Billboard Concerns Draft

On the question: Shall the MCFP committee recommend the proposed project (an electronic billboard at Hardy Street and 31st Avenue) to President Saunders, there were 2 ayes and 10 nays.

President Saunders: The Committee directed me to convey their concerns with the project, essentially the reasons they did not recommend the project to you.

Issues related directly to the Master Campus Facilities Plan

1. Location and size of the sign. A number of issues coalesced under this heading.

   a. Thirty-first Avenue and Hardy Street is one of the five major gateways into the campus designated in the Master Plan (see p. 61 under the heading Connect to the Community). How shall we mark these gateways, specifically this one? With a large commercial billboard? It seems out of character for one of the three comprehensive institutions of higher learning in the state. Planning Principle 3 (p. 43) states: Create and Promote Environments for Learning, Research and Social Engagement.

   b. On that same p. 61 is indicated a plan that has been in process for several years for a mixed use area that encompasses 31st Avenue to Hwy 49 and Hardy Street to Arlington Loop: single family and multi-family residential, condos, professional offices, restaurants, clubs, small businesses—an area that is pedestrian friendly, well lighted, attractive and safe. Such an area would have the potential to become a destination for work and entertainment, an economic engine for the immediate area and for the city as well as an attractive addition to the broader University-Medical district. Three meetings have been held in the last year among university, hospital and clinic representatives, city and county planners, the Hattiesburg mayor, a Forrest County supervisor, neighborhood association representatives and major land owners in the area. Such a billboard would be inconsistent with these plans, plans that are being written into the city’s new Comprehensive Plan (to be completed this summer) as an overlay district.

   c. Were the University subject to city ordinances, no billboards of any kind would be allowed at the corner of 31st Avenue and Hardy Street. The zoning would not allow them. The billboards that do appear along Hardy between 31st and Highway 49 were grandfathered under the land code of 1989. The City’s vision for that portion of Hardy Street is that of the small town
or village, pedestrian friendly and small of scale with ample green space (in contrast, for example, to Hardy Street starting at 34th Avenue and going west).

d. A final issue under the heading of size and location is that the neighborhood most directly affected was not informed of such plans or brought into the planning process. The neighborhood is represented in the city by the University Heights Neighborhood Association. To many on the Committee, this was the most important concern. In any case, the Master Plan is rife with the assumption, both explicitly and implicitly stated, that the University should not act alone but should be keenly aware of its connection to the community in which it resides and the effects of its actions on the surrounding neighborhoods and the city as a whole.

2. Planning Principles specifically. I’ve mentioned Planning Principle 3 above. Two other Planning Principles concerned the Committee:

**Planning Principle 2:** Extend and Enhance the Character of the Campus through the Contextual Design of Future Buildings and Open Spaces (p. 43)

A concern of the Committee was that an electronic billboard does not “extend and enhance the character of the campus,” but rather is foreign to and contradicts the existing “character of the campus.” For example, imagine a family coming with their son or daughter to visit the campus. They are driving east on Hardy intending to enter the campus at 31st. As they approach this campus gateway, they encounter a large electronic billboard. But they are not turning in to a shopping mall, but rather entering a place of “learning, research and social engagement” (PP #3, p. 43). The question hinges on how the University wants to present itself to its publics.

**Planning Principle 1:** Protect Historic Open Spaces and Buildings (p. 43)

A concern of the Committee was the proximity of 31st and Hardy to the historic core of the campus. Brett Fare could throw a football from that corner to George Hurst, a historic building, and nearly to College Hall. How close is too close? For example, if Central Park were 80 acres instead of 800 acres, it would not be the refuge that it is from the city’s rush and racket, a place of solitude and peace. (The same concern goes for the neighborhood [see above, 1.a. & d., *Connect to the Community*]. Parts of the neighborhood have been in place over 50 years, newer parts over 30 years. “Historic” suggests longevity, stability and durability. The neighborhood is “historic” and therefore worthy of respect. The University must be sensitive to who and what it intrudes upon.)

Other issues of concern that the Committee deemed relevant

3. Safety

Another concern of the committee was the potential for the sign to distract drivers on Hardy Street, already a high traffic area. With 8 small signs on a side each changing every 8 seconds, all in bright, full color, driver inattention to driving is quite possible and could be dangerous.

4. Cash Flow
Another concern was that all the costs, e.g., for electricity to run the billboard daily and for taking power to the site, had not been factored in to the projected revenue. Therefore the projected revenue was over-estimated.

5. Depiction of the sign in the presentation

The billboard, as depicted in the power point presentation to the Committee (it was explained when questioned), was about half the size it would be in reality. The depiction was not drawn to scale. The height, it was explained, would be approximately the same as the street light pole that stands behind the billboard, i.e., about 30 feet. In its actual size, the proposed billboard would dominate the corner of Hardy Street and 31st Avenue and the surrounding area.