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Billboard brouhaha escalates

By ELLEN SUNG, Staff Writer

If state Transportation Secretary Lyndo Tippet wanted to remove offensive billboards from Interstate 95, his plan backfired. A new billboard in Harnett County calls him a profane name that also insults his intelligence.

The sign was put up by Sunshine Outdoor of Florida Inc., owned by Jerry Sullivan of Micanopy, Fla.

In February, Tippet sent a letter to Sunshine Outdoor asking it to refrain from posting "offensive billboard displays." Tippet said Gov. Mike Easley had asked him to respond to many letters about billboards for adult entertainment.

Sullivan fired back with the insult-laced billboard on I-95 near Dunn.

In a Web site mentioned on the billboard, he posted Tippet's letter and his own response. Sullivan's letter called the secretary an "ignorant, narrow minded, bigoted, intolerant, prejudicial pea brain." He also threatened a lawsuit, adding, "Who I rent signs to is none of your business."

Sullivan said he had leased a billboard to Cafe Risque near Dunn for four years and never received complaints. He didn't mention that he owns at least three Cafe Risque restaurants himself.

The 24-hour topless clubs are near interstates and have full menus but do not serve alcohol, said Mike Nigh, manager of Cafe Risque in Dunn. He identified the owner as Jerry Sullivan of Florida.

Sullivan did not respond to questions, saying that the Web site and the billboard, which calls Tippet a www.dumbassncdot.com official, speak for themselves.

Tippet, who lives in Fayetteville, can drive by the billboard on his way home. In response to a request for an interview with the secretary, his department issued a written statement. It noted that the N.C. Outdoor Advertising Association had asked its members to limit offensive billboards.

"While we recognize the First Amendment guarantee of free speech, as a state agency we have a responsibility to protect our children and families from these kinds of messages," it said.

Sullivan was embroiled in another free speech battle recently in central Florida. Protesters flooded his office with calls after he leased a sign in central Florida to a neo-Nazi group. The billboard was taken down in March.

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The billboard on the left prompted a complaint from state Transportation Secretary Lyndo Tippett, which in turn inspired sign company owner Jerry Sullivan to erect the one on the right, which Tippett can see when he drives home to Fayetteville.

N&O file photo



Staff Photo by Takaaki Iwabu