LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS PUSH FOR COLLECTION OF MILLIONS IN BILLBOARD TAXES
WANT FUNDING USED FOR PITTSBURGH CLEANUP EFFORTS

Pittsburgh, PA—Citing growing problems with litter, illegal dumping, waste/recycling, visual blight, and vacant properties in the City of Pittsburgh, the non-profit organization Scenic Pittsburgh has partnered with Allegheny CleanWays and the Pennsylvania Resources Council on an effort to address them called the CleanPGH Resolution.

What makes their proposal different from previous plans to address visual blight, says Scenic Pittsburgh Executive Director Mike Dawida, is that this plan already has a generous funding source that only needs to be collected: Pittsburgh’s Billboard Tax.

“For seven years, the billboard companies have been fighting the collection of this tax,” says Dawida. “At this point, we estimate they owe the City of Pittsburgh somewhere between 14 and 20 million dollars.”

On November 27, 2012, Pittsburgh City Council unanimously passed a 10% levy on revenue generated by billboards within city limits. Billboard companies have kept the tax tied up in litigation since then.

Dawida notes that Philadelphia already has their own billboard tax, which collected revenues of $3.3 million last year. But he adds that Pittsburgh has a chance to do something unique that would be a model for the nation: use one form of visual blight, billboards, to mitigate others.

“We stand to lose our reputation as a ‘most livable,’ sustainable city if we can’t do something about the litter, the illegal dumpsites, the vacant lots and abandoned structures. Our goal is to see Pittsburgh become the cleanest city in the U.S. Now the city has this perfect opportunity to establish Pittsburgh’s leadership in innovative problem-solving – and it’s already got a dedicated funding source,” he added.

Here’s how the CleanPGH Resolution would work. First, the billboard companies must come to the table and pay what they owe.
“After all, city residents’ tax dollars are paying to subsidize these companies’ profits,” notes Dawida. “We pay to build and maintain the busy roads and the communities on which the billboard companies depend for their profit. They must step up and pay their fair share.”

The Clean Pittsburgh Commission, which is already established and led by representatives from City departments, local non-profits, individuals and community groups, would then administer the funds needed to achieve the goals of the CleanPGH Resolution, including:

- Clean up the hundreds of dump sites across the city, install cameras and train law enforcement and magistrates to monitor future dumping
- Fund regular cleanups of neighborhoods and riverfronts, expand hard-to-recycle events and fund bulky item collections in the city
- Plan and create one-stop drop-off centers and transfer stations where all area trash, recyclables, reusables, hard-to-recycle items, household hazardous waste, and compost can be brought and sorted according to stream
- Create a comprehensive maintenance plan for abandoned properties which would address garbage, vegetation and basic building preservation – especially buildings that have historic value
- Recover and maintain greenspace on city-owned land, providing trail access a and manage vegetation and invasive species and create walkable bridges between neighborhoods

The elements of the CleanPGH Resolution can all be found in plans that the City has already adopted, Dawida points out. “If people want to support this Resolution and the collection of the billboard tax, get in touch with your councilperson, or the Mayor, and tell them it’s important to you,” he added.

Dawida says he hopes that the current effort and the Resolution his organization has developed with Allegheny CleanWays and the Pennsylvania Resources Council will help to motivate the billboard companies to come to an agreement with the City and provide the funding needed.

“It’s clear we need to find a way to push through the obstacles here, claim this revenue, and take bold action before these problems undercut everything this city has worked to achieve.”

About Scenic Pittsburgh: Scenic Pittsburgh is a nonprofit organization that protects, enhances, and promotes the scenic beauty of the Pittsburgh Region by identifying, monitoring and fighting visual pollution, outdoor advertising, and other scenic detractors as a means of promoting a healthy, vibrant region. We serve the following counties: Allegheny, Armstrong, Butler, Beaver, Fayette, Greene, Indiana, Somerset, Washington, and Westmoreland. Scenic Pittsburgh is a chapter of Scenic America, the nation’s premier scenic conservation organization. For more information, go to https://www.scenicpittsburgh.org/