

Advertisers' assault on small towns should set off sirens

I understand the reasoning. I'll even admit it's practical in a certain sense. Small-town police chiefs, their budgets constrained by a tight economy, find themselves in a bind: not enough patrol cars for their officers.

So, Government Acquisitions LLC, a company in Charlotte, N.C., has come to the rescue with an offer to donate cars to those departments. There's just one catch: The vehicles must be emblazoned, NASCAR-style, with advertising logos.

It's hardly surprising that a handful of desperate chiefs have said yes to the deal and hundreds more are reportedly considering it. No matter what business you're in, budget shortfalls can lead to compromises in service. And when public safety is the service you provide, those compromises translate into property damage, injury and loss of life.

So it's hard to fault the top cop who



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takes the company up on its offer. Hard to fault, but impossible to support.

The truth is, this is a bad idea. Frighteningly bad, in fact. To begin with, I don't think it does police any favors. In order to do the job effectively, an officer must project authority, must

command respect.

Forgive me, but authority and respect are not the first words I would think of to describe the cop who rolled up to the crime scene in a car festooned with golden arches. The implications for the society that officer has sworn to protect and to serve are, in the long run, even worse. I mean, what's next?

Does Bud Light get to chisel its logo into the frieze above the entrance of the courthouse? If we can't afford to refurbish the Lincoln Memorial, does MSN foot the bill in exchange for putting its rainbow butterfly on the wall behind Abe's head?

Maybe those scenarios sound far-

fetched to you. But they are not fetched nearly so far as you might think.

From the moment you open your eyes in the morning, somebody's trying to sell you something. Everything in our lives — music, art, sport, faith, food, the very clothes on our backs — has become a platform for marketing.

And it's only getting worse. In the past few years, we've seen Major League Baseball consider selling advertising space on the uniforms of its players, a New York couple trying to interest corporations in buying "naming rights" to their newborn child and Boston offering to christen subway stops for paying advertisers.

But suddenly, it's no longer a question of advertising intruding upon every nook and cranny of the physical world. Now the question is whether consumerism will be allowed to trivialize civic life, to usurp government functions.

Some things are so fundamental to the orderly operation of a society, so intrinsic to its dignity, that they have traditionally been entrusted only to people hired and

equipped by all of us, collectively, in the interest of the common good. Law enforcement is one of those functions. Or it used to be. Apparently, in some small towns at least, it will henceforth be just another item on the menu at McDonald's.

Makes you wonder. How seriously can we — or should we — take a government that will not pay, or even cannot pay, for its own most basic needs? That farms those needs out to the maker of hemorrhoid medicine, the hamburger restaurant or the electronics superstore that offers the highest bid.

I understand there is a practical reason for police chiefs to allow their cars to be used as rolling billboards. But I'd like to remind them there's also a compelling reason they should not:

It's wrong.

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