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When Public Becomes Private

By Ian Malczewski

For better or worse, we live in a world where money talks. This fact not only relates to the business world, but also to municipal government, where the allocation of funds to certain projects often means a lack of funding to others. Compared to large corporations, governments - especially municipal governments - have much less money than they need to fund the social services that are their responsibility. In urban environments, these problems are literally made concrete before our very eyes.

Recently, Megaworld offered to pay for the construction of the New Iloilo City Hall in Mandurriao, by the old airport. While this development is worthy of applause, we should always be wary of the degree to which we allow private interests to shape the public realm. This is not to suggest that all private companies have bad intentions - they don't - but because of the nature of economics, their primary concern is for their own bottom line, not for what is most beneficial to the public.

The most obvious way in which private interests enter into the public realm is through advertising. Long considered an inevitable and even charming aspect of the urban environment - see New York City with its bright-lights-big-signs at Times Square - advertising is now as much a part of the urban landscape as streets and sidewalks.

But is there such a thing as too much advertising?

There is a growing movement of public realm activists around the world that are beginning to answer this question with a resounding "yes." In Toronto, Canada, a small but dedicated group of volunteers uses its time to track down illegal advertisements in the city and demand that they be removed. In Sao Paulo, Brazil, the mayor recently banned all outdoor advertising and billboards, claiming it was a source of visual pollution. Some social scientists believe that advertising has a negative effect on the human psyche, claiming it can encourage a poor self-image.

There are several counter-arguments to this line of thinking, though. One is that advertising is an important

element of an exciting and vibrant city, adding colour to an otherwise drab and dull setting. Another argues that advertising offers an invaluable source of income to municipalities that would often not be financially able to provide essential social services without them.

There is no "right" side to this debate, but as cities look to become more environmentally friendly, it's important to look critically at the ways in which the urban environment encourages a sustainable way of life. Although it is nearly impossible to make any all-encompassing statement about advertising because of the diverse nature of its content, one near-universal quality is that it encourages a culture of nearly-incessant consumerism. This culture of consumerism indirectly connects to the global environmental shifts we see by encouraging a kind "disposable world," where things can be purchased, used, and discarded at a nearly endless rate.

Of course, as we continue to drain natural resources, we realize that our endless appetite for new and better products has taken its toll on the natural world. So how can a region like Metro Iloilo encourage a sustainable lifestyle in its public realm while simultaneously benefitting from the much-needed revenue?

The city is already on the right track. While it is true that there is great deal of advertising to be found in the city, it has not yet reached the levels one might find in Metro Manila or Cebu. Perhaps a portion of the revenue from advertising could go into funding "green-collar" jobs, jobs that allow people to work and earn wages while acting as custodians of the natural environment. Alternatively, the city could require that some advertising space be used as public notice boards for sustainable initiatives, providing a public voice for environment issues.

Because of the importance of private funds in generating social services, an all out ban such as what has occurred in other parts of the world seems unrealistic and unfair. Still, we should look critically at the world around us, lest the billboards begin to stand taller than trees, and cause us to lose sight of the world we stand on.