

CITY & REGION

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A sign of free speech – or of racism?

Anti-Obama placard draws criticism in Aurora

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It's no secret to anyone traveling on Center Street in the Town of Aurora that Joseph L. Shimburski doesn't like President Obama.

After all, Shimburski, 77, had advertised his disdain for Obama on his front lawn for more than 3½ years with a large sign that stated "Obama Ain't My Pres" on one side and "Say No to Obamacare" on the other, according to a neighbor.

When Obama was re-elected to a second term Nov. 6 over Republican challenger Mitt Romney, Shimburski altered his original sign.

"Voters Reniged" the sign now reads for motorists traveling south on Center Street toward the nearby border with the Town of Colden.

For those headed north, the other side of the sign reads: "Still No President."

Shimburski, a registered Republican, stands unabashedly behind his sign. He doesn't believe his new sign is racist or hate speech, but if others do, said Shimburski, that's their problem.

"If they think it's racist, tough crap," Shimburski said when The Buffalo News asked him about the sign. "If somebody wants to go get some kind of court order to take it down, that's fine."

The sign is set up just off the west side of the 11-mile road that connects East Aurora with Glenwood. It dwarfs a smaller placard in Shimburski's front yard that has the word "Obama" crossed out and is staked in the ground near the foot of a pine tree decorated with multicolored Christmas lights.

"It's not only racist, but jeez, he's our president," said Paul Bradford, who lives farther south on Center Road in West Falls and is an Obama supporter. "I drive by it every day. Part of me wants to take a sledgehammer to it and part of me – I'd like to see it taken down, for sure."

Added Bradford: "This is just too far. This is something you'd see 20 years ago, but not now."

Maybe, maybe not, said Frank B. Mesiah, president of the Buffalo branch of the NAACP, who points out that Obama's election in 2008 seemed to bring much to the surface about where the country stands on race.

"There's something good [about Americans] that produces an Obama, but there's also a negative side that produces so many people in so many states who have a negative feeling for people of color," Mesiah said. "There are things said about the president that have never been said of any other president."

"This elderly fellow," Mesiah said, "he came through educational and religious systems, but he still harbors these feelings. That tells us what's going on in this country that creates this type of a person."

The words on the sign are nearly identical to those that appeared on a bumper sticker that went viral on Facebook earlier this year. According to the Huffington Post, the bumper stickers were being sold on a website called Stumpy's Stickers. Re-niged plays on the word renege, which means to go back on a promise, but also is seen as shorthand for the offensive N word.

When asked whether he planned to take down his sign, Shimburski scoffed.

“No, I’m not going to take it down,” he said. “I can express myself.”

And, Shimburski said, more people seem to agree with his views – at least on his street.

“A couple stopped their cars and they said, ‘I like your sign,’” Shimburski said. “People go by, and they blow their horn (in support of the sign) every day.”

Bradford said that’s what motivated him to take a stand against the sign.

“I think he’s kind of proud of himself,” Bradford said of Shimburski, adding that the lack of outrage in the community over the erection of the sign three weeks ago confounds him.

East Aurora police reported that the department has not fielded any calls for complaints on that stretch of Center Street dating back through October.

“Because it’s a rural community, I think a lot of [neighbors] are probably OK with it,” added an indignant Bradford. “To me, I thought maybe this needs to be brought to light a little bit.”

Mesiah agrees with Shimburski that he has every right to put the sign on his front lawn.

“It may be inappropriate, and it may be hate speech,” Messiah said, “but he has a right to do it.”

Mesiah, however, added his “applause” for Bradford and anyone else who speaks out against the sign.

If there were more people like Bradford, stepping up with their own First Amendment rights to let Shimburski know they don't agree with him and think his views are "bigoted," "un-American" and "an embarrassment to ... [his] community," Mesiah said, signs like Shimburski's might never see the light of day.

"Right now, he has no feeling anything he's doing is offensive to anyone," Mesiah said of Shimburski.

"These people feel very comfortable speaking out. They must have a feeling of security that people won't say anything."

He added: "It raises the point that there are a lot more people out there who actually harbor these feelings than a lot of people want to admit."