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Anti-Abortion Billboard is Removed

By *LIZ ROBBINS*

Updated Feb. 25, 1:19 p.m. |The outdoor advertising company that put up a controversial billboard sponsored by a group opposing abortion decided to remove it on Thursday because employees in the Mexican restaurant below the sign were harassed by people angered by the billboard’s message, the company said.

“It’s down, or at least it should be coming down soon,” Peter Costanza, the general manager of Lamar Advertising New York, said in a telephone interview on Thursday. “Why did I take it down? Yesterday, somebody came into the restaurant harassing the waiters and waitresses. I don’t want any violence to happen around the buildings there.”

On Friday, Mr. Costanza said the billboard had been removed Thursday night.

A woman who answered the phone at Lupe’s East L.A. Kitchen, the Mexican restaurant beneath the billboard, on the corner of Sixth Avenue and Watts Street, said restaurant staff members were too busy for her to comment on the situation, and she would not confirm that any employees had been harassed. The restaurant, she said, has no affiliation with Lamar Advertising or the group opposing abortion.

“It wasn’t about politics,” Mr. Costanza said, adding that it was more about safety.

The anti-abortion group, Life Always, which is based in Texas, had a news conference in Manhattan on Wednesday to discuss the opening of an advertising campaign intended to reach black women. The billboard, located a half-mile from a [Planned Parenthood center](#) in SoHo, showed a young black girl in a pink dress and the words “the most dangerous place for an African-American is in the womb.”

The campaign, according to leaders of Life Always and New York church leaders opposing abortion who attended the news conference, was in response to the high rate of abortions in New York City, particularly among black women. A recent report by the city’s Department of Health and Mental Hygiene said that the abortion rate in 2009 was 41 percent. The rate among black women was 59.8 percent.

Life Always officials likened abortion to genocide, and those comments, coupled with the billboard, enraged city officials.

Bill de Blasio, the city’s public advocate, on Wednesday called for the billboard’s immediate removal. Christine C. Quinn, speaker of the City Council, issued a statement saying: “To refer

to a woman's legal right to an abortion as a 'genocidal plot' is not only absurd, but it is offensive to women and to communities of color."

Letitia James, a City Council member who represents parts of Brooklyn, said she was outraged that Life Always members had said they decided to post the billboard to coincide with Black History Month. Ms. James said she had talked to concerned citizens throughout the day and night on Wednesday, and she directed her staff to start an [online petition](#). Ms. James said she asked MoveOn, the liberal activist group, to post the petition. It went online around 10 a.m. on Thursday, and included Mr. Costanza's name.

In addition, the Women of Color Policy Network, a research and policy institute at New York University, wrote a letter to Mr. Costanza on Thursday. In a statement, the institute said it had received confirmation from Mr. Costanza that the billboard would be taken down.

Mr. Costanza said he was not inundated by phone calls or e-mails pleading for the billboard's removal. The billboard, 29 feet high and 16 feet wide, was erected on Feb. 18, and it had been scheduled to be up for at least three weeks, the Rev. Stephen Broden, the founder of Life Always, said on Wednesday.

Hal Kilshaw, a spokesman for Lamar Advertising, said that the advertisement had complied with the company's policy. "It's our belief that people have a right to express their message," he said, adding that advertisers must have a disclaimer saying who is sponsoring the message.

"We would have left it up," he added. "But Peter has become concerned because the wait staff in the restaurant below was harassed by people who objected to the message. There were talks about a protest tomorrow, and he was worried about their safety."

Ms. James said that before Lamar had decided to pull the ad, she had planned to hold a news conference with the Rev. Al Sharpton on Friday under the billboard.

In a statement, Life Always said it "strongly disagrees with Lamar Outdoor's decision to remove the billboard in SoHo, but the billboard's message holds true, and truth has a place in the public square. The intent of the board is to call attention to the tragedy and the truth that abortion is outpacing life in the black community."

The Rev. Michel Faulkner of the New Horizon Church in Harlem, who attended the Wednesday news conference with Life Always, said in the same statement:

"While this billboard causes a visceral reaction from many African-Americans, it addresses a stubborn truth that 60 percent of black babies do not make it out of the womb. We must do something now.

"Instead of challenging the design of the ad, we should ask why the message is true and how can we change the fact that the leading cause of death for African-Americans is abortion."

City officials voiced relief over the billboard's removal.

“We won!” Ms. James said.

Mr. de Blasio, in a statement, said: “In the few short days since this billboard was put up, countless New Yorkers responded with collective revulsion to the divisive and ugly nature of its message.”

Joan Malin, the president of Planned Parenthood of New York City, said in a statement that the organization was “pleased that Lamar Advertising has heard the voices of thousands of New Yorkers.”

An earlier version of this story incorrectly reported that the billboard went up on Tuesday. It was erected on Friday, Feb. 18.