

WESTWOOD NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL

September 14, 2011

Agenda Item #6

Community Impact Statement
Council File 08-2020
Citywide Sign Ordinance

The Westwood Neighborhood Council opposes adoption of the revised citywide sign ordinance now pending before the City Council Planning and Land Use Management committee because it would allow a proliferation of commercial advertising on both private and public property without a significant reduction in existing billboard and signage blight, and would allow new electronic signage without addressing energy use, light pollution, traffic safety, and other issues that could negatively effect communities throughout the city.

BACKGROUND

The City Planning Commission (CPC) approved this ordinance on March 26, 2009, after three public hearings that included extensive testimony from representatives of neighborhood councils, community groups, business and development interests, and the sign industry. Unfortunately, proposed changes to the ordinance first made public on July 22, 2011 by the City Planning Department seriously weaken the ability of the city to protect its citizens from the negative impacts of outdoor advertising.

SIGN DISTRICTS: The CPC retained the sign district provision allowing off-site and other prohibited sign types in sign districts, but greatly limited the potential for negative impact on communities by allowing districts only in high-intensity commercial areas zoned regional commercial or regional center. The CPC also approved a provision that allowed property owners to erect these kinds of signs only after acquiring and removing existing billboards in the surrounding community at a more than one-to-one square footage ratio. The CPC voted to "grandfather" only two pending applications for sign districts under the current city sign ordinance.

The revised ordinance now before the Planning and Land Use Management (PLUM) committee seriously undermines the CPC's intent by proposing to grandfather a dozen pending sign district applications and proposals for special signage in specific plan areas. This could result in hundreds of thousands of square feet of new off-site signage in the city without a single billboard being taken down. The CPC rightly decided that removal of billboards that blight commercial streets in many neighborhoods provides a tangible, quantifiable community benefit as well as ensures that there won't be a net proliferation of new billboards and off-site signage in the city.

COMPREHENSIVE SIGN PROGRAMS: The CPC included this provision to allow special signage

rules for large properties like shopping centers and college campuses, but the provision didn't allow any off-site or electronic signage generally prohibited by the ordinance. The revised ordinance would allow those generally prohibited sign types if they aren't visible from the public-right-of-way and don't exceed 10 per cent of the total signage on the property. These comprehensive sign programs would be allowed on any commercial property, either public or private, which opens the door to commercial advertising in city parks and recreational facilities.

ELECTRONIC SIGNAGE: The CPC prohibited electronic signage outside sign districts, but the revised ordinance would allow them as on-site, or business signs anywhere in the city. The only regulations proposed are a minimum eight-second message duration and a daylight and night-time brightness limit. These regulations fail to address serious issues of energy use, traffic safety, light trespass on residential properties, change in community character, and potential for privacy invasion. At a minimum, a moratorium should be placed on the installation of any new electronic signs and conversion of existing signs until regulations are in place that protect residents, motorists, communities and others from adverse effects.

OTHER

Donor Signs: Signs recognizing donors would be allowed by-right, without restrictions on size, location, text. This would allow signs carrying corporate logos anywhere, including city parks and other public property. These should not be allowed without strict regulations on size, text, and placement.

Right of Private Action: The provision allowing property owners within 500 ft. of an illegal sign to file suit if the city failed to enforce citations was removed from the CPC-approved ordinance, but should be reinstated.

Signs in the Public Right of Way: The ordinance exempts signage in the public right-of-way from any regulations. This signage should be made subject to applicable regulations of the ordinance.

Sign Adjustment: The ordinance would allow a zoning administrator to approve a 20% deviation from sign area and height, location, projection and clearance, and time limits on temporary signs, and would allow variances for adjustments beyond 20%. These are far from "minor" adjustments and should not be allowed without a public hearing and appeal process.

Signs Covering Windows: The CPC-approved ordinance prohibited any signs covering windows, but the revised ordinance would allow them if the fire department certified that they didn't present a safety hazard. This fails to account for the fact that signage adhered to windows can degrade the view to the outside, and seriously affect the quality of life of tenants of offices and apartments.

DOT hazard Review: The revised ordinance removes the provision requiring any signs within 500 ft. of a freeway to undergo a DOT hazard review. This should be restored.