

Beware of Environmental Warning Signs

By Earl Higgins

On a recent trip to San Francisco, I stayed in a hotel near Fisherman's Wharf. The hotel was comfortable and had a nicely landscaped courtyard with a door connecting to the main lobby. Just to the left of the door on the outside wall was a polished brass sign admonishing the reader with these dire words: "This building and the food served in it have been

determined to contain substances that can cause cancer." I stopped and read it again. I didn't know whether to (a) ignore it; (b) don a gas mask; (c) immediately check out of the hotel while holding my breath; (d) dispose of my clothing, luggage, and personal belongings in a toxic waste disposal site (lots of those in Louisiana); (e) laugh; (f) all of the above. Why, I asked myself, would a self-respecting innkeeper put up such an elegant sign unless a regulatory agency made it required by law? The hotel manager confirmed my speculation and informed me that the building was old and contained asbestos. The State of California has regulations mandating such signs. The manager knew of no one who had been deterred from

entering or eating because of this sign. (But, then, how do you prove the reasons people stay away from your business?)

Near the end of my stay I drove out to the famous Napa Valley, about an hour's drive from San Francisco and one of the best know wine-producing regions in the world. It was a beautiful spring day, and I was looking forward to visiting wineries and acquiring a pleasant glow from tasting the local product. My first stop was the Berringer winery. It is very picturesque, with elegant stone manor houses built in the early part of this century. There are, as one would expect, not just free tours and tastings offered, but also wine for sale in a retail shop. Even though it was a

weekday, there were lots of visitors buying many bottles of wine, and many glasses of wine were being tasted. And there, on the side of the majestic stone building with the ivy climbing on it, was another elegant, polished-brass warning sign. This one was the familiar one we read (with much difficulty because of the size of the print) on the label of wine bottles and beer cans: that wine contains alcohol that can be harmful to pregnant women and — surprise, surprise! — that too much of the stuff can impair one's ability to drive a vehicle or operate machinery. It then struck me that the whole purpose of such signs was not to warn the unwary of evil substances lurking in the liquid, but rather the scheme was a symbiotic relationship between the regulators and the regulatees. That is, the governmental regulators don't actually want to discourage the drinking of wine; after all, it is a multibillion-dollar business. The regulatees can piously show their compliance with the law by posting signs, well aware that not one person in all the millions who visit the Napa Valley will be discouraged from drinking wine by reading the signs. Every winery in the Napa Valley displays such signs.

This practice is similar to the posting of "Drug-Free Zone" signs in the neighborhoods where dope dealers abound. The posting of the signs is cheap, doesn't require additional police, doesn't get into the nasty social and economic questions of illegal drugs, and demonstrates to the populace that the city government is doing something about the "drug problem". The message is clear: we can solve social, public health, and environmental problems by slogans alone.

The recent antics by members of the Louisiana legislature in attacking the Department of Environmental Quality for doing its job too well leads me to propose a warning sign to be posted at bus terminals, airports, and on all roads leading into the state. The signs should read: "WARNING. This State Contains Members of its Legislature who have been Determined to be (and are determined to be) Dangerous to Your Health. Exercise Caution While Eating, Drinking, and Breathing." Maybe those signs will get more attention than the hotel warnings and the whining wine signs. △