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Firm to erect free ads on smoking hazards

By Frank Phillips
Globe Staff

The state's largest billboard advertising firm, under fire for placing a high concentration of cigarette ads in minority neighborhoods, has decided to put up 35 free billboards to "educate" the public about the hazards of smoking.

Ackerley Communications of Massachusetts Inc., is carrying out the campaign with the state's Department of Public Health, which has lobbied for legislation to ban cigarette ads on billboards.

But Massachusetts Public Health commissioner, Deborah Prothrow-Stith, said Ackerley's public service billboards will not stop her agency's efforts to seek a complete ban on smoking ads.

"This is sort of one step in that direction," she said. "This will serve in a very important way to develop a public-private partnership around a public health issue."

Billboard critics contend that the Ackerley plan is a common industry ploy to defuse charges that outdoor advertis-

ing companies target minority communities for cigarette and liquor ads.

"The use of public service billboards will do more to simply protect billboards than to curb smoking," said Edward McMahon, the executive director of the Coalition for Scenic Beauty in Washington. The national group has been a major lobbying force to control and ban billboards.

"What they're saying is that we donate to charity, so forget the fact that

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■ BILLBOARD

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"we're a polluter and public health menace," McMahon said.

Ackerley's president Louis R. Nickinello, denied his efforts are aimed at heading off the effort to ban billboards. "My purpose is to show the purpose of my medium. That's my area of concern," he said. "We just want to be part of the antismoking program."

The billboard ad will contain a 12-by-25 foot poster displaying a baby in diapers. Next to the child is the message: "If there's a baby in the house, Please Don't Smoke." A cigarette burning in an ashtray is overlaid with a circle with a line through it.

Also on the poster are the

words: "This Message Sponsored by the Massachusetts Dept. of Public Health." Nickinello and Prothrow-Stith deny that the agreement to cooperate on the public service ad included a commitment by the department to ease up on its pursuit of an all-out ban.

But Nickinello, a former Democratic legislator from Natick who served as House chairman of the Transportation Committee, indicated that he hopes the company's offer would be a better alternative to outlawing cigarette ads. Ackerley has recently drawn criticism for placing a large number of billboards advertising cigarettes and alcohol in minority communities.

"We think this is the proper way to go," Nickinello said. "In-

stead of banning something, you educate."

Nickinello, who said the public service ads will cost Ackerley about \$200,000 a year, said the free billboards are not part of an antismoking campaign but rather an education effort. "We can't be hypocrites. We accept cigarette advertising. We will continue to accept it, although we're trying to cut it down," he said.

He said that the percentage of cigarette and liquor ads on his company's billboards in Massachusetts has dropped from 60 percent in 1985 to 20 percent last year.

"I've been very clear to the tobacco companies and told them they can't dominate a market or a neighborhood," he said.

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