

## **Citizens for Media Literacy**

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### **Billboard owner relents; allows anti-smoking ad**

As long as anyone can remember, the billboard at Biltmore Avenue and Hilliard Street in Asheville, N.C. has portrayed cigarette smoking as glamorous and fun.

For years, the 14 by 48 foot street-level sign, adjacent to Asheville's black business district and within a half mile of the city's hospitals, directed its message mainly at women and African-Americans. In January, for the first time in at least a decade, that message changed radically.

The billboard now carries the U.S. Surgeon General's warning about the hazards of smoking by pregnant women. Instead of being buried in small type at the bottom of the sign, the warning label is now spread in large white letters on a jet black background, filling all 672 square feet.

"We wanted to call attention to how the message environment influences our health for better or worse. Counter-ads are a good way to do that," said Wally Bowen, executive director of the Asheville-based Citizens for Media Literacy, which purchased the billboard space.

Bowen said the stark white-on-black health warning on a billboard that for many years carried glamorous and colorful images is getting lots of attention. "We've had a lot of supportive phone calls. One parent even said his young children, who don't know how to read yet, commented on the change in imagery," he said.

Children are especially vulnerable to billboards because their exposure to outdoor messages can't be controlled by parents, said Bowen. This phenomenon

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is well-known to the tobacco industry, which gets as much as 90 percent of its \$7.3 billion in annual revenue from smokers who became addicted as children, according to estimates by Action on Smoking and Health, a Washington, D.C.-based research and education organization.

“We chose the smoking and pregnant women message because we don’t hear much about how children are hurt by smoking, directly or indirectly, and because this particular billboard has for years aimed its message at young women,” Bowen said.

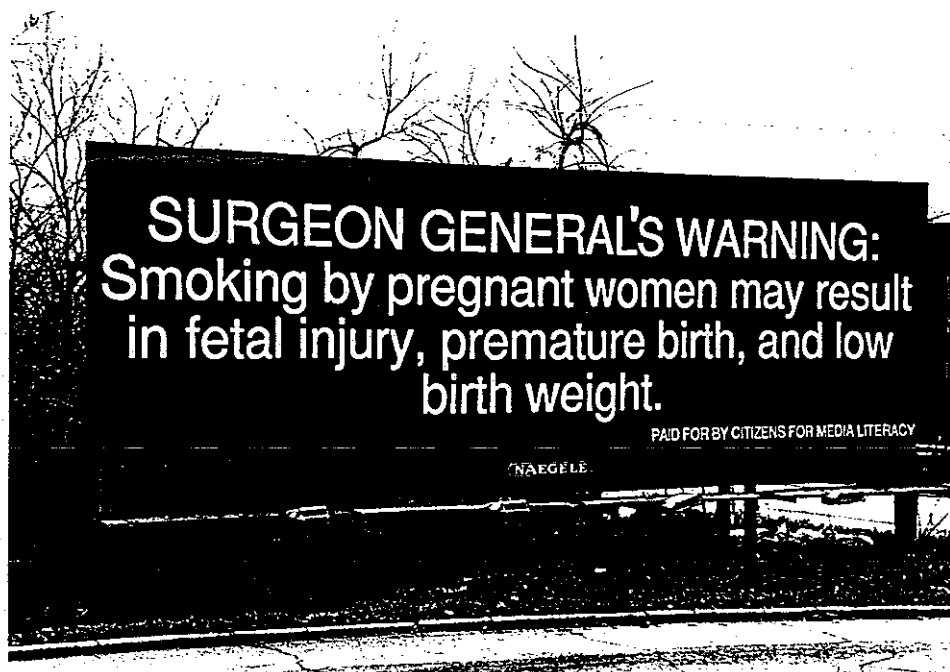
All citizens, smokers and non-smokers, are hurt by tobacco addiction via higher health care costs and lower job and school performance, he added.

CML, a public interest media education project, was originally turned down by the billboard’s owner, Naegele Outdoor Advertising, when the organization first tried to purchase space for its anti-smoking message last August. “We were told that the company would be biting the hand that feeds it if they allowed an anti-smoking message,” said Bowen.

By November, however, the billboard company had changed its mind. Bowen believes the recession, cutbacks in tobacco advertising, and a desire to upgrade its public image are behind the company’s change of heart.

“After having been turned down the first time, we weren’t sure that we still wanted to purchase space. But when we learned that the tobacco industry had let its contract lapse on this particular location, we knew we had to do it,” he said.

**END**



**Sign of the Times** -- For years this billboard in Asheville, N.C. aimed its smoking-is-fun message at the city's black community. When Phillip Morris let its long-term contract lapse, Citizens for Media Literacy decided to send a different message about smoking.