

VOLUSIA

Floating digital billboard will soon cruise along Volusia County beaches

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A floating digital billboard will soon be seen cruising along Volusia County shores displaying ads on a pair of 40-foot LED screens.

The Volusia County Council on Tuesday granted Rob Guarriello, owner of Shark Bite Media, a permit to motor along the shore from Ponce Inlet to Ormond Beach, coming as close as 750 feet from shore.

"This approval is intended as a pilot program," public protection director Joe Pozzo told the council Tuesday.

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Councilwoman Billie Wheeler led the councilmembers to a 6-1 vote in favor of the permit. She said it's not like it will be staying in one place and she saw an opportunity to get county messages across.

"During those days that we have the bad surf and the undertow, it would be great to have signage going up and down to remind people of the consequences," Wheeler said. "Let's see if this works. If it doesn't can we tweak it?"

Councilwoman Heather Post was the lone no vote. She said she struggled deeply with the subject.

"Volusia County prides itself on the 'World's Most Famous Beach,'" Post said. "I'm not sure that this is really the look that I want to be seeing when I look out on the ocean."

'Next thing you know, it's like I-4'

Post made a motion to deny the permit, which Councilman Ben Johnson seconded.

"How once you open that Pandora's box do you stop the rest of them. Next thing you know, it's like I-4 going up and down there with big signs, " Johnson said.

Anyone interested in coming within 1,500 feet of shore must secure their own separate permit.

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"We're only doing it for one summer, then you guys get to look at it again," Guarriello's attorney Bob Merrell told the council. "Once you get more than twice the distance from swimmers and surfers, I don't see the harm."

Guarriello said he plans to moor the 60-foot barge in Ponce Inlet.

Volusia public safety messages also will be displayed

The billboard will feature advertisements as well as public safety messages to warn beachgoers about riptides or jellyfish, for example. Guarriello agreed not to display "obscene or indecent messages."

A permit was necessary because beach code prevents motorized vessels from coming within 1,500 feet of shore. The boat may come as close as 750 feet from shore.

Guarriello has permission to begin as soon as possible and run daily between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m., weather and tide permitting. The permit extends through the end of November.

The boat captain will notify Beach Safety each day the boat is running.

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Councilman Fred Lowry asked if it would open Pandora's box in terms of other crafts entering the restricted area.

"That is a potential, but we can handle that," Beach Safety Director Andrew Ethridge said.

Chair Jeff Brower said it was a novel idea that could add fun to the beach.

"If this was a static object, none of us would be for it, because it would ruin that section of the beach," Brower said.

Daytona Beach small business owner Krista Goodrich offered her support at Tuesday's council meeting.

"As a pilot program, I think it's fantastic," Goodrich said. "It's very expensive for a business like mine to do the plane thing. I'm hopeful that this would be a business we can utilize."

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Councilman Danny Robins said it was a creative concept that deserved a chance.

"We have airplanes going up and down the beach all day carrying banners," Robins noted. "If we don't look at it a little bit closer, what message are we sending to future entrepreneurs coming to Volusia County?"

Councilwoman Barbara Girtman said she too supported the idea.

"I really see a positive use in county messaging, being able to use it for that purpose," Girtman said.

As the discussion neared an end, Johnson announced he had changed his mind and withdrew his support of Post's motion to deny the permit.

Post stood by her comments and said a pristine view of the Atlantic Ocean was something she was unwilling to sacrifice.

"You're not looking at ads and billboards and development and all that kind of stuff. You turn around and you look back at condos and all these other things," Post said. "I'm just not willing to trade that."

At Andy Romano Park on Thursday, reviews on the floating billboard were mixed.

"I wouldn't like that," said Ashley James, who was visiting from Ocala with William Figueroa. "That's just weird. I just couldn't imagine a billboard in the middle of the ocean. Billboards should stay on the sides of the road and not in the water."

Figueroa, though, said a floating billboard is OK with him. "I wouldn't mind it if it's that far out," he said.

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Lorena Ortega, visiting from El Paso, Texas, said the floating billboard won't bother her, either.

"We were in Miami Beach last weekend and that's what they had," she said. "It's good promotion."

Dallas Kelley of Daytona Beach was less enthused.

"Personally, I think the planes with the banners flying over is enough," said Kelley, who was enjoying the beach with his wife, Judy, and their granddaughter, Morgan Ruley from Kentucky and her husband, Colton Ruley. "It looks too industrial to me."

Morgan Ruley agreed.

"There's a lot of other means of advertising," she said. "They don't have to put it in the ocean. It might push people away."