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Ads or Free Speech? Court Ponders Signs Blasting a Business.

HARTFORD, Conn. — The Connecticut Supreme Court heard arguments Tuesday on whether local governments have the right to regulate signs on private property that criticize local businesses.

Seven years ago, Milford resident Eileen Arisian erected signs on her lawn expressing her dissatisfaction with the work of a home contractor and pointing out that the business was facing lawsuits.

The city's zoning enforcement officer said the two signs violated local regulations and ordered Arisian to take them down. When Arisian didn't comply, the enforcement officer sued.

Scott T. Garosshen, an attorney for the city, argued before the court that the signs are public announcements and amount to advertising that can be regulated by local government.

He said the broad definition of advertising used by lawmakers in giving that power to municipal governments in 1931 had "nothing to do with whether the sign says, 'Stop,' 'Eat at Joe's,' or 'Joe's has bad food.'"

He also argued that the city was not concerned with the content of the signs, but rather the number of signs, their size and distance from the street.

Justice Andrew J. McDonald questioned whether that meant someone would need city approval to put up an oversized American flag or a sign that said "Impeach McDonald."

Eileen Reynolds Becker, an attorney representing the 76-year-old widow, told the justices that the city had overstepped its authority. She argued the government only has the right to regulate advertising that promotes the sale of goods or services.

She said her client was angry over the quality of the work on her home, which included elevating it and putting a wrap-around deck on the second floor. The contractor also had failed to secure a certificate of occupancy for the work, forcing her to move out for a time, she said.

Arisian modified her signs in response to a letter from the city, but decided to go to court after officials told her that wasn't enough.

Outside the courthouse, Becker said it was clear to Arisian that the city was simply trying to censor her speech.

"People need to know what they are allowed to do with their own properties or not and how they can express their opinions," she said. "My client feels very strongly about her free speech rights and that if she wants to hang a sign on her property, she should be allowed to hang a sign on her property."

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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