

PRESTONSBURG — The Mountain Arts Center board met at a specially-called meeting on Tuesday to discuss their plans for handling the unexpected controversy that arose from their U.S. 23 billboard sponsored by Mann Toyota.

MAC Executive Director Keith Caudill cited research and Gallup polls that have continually ranked Eastern Kentucky at the bottom of health and well-being indices as his inspiration for the billboard's conception. His goal was to counter the national perception of the region as gloomy and depressed with a message that would generate smiles and laughter.

When Mann Toyota put up a large sign years ago that blocked part of the billboard, its commercial value had been impacted, and has since hosted public service announcements. Caudill's plan was to employ the obstruction for comedic effect, and use it to gain more attention. With sponsorship from Mann Toyota and the help of MAC comedian Freddie Goble, in character as Munroe, they put up their billboard. If the reaction they received was any indication, the sign was a massive success.

Representatives Dan Clark and C. W. Fortney from Mann Toyota said at the meeting that, in addition to the thousands of users who actually interacted with their Facebook posts of the billboard, they reached a total of 1.3 million viewers from 45 different countries as of Tuesday. Within 2 hours, the post was viral, and in a matter of days, Munroe was on computer screens in the Philippines, South Africa, Iraq, and elsewhere.

But not all of the reaction has been positive. All parties involved agree that their hearts were in the right place, and the billboard was created with the best of intentions. It was never meant to be obscene, but simply generate some laughs. Some members of the community, however, found the content objectionable, or were at a loss to explain to their kids why a “naked man” is on a billboard.

“There's nothing showing except an old man's body that don't look good,” Goble remarked. “And I've been singing a song called 'I Just Don't Look Good Naked Anymore' for 15 years. At least it proves that I've not lied.”

Goble went on to relate a touching story that explained the difficult position this new notoriety has placed him in. He discussed his long-standing friendship with his preacher's daughter, a five-year-old girl he describes as never seen without a smile on her face. After church services on Sunday, Goble asked her, “How are you this Easter morning?”

“She looked at me, and she said, 'You're the naked man.' She did not smile. She turned around and walked away,” Goble said. It was then that he decided something had to change.

Caudill explained that, given the MAC's role in the local community as a family-oriented hub of arts and music, even one complaint was one too many. Although the majority of the feedback has been positive, the sign has already accomplished its goal and perhaps it is time to move forward with a new design. In the meantime, the wheels were put in motion to get the current billboard design taken down.

Goble added, “All the people that called [to complain], no matter if it was a small number, are my friends, and I don't want them thinking badly of me.”