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Senators oppose billboard exemption

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By Kathy Kiely, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — An effort to exempt billboards in 13 Southern states from a long-standing highway beautification law is drawing opposition in Congress.

Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., is soliciting colleagues' support for an amendment he plans to offer today to block what he called "a big wet kiss to the outdoor advertising industry," which gives thousands of dollars annually to Republican and Democratic members of Congress.

At issue is whether hundreds of aging billboards, knocked down by hurricanes and other storms, can be rebuilt even if they violate guidelines put into place after the 1965 Highway Beautification Act.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., called the exemption "a matter of personal importance" in a letter to colleagues. The Senate Appropriations Committee added the provision to must-pass legislation providing for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Reid's political action committee collected \$16,000 from outdoor advertising interests in the last campaign cycle.

Representatives of the Outdoor Advertising Association did not return calls seeking comment. An essay on the group's website said, "Outdoor advertising is critical to the success of many small businesses" and repair of the billboards should be considered part of hurricane recovery. The association's political action committee gave \$143,000 to congressional candidates in the last election, records show.

"I call this 'billboard amnesty' because it suddenly treats as legal billboard sites that have been illegal for 40 years," Alexander wrote in a letter to colleagues. He said there are 2,988 such billboards in his state.

Sens. Mel Martinez, R-Fla., and Richard Shelby, R-Ala., are co-sponsoring Alexander's amendment. Both are from states where the exemption would let non-complying billboards be rebuilt. "This is the epitome of ridiculous. Slipping billboard provisions into something that's supposed to fund our troops is an insult to those defending our nation," Martinez said.

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