

TO: Virginia Beach City Council

DATE: April 24, 2015

FROM: Matthew J. Monroe

SUBJECT: Redesign of Profanity Signs along the Oceanfront

Introduction

The development of this report stemmed from the continuing confusion amongst residents and tourists on the no profanity signs located on several blocks of the Oceanfront. Several people have posted this confusion on multiple blogs and social media sites. The Tidewater Log posted a picture pertaining to the symbols on the sign with the rhetorically phrased question, “Ask anyone what they mean, and they'll say it means "No Cursing". Right” (Tidewater)? Tourists like Chris James were so confused over the sign that he posted it on Flickr with the question, “Anyone know what this means? These line the streets in VA Beach, VA and I couldn't figure it out last week” (James, 2006). This lack of clarity may affect the actual goal that the sign is trying to achieve which is making the Oceanfront a family oriented environment for residents and tourists alike. Without clear language and better quality visuals on the signs, residents and tourists may violate laws that they are unaware of. This will result in a host of citations and fines. In 2014 alone, “twenty-five people received citations for letting their curse words fly forth from their mouths. That's \$6,250 collected in cursing fines” (Meg, 2014). In order to keep the Oceanfront an attractable spot for tourists and residents and to avoid communication errors, the sign must be developed into a more effective form of public communication.

This report will propose the necessary steps to take in order to give the sign its desired purpose by taking up a new design. I recognize that there already are a few signs posted along the boardwalk that explain what it means, but they are not joined with any profanity sign. This means an individual may stumble upon the first sign with the symbols without realizing what they mean. Therefore, it will

be beneficial to combine both signs into a consistent single version. The report will (1) outline the benefit of using language rather than symbols when it comes to this sign, (2) create a new sign that adds context to the symbols on the first sign and reinforcing it with language, and (3) combine elements from the second sign into the new sign, but implement language that is more specific and detailed according to city ordinances and Virginia law.



Figure 1 No Profanity /Information taken
from Tidewaterlog.com

Limitations of Visual Symbols in this Sign

Communicating effectively with the public can include the use of visual symbols and language. Visual symbols or visual rhetoric is “communication that uses images to construct meaning or an argument” (Palczewski, 2012, p.6). Therefore it is important that visual symbols are well understood by cultures in order for them to fully understand their meaning. The Oceanfront is one of the top tourist attractions in Virginia. This means there are a wide array of people from different states and countries coming to visit. What one visual symbol may mean in another culture could represent something totally different to another one. The symbols in Figure 1 are called grawlix and are most commonly seen in the speech bubbles of comics to represent profanity. However, not everyone is a part of comic book culture and therefore could interpret each symbol in the grawlix in different ways. See Figure 1 for a visual.

For example, the lightning bolt is also featured on many other signs that often warn of a type of hazard such as high voltage. This can be further argued with the two exclamation points to try and seek out the attention of the audience as to say “warning.” Furthermore, the first symbol represented on the sign doesn’t have any historic content in regards to any street signage. The problem with the grawlix symbols on the sign is there is enough room for someone to make an error on what exactly they mean even when all of them are combined. Furthermore, grawlix is commonly used in a context such as plain text within a comic (Pentzlin, 2011). This sign fails to put them in any context they are just there. As Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch state in their book *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, “The key function of any symbol is to convey meaning. The meaning of a symbol is not the same for everyone” (Palczewski, 2012, p.6). Public communication must close the gap on any possible chance of misinterpretation. Implementing language in this sign will clear up any confusion because it can specify exactly what the city of Virginia Beach is prohibiting at the Oceanfront.

Implementing Efficient Visualization and Language in the Sign

The new sign that I propose will seek to add more contexts to the overall message the city of Virginia Beach is trying to give its residents and tourists. I have two design proposals for this subject that can be based off of Figure 2 and Figure 6.



Figure 2 No Profanity Sign
Information taken from Berti

First Design Proposal

1.) The first possible design was borrowed from a website that specializes in artistic design when it comes to representing signs. This design lines up with one of the options I'm proposing in giving the sign an added visual to portray the message more clearly. In it, you will see the common figure used in most street signs representing a person. This is beneficial due to our visual culture being familiar and recognizing this type of symbolization that is not only portrayed in the U.S., but many areas of the world from Europe to Asia.



Figure 3 Chinese Pedestrian Sign
Information taken from Oquias



Figure 4 Russian Pedestrian Sign
Information taken from Reid

As you can see from the pictures many cultures use this same symbol. Implementing it within the sign will add weight to the meaning since the Oceanfront is a hotspot for tourists and they would be familiar with the visual representation on street signs. For example, in Figure 3 the Chinese also use this same sign. This would be beneficial for Chinese tourists and worth noting considering Virginia is attracting more tourists from China than ever before. From 2011-2012 the Virginia pilot reported a 69 percent increase in Chinese tourists in Virginia alone (Walzer, 2014).

After including the human symbol, the next step would be to put the symbols representing

profanity next to the mouth of the human symbol as if it is projecting curse words. This way residents and tourists will be able to make a connection with the signs meaning rather than having the grawlix stand alone.

Second Design Proposal

2.) The second design is to actually implement language into the sign to reinforce the grawlix located on the sign. This will further the goal to prevent any misinterpretation of the sign's meaning. I provide two examples of signs that illustrate this new concept. The first sign represents the current anti-profanity signs located in Ocean City, Maryland. It is represented in figure 5.



Figure 5 No Profanity Ocean City
Information Taken From momgoeson.wordpress.com

As you may already know, Ocean City's concept to clean up bad behavior was actually taken from Virginia Beach's campaign to limit the amount of unruliness that could sway residents and tourists away from the vacation hotspot. However, unlike Virginia Beach's signs, these are posted more frequently along the streets making sixty in total (Ocean City Profanity, 2014). Another difference is the lack of the grawlix in the sign and the clear message of "No Profanity Please". While the language can be borrowed from the sign, the degree of warning must be more visible in the Virginia Beach signs. As you're well aware of, it's actually illegal to use abusive and offensive

language within public grounds according to Virginia law. Therefore, the friendly blue ocean theme should not be applied as residents and visitors may not take the sign seriously. Figure 6 illustrates a design that can use the language from the Ocean City sign, but with a more visually alerting presence.



Figure 6 Artist Rudi Seitz

Information taken from rudiseitz.com

Visual Design artist Rudi Seitz designed this with full awareness of the Virginia Beach signs. She initially created the sign as an experiment to be posted online and to see how many of her friends would recognize the message it was trying to convey. The sign combines elements of the grawlix with the language and red slash to make the message more apparent. This is the type of context that will give residents and tourist alike a better understanding of the signs meaning because it doesn't rely on the grawlix alone. Since 94 percent of tourists come to Virginia Beach by driving, it is safe to assume that out of that percentage, the majority of tourists will understand the English language being used to represent "Swearing Prohibited" or No Profanity" (Kuhlman, 2012) Therefore, a sign such as this would close the gap on the number of people that may be confused about the message, which could improve the overall behavior of the Oceanfront.

Combining the Signs

The final step in the design of the sign will be using language from the some of the signs already posted along the Oceanfront that indicate what the sign with the grawlix means(Figure 7). Like I stated before, the problem with these signs is that they are not usually attached to any profanity signs. Therefore, there is a level of inconsistency when you have two different signs that are trying to make the public aware of the same set of laws. It would be much easier if there was one sign that combined all these elements with some modifications to the language.



Figure 7 Virginia Code Sign
Information taken from tidewaterlog.com

I propose that the language in this sign should be changed slightly to compliment the Virginia Code that makes this type of behavior unlawful. According to Section 18.2-388 of the Virginia Code, “ If any person profanely curses or swears or is intoxicated in public, whether such intoxication results from alcohol, narcotic drug or other intoxicant or drug of whatever nature, he shall be deemed guilty of a Class 4 misdemeanor(Legislative Information, 2015). While the above sign states that no cursing is allowed it does not mention that it is also unlawful to be intoxicated in public. If this sign is supported by a law in the Virginia Code it should contain all elements of it. The sign should make the public aware that public intoxication is illegal. The language should be as

specific as possible and that is why the last two bullet points in the sign should be removed since they sum up what the first three are trying to make clear. Another missing element from this sign is any mention of a fine. Perhaps residents and tourists would take it more seriously if they are aware that they could face fines up to \$250(Legislative Information, 2015).

Once the language is made more efficient this is when you can combine both elements of the pre-existing. My vision for the new sign is drawn in a rough sketch that takes elements from Figure 6 and combines them with the edited language that I proposed above. The rough sketch is seen in figure 8.

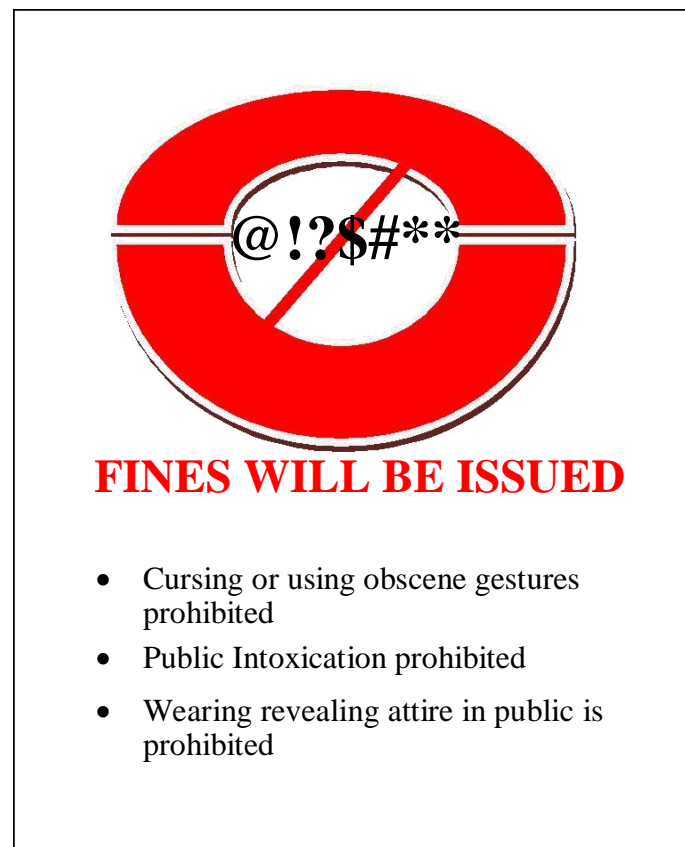


Figure 8 my redesign
Language taken from tidewaterlog.com

Conclusion

The importance of designing effective signage is imperative to communicating with the public about certain laws they must obey. Already there have been tourists and residents alike that are confused with what the no profanity signs are trying to say. Even if ninety percent of people

understand that the grawlix means profanity that still leaves ten percent. Although only twenty-five people were given fines in 2014, the combined monetary total was thousands of dollars. Making these signs consistent and concise with language could improve the behavior at the Oceanfront. Tourists like Chris James may be less inclined to post pictures of the sign on social media platforms asking what it means.

Recommendations

If you wish to implement my ideas into a new sign to better serve the community I recommend that it be completed before Beach Weekend in 2016. As we all know, violence and unlawful behavior is prevalent during Beech Weekend and 2014 saw a significant increase in misdemeanor offenses compared to 201

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