

FINANCIAL STRAPPED CITIES TO SELL ADVERTISING ON PUBLIC SPACE



The City Council of Baltimore's frantic efforts to raise money through new strategies, failed to prevent the shutting down of three fire companies—a decision that the Baltimore officials took with considerable disinclination and unwillingness. The reluctant decision however, brought awareness that it was now unavoidable to take drastic action to raise more money, failing which more cuts would naturally follow. The City Council passed a resolution to explore the feasibility of selling ads on the city's fire trucks. It was three years ago that Baltimore began closing a few different firehouses each day, hoping that better times would come. However, when the economy showed no signs of improving, the officials felt it would be better to close three permanently. "Back in '09, we thought maybe this will last a year," Fire Chief James S. Clack said. "It's been three years. Our finance folks are telling us that the budget is not going to get significantly better for several more years. So it's time to make a decision." However, it is not certain that this will be implemented soon as officials in Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake's administration have expressed concern whether it's worth it, since they feel that the revenue thus generated may not be enough to keep even one fire company open. The move to close three fire companies would save the city \$6 million each year, an amount, revenue from ad placements on fire-engines would be hard pressed to match. Baltimore is not the first city to explore revenue generation avenues of advertising space on buses, school walls and other similar spaces. There are many other cities that are trying to overcome the economic crisis by selling advertisements, naming rights and sponsorships. Ads for McDonald's have appeared on fare cards and on turnstiles of stations. KFC were among the first to take advantage of this unusual non-traditional ad placement. Its ad appeared of all places on manholes and fire hydrants. The company had helped the cities, Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee, in filling potholes and replaces faulty hydrants. There are many school district that sells ads and Pizza chains have been seen to advertize on school buses. The Baltimore City Council member, William Welch, who wrote the legislation, said that he saw in it a revenue generating exercise in times when money was extremely short. He said, "As I've looked at budgets, they get bigger with less support from the federal and state governments and we can't tax people out of existence. We're trying; our mayor's trying, to bring 10,000 more people back to Baltimore city. And if you have an increasing fee or tax structure, you're not going to be able to do that. So you have to create alternatives." Tyngsborough, Massachusetts Police Chief William F. Mulligan expressed concerns that accepting ads could be perceived wrongly. "Because of what we do, we like to be neutral," he said. "Say there were two shopping plazas, and one advertised and one didn't. Would that company feel like we weren't treating them fairly?" However Police Departments have been known to advertise before. When the Police Department in Littleton, Mass., needed new cars they raised money from a local supermarket chain through a "advertise with the good guys" program. Hose covers of many fire trucks in Minneapolis ran anti-smoking ads. In Phoenix, health care providers pay for safety message on fire trucks. The fire-department, through their union, uses the revenue generated to help the victims of fires, local children and the poor. It seems that the Onondaga County Sheriff's Office Helicopter cannot be kept aloft with fuel, but only with the help of ads that could keep it flying. "Some people think it's a great idea to help support public budgets," said John Balloni, a chief in the sheriff's office, "and some people are a little put off by the idea that we're getting sponsorship for what used to be a government duty, if you will." However, whatever the economy enforced choices; advertisement on public spaces has not gone down well with many. Elizabeth Ben-Ishai, the campaign coordinator for the Public Citizen's Commercial Alert project said, "We are bombarded by ads everywhere we go, and these are public spaces meant to be reflective of the values of our society, co-opted by the private sector." Jody Berg, the principal of Media Works, a communications company based in Baltimore, said that the ads could serve a public purpose and the city should find sponsors for advertisements in health care, education, sports or insurance. "All we're ever looking for is not only to do something good for the community, but to find another place for eyeballs to be looking at things," he said. It is not certain whether the proposal to have ads on buses will ever see fruition, but Baltimore will surely see ads and sponsorship as it was seeking the assistance of an advertising company to help it sell naming rights and ads and other sponsorships for city buildings, recreation centers and parks.