

The city's top de-signer

In his crusade against illegal billboards, Rami Talbello has transformed a laissez-faire bureaucracy into a bare-fanged prosecutor

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Rami Talbello calls himself a "recreational gambler" but freely admits that the proceeds are his only income. In any case, they are healthy enough to finance an idiosyncratic sideline: running the municipal licensing department on a strictly volunteer basis.

So maybe he doesn't run the joint. But not since Laura Secord has any mere citizen from these parts inspired such a fit of official activity.

Rather than saving the country, this personable young man focused narrowly on saving Toronto from a plague of allegedly illegal billboards. In the process he has single-handedly transformed a formerly laissez-faire bureaucracy into a bare-fanged prosecutor of outdoor-advertising miscreants.

All over downtown, empty frames and anchors on the sides of buildings once covered in giant sheets of printed vinyl attest to his success. He identifies the offences, launches the investigations, and the city does his bidding.

Last week, Mr. Talbello scored a "huge victory" when his retainers in the city legal department won a court ruling allowing his dependants in the licensing department to remove dozens of billboards erected by one of Mr. Talbello's favourite corporate targets, Strategic Media.

Meanwhile, other functionaries are busy developing a new citywide sign bylaw to clean up the mess exposed by Mr. Talbello on his website, illegalsigns.ca, and meticulously documented in 650 official complaints.

None of them lifted a finger before this recreational gambler popped up out of nowhere and began to lay down the law they had previously preferred to ignore.

"No one was doing anything till we came along and showed them how stupid they were being," Mr. Talbello says. "We basically had to do their job for them."

He spurred them into action by shaming them. Now they are dutifully following his lead.

"It pays to be a pest!" Mr. Talbello exulted last week after the city won the ruling against Strategic Media.

Using winnings on sports bets to finance civic reform, Mr. Talbello has cultivated substantial political support - beginning with licensing committee chair Howard Moscoe, who loves the issue and the attention it brings him.

"When Howard Moscoe is on your side you can be 10 times the pest," he notes, with considerable acumen.

There are illegal signs to fight against in every ward in the city, he adds, allowing every local politician to join in, and the media love it.

"When you're an activist and you have the law on your side, political support and good media, you can't lose," he says, piloting his Mini Cooper on a tour of the canyons that once sported dozens of illegal signs - signs defacing historic buildings, signs covering windows, signs on the fronts of buildings and signs too close to other signs.

But no more.

"It's a heck of a lot of fun to drive around and see where all these billboards have been taken down," Mr. Talbello says. "You can make a huge difference."

Currently he is working closely with Mr. Moscoe to ensure that the new Talbello-inspired sign bureaucracy will have a structure to his liking. The buildings department is refusing to admit past mistakes by rescinding the approvals that resulted in so many "illegal" signs, according to Mr. Talbello. As a result, he is implementing a reporting structure that will inspire more independence and greater zeal.

"We have to start from scratch, unencumbered," he says. "We're making a huge difference, but will make even more of a difference once we have a new bureaucracy."

It's unclear what Mr. Talbello, a one-man show if ever there was one, means by the word "we." But there's no question who's calling the shots in the civic sign wars.

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CORRECTION

A recent column about anti-billboard activist Rami Tabello misspelled his name throughout.

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