



Aerial ad for sex toy rubs some people the wrong way

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[Allen Essex \(Valley Morning Star\)](#)

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND - A company that sells sex toys is crying foul over Cameron County's grounding of its aerial advertising banner during Spring Break.

Vibrator.com spokesman Keith Levenson said Cameron County violated his company's First Amendment rights by ordering a pilot to stop towing its advertising banners from a plane that took off from the Port Isabel-Cameron County Airport.

The banner showed the silhouette of a woman with the message, "Got toys?" The company is located in New York City.

The pilot was told he had to stop towing the banner or he would be prohibited from towing any other advertising banners from the airport, according to Levenson and Mike Arnold, of Arnold Aerial, the New York City business that arranged for the towing.

Electric vibrators can prevent people from risking contraction of sexually transmitted diseases, Levenson said.

"People with sex toys can technically practice abstinence with sex toys," he said. "People have a physical need. It may be better in certain ways."

Cameron County Judge Carlos Cascos said, "I only got one phone call and an e-mail from someone upset about the banner."

The phone call came on March 24 from a family who said they were offended by the advertisement. Cascos said the e-mail appeared to be incomplete and he could not understand it.

"But that's not to say there weren't a lot more people out there who were offended and did not know who to call or what to do about it," Cascos said. "At first I didn't know what the problem was, but when I saw the picture, I found it offensive."

The county cannot control aerial advertising, Cascos said.

"We don't control the airways, but we can control what flies out of our airport," he said.

County Administrator Pete Sepulveda said the county had a contract with the company that was towing the advertising banner.

There was no language in that contract about what may be displayed on the banner, but the county is now working on a clause to be added to future contracts.

The pilot complied with the county's order and was allowed to continue towing other aerial banners, Sepulveda said.

Arnold, citing competitive reasons, declined to say how much Vibrator.com was charged for the towing of the banner.

Part of Spring Break also overlapped with Semana Santa, or Holy Week, this year, but Cascos said he is not aware of any phone calls from church officials about the banner.

Roland Herwig, an Oklahoma City-based spokesman for the Federal Aviation Administration, said his agency controls aviation safety, not the content of advertising. The First Amendment to the Constitution would prohibit a government agency from regulating that, he said.

About five years ago, a group of local ministers tried to stop a plane-towed banner for Hooters restaurants over a football stadium in Dallas, but the FAA told them the agency had no authority to regulate advertising, Herwig said.

Cascos said the county cannot stop the advertising agency from having its planes use another airport to tow its banners. But Jose Mulet, marketing director for Valley International Airport in Harlingen, said aerial banners are only towed from the county airport and from private crop-dusting airstrips because of the distance to South Padre Island.

Larry Brown, aviation director for Brownsville/South Padre Island International Airport, said larger Rio Grande Valley airports with scheduled commercial flights do not allow towing of advertising banners because it might interfere with passenger flights.

Arnold said he was surprised Cameron County stopped the towing of the Vibrator.com banner because it didn't seem very suggestive to him.

The Vibrator.com banner was flown over Miami/Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and in the New York City area without problems, he said.

Levenson said the county's action is an outrageous violation of his company's constitutional right to free speech. But he doesn't know if his company will take the matter to court, he said.

Cascos said the county's legal department will review language that will be inserted in future aerial banner towing contracts. And, if necessary, the county's lawyers will defend against any challenge to the county's authority to stop offensive messages being flown from the county airport.