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- Home
- News**
- Towns
- Sports
- Blogs
- Entertainment
- Business
- Life
- Health
- Opinion
- Video
- Obits

HOT TOPICS Pistorius Verdict | New iPhone, Watch | Single Americans | Roger Goodell | U2's New Album | Home Depot

Home > News > Connecticut News

UConn Beer Billboards Cause Flap

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- +1 1



A photograph of a Coors billboard located off of I-91 in Hartford that features a beer bottle and the UConn logo, proclaiming "Huskies Love the Cold." (Courtesy Chris Healy / September 9, 2014)

By **KATHLEEN MEGAN**, kmegan@courant.com

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Four billboards featuring UConn's Husky mascot, a towering Coor's beer bottle and the slogan, "Huskies Love the Cold," caused a flap that had school officials scrambling Wednesday to have the advertisements taken down.

Ads had been removed from the two electronic billboards and would soon come down from the two "static" billboards as well, said Michael Enright, spokesman for UConn athletic department. All of the billboards are in the Hartford area with at least one on I-91 and another on I-84. Enright said he wasn't sure of all of the locations.

At least one legislator and others who saw the "endorsement" of a beer brand as contrary to UConn's efforts to curtail drinking and vandalism on campus, particularly after UConn victories and during the once-notorious Spring Weekend celebrations.

"What are they thinking? That's the first thing that came into my head," said Sen. **Toni Boucher**, R-Wilton, who is a ranking member of the legislature's higher education committee. "The university has gone to great lengths to curb excessive drinking ... Here, you are sending a mixed message."

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Boucher added: "I am extremely disappointed that the wisdom of this was not considered before a public outcry ensued."

UConn President Susan Herbst and Board of Trustees Chairman Lawrence McHugh issued a joint statement Wednesday that said: "Whatever the intention was, we believe that these billboards sent the wrong message and are pleased that they are being taken down. Adults are free to drink responsibly, but UConn cannot appear to endorse drinking among our students, particularly if they are under 21."

The advertisements were placed by IMG Sports, which holds the marketing rights for UConn athletics as well as many other universities, and has a national sponsorship contract with Coors Brewing Co.

"That sponsorship allows for Coors to use licensed trademarks of university athletic programs around the country marketed by IMG — UConn being one such program — in promoting UConn products," UConn Athletic Director Warde Manuel said in a prepared statement.

Manuel said that UConn does not receive direct funding from Coors for their sponsorship, since that contract is between Coors and IMG.

However, UConn is getting close to an \$8 million fee this year from IMG in exchange for the marketing rights. He said that UConn has been working with IMG for the past week to remove the ads.

Other corporate sponsorships through IMG include Webster Bank, Dunkin Donuts, Coke, UPS, and Connecticut Business Systems, Enright said.

Enright said that athletics staff had approved the proof for the Coors advertisement. He declined to say exactly why the ads were coming down.

"We determined that it wasn't what we wanted up there," Enright said, and worked with IMG to get the ad removed from the billboards. He said the university's contract with IMG allows the university to order the ads removed.

Enright said he wasn't sure exactly how long the billboards were up, but thought it was for about two or three weeks. He said the Coors advertisements will continue to run on the radio during UConn games, but as always, will also carry a message urging responsible drinking.

He said those ads are different from the billboards because there are "no visuals" of Huskies or references to UConn or the Huskies in the radio ads.

Attention was drawn to the billboards partly by a blog posted by Chris Healy, Republican activist and consultant, on his blog at <http://www.thehealystrategy.com/blog/>.

"Many find it hard to believe that the university would now have an 'official beer' even though campus officials have dealt with some pretty tawdry alcohol fueled behavior by UConn students," Healy blogged.

UConn's undergraduate president, Claire Price, said she's glad the administration is taking the ads down because, she said, she thinks the billboards could have upset and confused students.

"There are definitely students who don't drink, students who are underage, so I think that sends a bad message about the school," Price said. "And even if you are over 21, maybe you don't like Coors.. I don't think it was the best use of our logo."

David Jernigan, director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth at John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said "There are sound public health reasons for why many colleges have resisted efforts by alcohol companies to use university logos in their marketing campaigns."

He said that exposure to alcohol marketing among young people has been associated with increased alcohol consumption.

Courant Staff Writer Dave Altimari contributed to this story.

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