

Pot law backers draw flak

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Initiative foes assail billboards that will show battered woman

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Backers of a Denver ballot measure to legalize marijuana for adults were accused Thursday of exploiting crime fears and deceiving voters.

A pro-pot group, Change the Climate, on Monday plans to unveil three billboards around Denver showing a battered woman with her male abuser behind her and the slogan:

"Reduce family and community violence in Denver. Vote Yes on I-100."

Nowhere does the ad mention that Initiative 100's passage would amend Denver law to make it legal for adults to possess 1 ounce or less of marijuana.

Earlier this week, Denver Councilman Charlie Brown blasted I-100's sponsor, Safer Alternative for Enjoyable Recreation - or SAFER - for campaign signs that declare: "Make Denver SAFER, Voter Yes on I-100."

Brown said the slogan is designed to fool residents into thinking the measure on the Nov. 1 ballot is about highly publicized efforts to combat rising crime and falling arrest rates by boosting police staffing.

He was so furious because the red-and-white signs were illegally scattered in his Observatory Park neighborhood and along street medians that he spent an hour Saturday yanking them out.

Now a political analyst and an activist who fights domestic violence are criticizing the billboard sponsor for using the emotionally charged image of the brutalized woman with a black eye to "distort" the goals of the pot legalization campaign and exploit Denver residents' fear about growing crime and police understaffing.

All political advertisers are "pretty liberal with the truth" as they strive to grab people's attention and deliver the message, said veteran Denver pollster Floyd Ciruli on Thursday. "But this is probably on the very far edge . . . in terms of a political accuracy and honesty.

"They're not even identifying what the issue is at all."



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A campaign to legalize marijuana for adults is planning to unveil billboards showing a battered woman and her abuser.

And while the group could make a strong argument for its central claim - that adult marijuana is a safer alternative than violence-fueling alcohol - the billboard's message "is pretty distorting," Ciruli added.

But Change the Climate founder Joe White said the Greenfield, Mass., nonprofit group's Denver billboards reflect dozens of marijuana-reform advertising campaigns it has run from California to Washington, D.C.

He said his group independently spent less than \$10,000 to post the billboards in support of the I-100 campaign. One billboard will be at Santa Fe Drive and Alameda Avenue, another will be outside Invesco Field at Mile High and a third will be at 5500 Colorado Blvd.

The goal, White said, is to get political leaders to rethink the wasteful expenditure of \$50 billion nationwide to combat nonviolent marijuana users, when many American cities are hard-pressed to fund police, fire, libraries and other social services.

"Our ad is seeking to stimulate debate and raise new ideas for political leaders to consider in an era of extremely tight and almost nonexistent funding for social services," White said Thursday.

But Councilman Brown said the billboard sponsors are using the smoke screen of domestic violence to mislead voters.

"Domestic violence is not on the ballot," Brown said. "Why can't they be grown-up about this issue and be straight with the Denver voters?"

"If you want a marijuana initiative, use the 'M' word. Don't hide behind these other issues. Yeah, alcohol causes problems, there's absolutely no doubt. But alcohol is not on the ballot, and alcohol is a legal drug."

White said the group isn't hiding its pro-pot message.

He said the billboard directs people to its Web site where "you'll see (their marijuana reform crusade) front and center."

The head of the Yes-on-100 campaign, SAFER's Mason Tvert, defended the billboard's imagery, even though his group wasn't involved in crafting it.

"The fact of the matter is, if people used marijuana instead of alcohol, fewer crimes, instances of domestic violence, fights and traffic fatalities would occur," he said.

"This is a more honest campaign than any you will ever see."

Randy Saucedo, advocacy director for the Colorado Coalition Against Domestic Violence, issued a sharp rebuke of the billboards.

"I find it pretty offensive that we're getting some out-of-state types trying to further their goal by masking the tragedy of domestic violence, when the issue has nothing to do with domestic violence," Saucedo said.

"I find it very appalling, especially that they're deceiving the voters of Denver."

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