

- Model alcohol ad bans have been adopted by transit systems in Seattle, San Francisco, Boston and Philadelphia.

- Most major cities allow alcohol advertising on transit-related street furniture, even those with transit policies banning alcohol ads.

- Despite claims of economic necessity, revenue from alcohol ads account for less than 1 percent of the reporting agencies' annual operating revenues.

MARTA advertising revenue

Atlanta's transit agency recently embarked on a pilot program that would display for the first time alcohol ads on buses and trains and at bus shelters. The following figures look at total advertising sales, and the alcohol ad portion of those sales, for January-August 2014 (alcohol advertising started in April):

Trains and buses
Total ad sales: \$3,416,091
Alcohol ad sales: \$152,927
Bus shelters
Total ad sales \$2,202,134
Alcohol ad sales: \$249,049
Total
Total ad sales (all modes): \$5,318,225
Alcohol ad sales: \$401,976

MARTA is one of the few major transit systems in the country that gets no operating money from its state, so the agency looks hard at revenue-enhancing opportunities. One of its new under-the-radar explorations involves alcohol advertising, with ads appearing on buses and trains for the first time. Today, I talk with MARTA CEO Keith Parker about this pilot program. We offer balance from a California nonprofit organization that campaigns against alcohol ads in public spaces.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

MARTA tests alcohol ads

By Tom Sabulis
tsabulis@ajc.com

In its quest for new revenue, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority is conducting a pilot program this year in which alcohol advertising is displayed for the first time on trains and buses and in rail stations. Until now, such advertising was displayed only in bus shelters installed and maintained by CBS Outdoor, a private company.

"MARTA has actually always had some level of alcohol advertising," MARTA CEO Keith Parker told me recently, but the ads were restricted from appearing on "actual rolling stock, on the trains and buses," and in the stations.

Now, MARTA is spreading out alcohol ads on its system, monitoring public reaction to them and calculating how much money they bring in. "We wanted to get a sense of how our customers were going to respond," Parker said. "We've done some surveys to get a feel on that. We've agreed with CBS Outdoor, our advertising contractor, to allow them to explore opportunities with alcohol advertising. We're doing that over a limited period of time, and we'll assess how that's working out and go back to our Board of Trustees and make a final recommendation on how to move forward."

Part of MARTA's process is figuring out how ads can be tailored to the message it's trying to promote — of the agency as a safe transportation alternative.

"The message we're trying to convey is that if you're going to drink, drink responsibly. And if you're in a situation where you're going to potentially be a harm to yourself or others, then let somebody else do the driving for you. And we



MARTA recently teamed with Miller Lite and the Atlanta Falcons for a promotion that encouraged football fans to take the train to the Georgia Dome for games. TOM SABULIS/TSABULIS@AJC.COM

are taking that beyond just us. We've reached out to the passenger vehicle-for-hire community (taxis, Uber, etc.) and talked to them about how we can potentially coordinate together."

MARTA recently teamed with Miller Lite beer for a promotion in which the company gave away Breeze cards for fans traveling to the first Atlanta Falcons game this year. Accompanying ads read, "Let MARTA be your designated driver."

The alcohol advertising push is one of several ways

MARTA is looking to raise revenue, from naming rights to concession agreements and transit-oriented development.

"We're looking at the pros and cons of all these various ways of raising revenue," Parker said. "All those things have a plus and a minus that comes with them. So we're assessing what brings the most positive benefit to us with the least amount of negative return."

"For example, what we've heard directly from folks as they talk about alcohol adver-



Keith Parker is CEO and general manager of MARTA.

tising is that it isn't as much a jump for us. If you watch a football game, you're going to see alcohol ads. If you're driving, you're going to see (alcohol) billboard after billboard after billboard. If you listen to the radio, you're going to hear (alcohol ads) on the radio. If you open a magazine, it's all over the place. So what real impact does MARTA have if someone sees those same ads on a train or a bus? We're assessing those things now to determine what level we will find acceptable in the future. But it's still a work in progress."

I raised the issue of children and teens who travel to school on MARTA's system. Couldn't they be considered a captive audience for the influences of alcohol?

"If we were to go full-scale on alcohol advertising," Parker said, "we would limit the amounts in different communities. There would be no one community singled out (for) the advertising. We would make sure all the ads pass our smell test. Is it acceptable? Does it look like it's marketing to children in any way, shape or form? Does it send out any type of negative stereotype that we are sensitive to? We will take this very seriously."

GUEST COLUMN

Alcohol ads put families, youth at risk

By Bruce Lee Livingston

MARTA could be a lot smarter by not allowing alcohol promotion on its property. The scientific evidence is clear that exposing youth to alcohol ads inclines them to drink earlier, and if they already drink, to drink more.

Policies restricting alcohol advertising to limit youth exposure are evidence-based and produce a great return on investment for public health and safety. The costs of binge and underage drinking fall largely on the government, taxpayers and the health care system, and government should not encourage or increase those costs.

Alcohol Justice is a national nonprofit organization with more than 27 years of experience working to reduce alcohol-related harm caused to individuals and communities. We promote evidence-based public health policies and organize campaigns with diverse communities and youth against the alcohol industry's



Bruce Lee Livingston is executive director and CEO of Alcohol Justice, a nonprofit based in San Rafael, Calif.

harmful practices. In June, Alcohol Justice and Public Citizen sent a letter to MARTA CEO Keith T. Parker, strongly urging him not to expand alcohol ads or sell naming rights to stations. Until now, alcohol ads on MARTA have been restricted to bus shelters, billboards and other outdoor displays. But a well-publicized "pilot program" outlined the agency's desire to sell more ads on its buses and trains and

in rail stations, and to possibly sell station-naming rights.

While to some it may seem not taking alcohol ad dollars might be leaving money on the table, the truth is that increasing alcohol ads on MARTA will produce a bad return for public health and safety. A "Bud Light Lime-A-Rita Five Points Station" is not a good idea. Here's why:

Research shows that as alcohol-marketing tactics become more commonplace in everyday life, they significantly influence youth attitudes, creating an environment that promotes underage drinking. In fact, each additional dollar spent on alcohol advertising raises the number of drinks consumed by 3 percent. Other research shows reductions in alcohol advertising could produce declines in drinking rates, particularly among youth.

In our recent national report, "These Bus Ads Don't Stop for Children: Alcohol Advertising on Public Transit," we exposed how revenue from alcohol ads

accounted for less than 1 percent of annual operating revenue from the agencies that report.

In Georgia, estimates placed the medical and lost productivity costs from underage drinking at approximately \$663 million in 2010. Additional costs from pain and suffering and reduced quality of life increased the toll to \$1.4 billion.

MARTA has projected 2014 revenue from alcohol ads at \$500,000, split 50/50 with the advertising agency handling the ad placement. Considering that in 2012 MARTA logged nearly 135 million passenger trips, even more individuals will be exposed to ads placed on the outside of buses and trains and at rail stations.

Alcohol companies and advertisers will be the only winners. Youth and their families will be harmed, and the cost of that harm will negate any marginal increase in revenue.

Instead of expanding its alcohol advertising, MARTA can and should join with other

major metropolitan areas including Seattle/King County, Honolulu, Massachusetts Bay, Miami-Dade, San Diego, San Francisco and Philadelphia to ban alcohol advertising on transit property. Los Angeles bans alcohol ads on bus benches and is drafting a more comprehensive transit ban as you read this.

Please help us stop the spread of inappropriate messaging on alcohol consumption to more of our public spaces. The alcohol industry's unhealthy marketing schemes should never be enabled by any public agency.

Go to www.alcoholjustice.org and take action by respectfully urging MARTA's chief executive officer that instead of expanding alcohol ads on the system, MARTA should ban them from all of its property. When it comes to alcohol advertising on public property, that is the only policy to achieve a positive return for public health and safety.