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Newark ought to fight crime, not battle over signs

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The signs have been up for a while, billboards paid for by the Newark Teachers Union that say, "Help Wanted. Stop the Killings in Newark Now." And City Hall has been grumbling about them for a while.

This week, however, the controversy became more interesting as businessmen joined Mayor Cory Booker to complain that the NTU is branding Newark with a negative image that is costing the city money.

You'd think Newark's crime problem was a secret before the billboards went up.

Newark counted 106 homicides last year, 25 so far this year, three of them on Wednesday -- two dead in a bar argument, another stabbed in a domestic dispute. So why would anyone object to an appeal for help to stop the killings?

In part because that someone is the NTU. In a city where the public education crisis runs a close second to the city's crime crisis, people are not always sure what to think of the teachers union. Also, the union did not endorse Booker's election bid last year because Booker has supported school vouchers. Vouchers use public money to pay tuition to private schools, a concept that is anathema to the NTU. Are the billboards more criticism of Booker than a campaign to stop the madness?

Instilling positive messages in students should be the goal of the teachers union; however, its message is the polar opposite, officials at City Hall say. It is not hopeful and presents a negative image of Newark and the children who are the future of a great city.

Oh, come on. A Washington-based anti-union organization, the Center for Union Facts, has plastered Newark buses and billboards with signs, bearing a big, fat red F, that say the teachers union protects bad teachers, discourages good ones and fails the city's children. Is that a positive image of the city schools? Is City Hall complaining?

But the really good gossip in this controversy is the tale of the runaway bride-to-be. A young woman was interested in booking her reception at the Newark Club, which is perched 22 floors above the city. The club offers a panoramic view, from the Manhattan skyline to the ridge of First Mountain, including all of Newark. You can see for miles from the Newark Club, but I could see nary an NTU billboard.

Yet somewhere before or during her visit, the future bride saw an NTU billboard, decided that Newark was not safe enough for her wedding fete and left, never to return.

I went to the Newark Club, talked to the management -- which, I'm guessing, realizes it has no reason to like tales of fleeing customers any more than City Hall likes signs about murder. I was assured that business is up, the city is about to take off and the Newark Club is ready for the ride.

In the meantime, Arthur Stern, a developer, said tenants in his newly renovated 1180 Raymond Boulevard apartments -- great-looking apartments that offer a workout gym, valet parking, a partial basketball court and bowling alley -- were annoyed by the NTU sign nearby at Broad and West Park. He said he will buy the space and cover up the "godawful" thing.

How many times did I pass that billboard without noticing it? But once you see it, you cannot help but notice the old, abandoned office building next to it -- which is owned by the city. Not far away are two other old, empty buildings owned by Stern's realty company. One of Stern's buildings has fairly new windows, and both are slated for redevelopment -- they have been for years. For now, they are just two more "godawful" empty downtown derelicts that don't do much more for the landscape, or Newark's image, than the NTU's billboard.

I drove along Route 1 looking for the NTU billboards that were supposed to be on the highway. Maybe I was paying too much attention to the trucks and cars, but I never saw the NTU signs. I did see a "Crimestoppers" billboard put up by the city: Give Newark police an anonymous tip about crime, and they will give you a reward. Yet another Newark billboard offered to buy back guns, to help stop the shootings and crime the mayor doesn't want other people to allude to on their billboards. I wonder if the city's billboards made the runaway bride-to-be feel secure?

They are signs of the times in Newark just as the NTU billboards are. Is their message positive? Negative? Should a city that needs to pull out every stop to fight crime worry about anything other than whether the message gets the job done?

The people who live in Newark's neighborhoods are the ones who have the most reason to fear the shootings and killings and other crimes. I know they want something done about it because I've seen residents, young and old, at rallies carrying their own signs: "Enough is enough."

Curiously, the NTU did not put one billboard in Newark's neighborhoods. The signs are on the highways or at the access points used by people going in and out of the city. Why?

NTU president Joseph Del Grosso said the billboard company dictated where the signs would go. Trust me, the NTU has a reputation for being just a bit more assertive than that.

What will the union do to back up its call for help? It will hold community forums, the first one next month, Del Grosso told me. He assured me he didn't just make that up. It was part of the plan all along.

Let me tell you about the signs I don't want to see anymore. They are made of T-shirts or a piece of cardboard. They go up on fences and walls to mark the spot where someone was killed in Newark. People leave candles and write: "The good die young" or "We'll miss you," followed by some childhood nickname. I hate those signs.

Stop the killings.

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