



Corporate Giveaway: House Bill 198 Allows Billboard Companies to Clearcut More Public Trees

Roadside Redbud Trees No Longer Protected

Please Contact Governor Cooper, Legislators, Local Elected Officials

Buried in an NCDOT agency bill are provisions that allow billboard companies to clearcut hundreds if not thousands of trees along public highway rights-of-way in North Carolina. [House Bill 198, DOT Legislative Changes](#), passed out of the House Transportation Committee last week. The NC House of Representatives appears prepared to vote HB 198 out in time to meet the May 4 crossover deadline.

The provisions sought by the billboard companies were added to a standard NCDOT agency bill (a bill introduced at the request of a state agency). The tree provisions were included in HB 198 with the approval of NCDOT, even though the bill includes some provisions that are similar to a billboard bill that Governor Cooper vetoed in 2019. There were some improvements made to the bill as it came out of committee, but the core giveaway to the billboard industry remains, as follows:

Doubling the acreage of clearcut trees

The current version of H 189 would dramatically increase the number of trees that can be clearcut on public-owned rights-of-way to increase the visibility of billboards. The measure would effectively double the acreage available for removal of the public's trees at each billboard permitted "viewing area," potentially resulting in the loss of hundreds to thousands of the public's trees.

Overriding local ordinances

In 2021, the General Assembly passed a measure removing local authority to determine the location of relocated billboards, when the billboards are removed by road construction. HB198 allows billboard companies to clearcut trees for relocated billboards, overriding local laws that limit tree removal, including laws that protect trees on private property.

Bye, bye Redbuds!

Since 2011, native redbuds, like dogwoods, have been preserved by law from cutting on rights-of-way to open up views of billboards. HB 198 would allow billboard companies to remove native redbuds.

What You Can Do

1. Contact Governor Cooper. Tell him that NCDOT should not have approved the tree provisions in HB 198, and that this undermines NCDOT's proud tradition of planting and maintaining wildflowers, trees, and other plants on our roadsides – the front yards of our state.
By phone: 919-814-2000
By email: <https://governor.nc.gov/contact/contact-governor-cooper>
2. Contact your state Senators and Representatives. Ask them to amend HB 198 so that trees on public property are protected for the benefit of all residents. To find your legislators: <https://www.ncleg.gov/FindYourLegislators>
3. Contact your local town or city council members and your county commissioners. Share your concerns about HB 198 removing trees in your area and across the state.

Background

Why should we keep trees? For scenic appeal across our beautiful state, yes, but it has been shown, particularly over recent years, that the benefits are so much more than aesthetics. They include air quality, health, economic cost savings, managing stormwater, higher property values, crime reduction, and the cooling of urban heat islands. At a time when cities and states are planting more trees, why would North Carolina consider removing them, and especially why would North Carolina turn over its public rights-of-way to billboard companies? See:

<https://www.smartcitiesdive.com/ex/sustainablecitiescollective/why-we-need-trees-our-cities/1100050/>

Public Opinion. A 2019 survey conducted by Public Policy Polling found that 63 percent of North Carolinians oppose more cutting of trees in front of billboards. Nineteen percent are somewhat opposed, and 44 percent are strongly opposed to more cutting of public trees in front of billboards.

Distracted Driving. Cutting more trees in front of billboards increases the amount of time that billboards are visible, taking driver's eyes off the road for longer periods. The U.S. Court of Appeals, Seventh Circuit, recently wrote "the connection between billboards and traffic safety is too obvious to require empirical proof."

Climate Change. The recently released [National Blueprint for Decarbonizing Transportation](#) identifies the benefits of using transportation rights-of-way in innovative ways to sequester carbon and reduce air pollution through the strategic planting and preservation of trees and bushes. The billboard provisions in House Bill 198, by contrast, would result in fewer public trees on rights-of-way and a lost opportunity to combat climate change, and would undermine North Carolina's climate-saving carbon reduction efforts.

2011 and 2013 Bills. The size of the tree cutting zone for billboards was already increased in 2011 and 2013 by the NC General Assembly. The figure below shows the currently allowed cutting zone and how HB 198 would increase the cutting zone on an interstate highway outside of a city with a 55 mph or greater speed limit and a 100-foot distance between the right of way line and the edge of the highway. We have not seen an explanation from the bill sponsor or NCDOT on why the current cutting zone is inadequate and needs to be dramatically increased.

