

**Ad Hoc Group on Digital and A-Frame Signs
Meeting #3. Notes
June 29, 2015**

Group Members Present:

Nate Macek (Chair), Barbara Belmont, , Fernando Torrez, Pat Miller, Bill Blackburn, Danielle Romanetti, Peter Benavage, Michael Porterfield, Steve Milone, Lillian Chao-Quinlan

Staff Present:

Alex Dambach, Nancy Williams, Kristen Walentisch, Curtis Rowlette

Group Members Absent:

Amy Rutherford, Charles Sumpter, Jay Nestlerode, Carol Supplee, Lynn Bostain

Presentation:

Takeaways from the previous meeting were presented, and the Group discussed the reasons behind the main takeaways and what main consensus has been reached among Group members and the public regarding policy decisions.

The presented takeaways were:

- Seek better wayfinding signage for businesses located off King St.
 - Investigate lamp-posts as an alternative
- If we allow A-frame signs for storefronts, the City needs regulations.
- General consensus was to not allow A-Frame signs in historic districts but allow them in the rest of the city on private property with a permitting process
- Need for a rationale for not allowing A-frame signs at storefronts
- Continue exploration of alternatives for businesses to get the marketing benefits A-frame signs
- Address allowing “special advertising” for Old Town businesses
- Expand retail wayfinding to areas beyond Old Town

Discussion:

There was follow-up discussion on the consensus that had been reached. Mr. Torrez mentioned his engagement with the public about their opinions of signage around town and shared his observations with the Group.

Mr. Macek explained a meeting with Staff, where they came up with the idea to create a visual guide for signage the in historic district.

Ms. Miller clarified to the Group and public the difference between the private A-frame signs that are not allowed and the commercial wayfinding signs along King Street that are allowed.

Mr. Dambach recommended that the Group keep those distinctions in mind when considering policy decisions for the meeting.

Mr. Benavage asked for clarification of what constitutes an A-frame sign. The Group then discussed the recent Supreme Court ruling on signage and how that decision will affect the Group's mission and the City's ability to regulate private business signage.

Mr. Benavage pointed out that he spoke with Counsel and the City could possibly get in trouble by the fact that the City has regulations in place and does not enforce those regulations.

The Group debated whether the regulations should be uniform across the City. Mr. Macek explained the distinctions of recent Supreme Court and State decisions. He then suggested that the Group will likely need another meeting in order to take votes on policy ideas to ensure everyone's opinions are heard. He asked if anyone had any questions about the Takeaways from last meeting.

Presentation, Continued:

Mr. Dambach made a brief presentation on digital signs going over digital sign policy options the city faces, problems are with current regulations, and the benefits and problems with digital signage. He explained the two sign types are that never allowed in the city, flashing and animated signs, and how their prohibition effectively eliminates the allowance for digital signs. He continued by discussing "the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" aspects of these signs. He also stated that nearly every city in the country is having similar problems forming policies regarding digital signs. He continued by discussing what a few other cities around the country allow. Mr. Dambach introduced Kenny Peskin to the room, pointing out that he works for the International Sign Association. He finished by opening the table up for discussion.

Presentation Discussion:

Mr. Benavage asked what the exception is for Northern Virginia Community College and how they were allowed to put up their sign.

Mr. Milone clarified that NVCC put it up without City approval because that is a state institution exempt from City approval. The group discussed what other signs exist around town that are not allowed under current regulations. Examples included: round 'open' signs throughout the city, Toyota Dealership, TC Williams, Polk Elementary School, etc.

Mr. Torrez recommended against policies that are too technical.

Mr. Porterfield admitted that he generally likes digital signs, and then clarified his interpretation of animated and moving signs. He is okay with digital signs but not in the Old and Historic Alexandria District and Parker Grey Historic District.

Ms. Romanetti asks if digital signage would regulate content. Mr. Dambach clarified that regulating content is discouraged, and he elaborated on regulations permitting but restricting special advertising.

Mr. Milone followed up by stating that a changing sign would qualify as special advertising, so how would the City allow it? Ms. Romanetti pointed out that there is no institution that regulates what is currently on digital signs, which is different from in the Historic Districts.

Mr. Dambach clarified that special advertising is permitted with restrictions, and mentioned the review process in HDs for signage.

Dambach asks Board of Architectural Review (BAR) staff to clarify their rules on special advertising. Stephanie Sample from the BAR staff clarified the review levels and what BAR allows.

Group reached consensus that the Ordinance should get away from regulating special advertising.

Mr. Benavage asked for clarification regarding what constitutes a flashing sign. He thinks the group should distinguish what a digital sign is, but should exclude Old Town. Ms. Sample confirmed that the BAR has never approved digital open sign, or any digital sign, other than Old Town Theater. The Majestic sign is grandfathered.

Mr. Macek went over the definition modification proposals that Dambach has presented. He clarified what the Group needs to determine regarding animated and flashing signs.

Mr. Porterfield thinks the titles of flashing and animated signs should be changed in the Zoning Ordinance because they aren't descriptive.

Mr. Torrez asked if storefront TV screens are allowed in store windows in Old Town, and if not, why has he seen them. Mr. Dambach pointed out that City is working to enforce regulations against TV screens.

Mr. Benavage proposed distinguishing the graphics on signs. He pointed out bank signs that display time and temperature.

Mr. Blackburn argued that he doesn't think digital signs should be allowed in any neighborhood.

Mr. Macek explained the situation at Polk Elementary. He stated that since these signs do exist in the City, the City must create regulations for them so they don't get out of control. He stated the City should regulate brightness for institutions and businesses.

Mr. Porterfield suggested that only a business of a certain size should be eligible for digital signage, which would weed out businesses in Del Ray and other small ones.

Mr. Benavage pointed out that once you start to regulate lumens, other issues will arise. He gave the George Mason University sign in Fairfax as an example and how its brightness and closeness to road is obnoxious. He asserted that there need to be general guidelines that can be amended as needed in future.

Ms. Romanetti asked what the point is for schools to have illuminated signs. Macek explained that when Polk came before the Planning Commission, the argument made by representatives of Alexandria City Public Schools claimed changing messages were to alert kids and parents of upcoming events. Mr.

Macek confirms the current process for signage of a similar type, which is approval via SUP. Group agrees that this should continue to be the process. Macek further asserts that even if SUP is needed for digital sign, Group needs to establish exactly how City will regulate them and what features/standards will be allowed.

Group discussed how they would measure and regulate illumination and brightness. Ms. Quinlan pointed out that there should be regulations on the amount of time a sign would be lit. What establishments/institutions would be able to have signs and to what time can they stay lit.

Mr. Macek summed up the recent discussion by establishing the policy features to be determined:

- Regulations for hours of operation, brightness, distance from road,
- Controls for what institutions/businesses can qualify to use digital signs
- Requirement that these signs would only be allowed by SUP.
- Group agrees that digital signage should not be completely forbidden.

Wayfinding Presentation:

Mr. Dambach presented the A-frame policy options for wayfinding signs. He discussed problems with current A-frame wayfinding signs. Then he highlighted what staff has proposed as alternatives to the current program. The first idea would be using A-frames but bolting them to the ground, with interchangeable bolted plates containing signs for each business. He then described another idea posed by staff of a 2-post “monument” sign with similar bolted plates.

Ms. Belmont shared her approval of the 2-post sign idea, stating that she finds the concept drawing attractive and effective. Mr. Dambach clarified that the businesses would maintain the signs. Ms. Romanetti questioned if the City would let the businesses maintain them. Mr. Milone doesn’t think that will work and that the City should regulate and enforce.

Mr. Benavage opened a brief discussion on what content would be on the signs and what their appearance would be. Would signs be uniform or individual? How would the standards be established? Mr. Macek asked the Group if the City should stick with the current A-frame design standards, which the Group agrees is a good idea. He then asked what Group thought about staff vs. businesses controlling the signs. Group agreed the City should maintain the wayfinding signs. Someone asked why the current process isn’t effective, and what the problems are. Ms. Romanetti described her experience getting her business removed from a wayfinding sign when her business relocated and how difficult it was. Mr. Torrez suggested leaving it to business owners to regulate who gets a spot on sign and in what order businesses should be shown in. Group consensus is that City should run the new wayfinding regulations.

Macek summed up new A-frame wayfinding policy decisions:

- The depicted 2-pole “monument” sign is preferred
- City should maintain and operate the program
- There needs to be a replacement method for Old Town for the existing signs
- There is potential for a commercial wayfinding policy for other neighborhoods.

Mr. Macek moved on to highlight the need for clarification from the Group regarding A-frame signs on private property vs in public ROW.

Mr. Dambach went over the initial consensus from the Group from June 3rd meeting to allow individual business A-Frames in front of storefronts, but how the consensus shifted at the June 18th meeting to not allow these in the historic areas of Old Town and to not allow these within the public rights of way.

Mr. Porterfield suggested that if A-frames are allowed, content must be temporary and changeable, so they should not advertise business names or logos, as a static wayfinding sign will do. The group mostly agreed with this proposal.

Mr. Benavage pointed out that the more restrictions that are placed on the signs, the more difficult it will be for the City to micromanage the regulations. He posed question of whether it would be more effective to have allow signs in line with tree wells

Mr. Milone admitted he fully opposes A-frames both in ROW and on private property.

Mr. Torrez argued businesses would close without A-frames.

Ms. Romanetti responded that businesses were around before A-frames and are still in business, and will continue to be in business if A-frames are removed. She pointed out that there should, however, be another way for HD businesses to advertise, so another solution should be allowed for them, like window advertising, etc.

A majority of group members agreed that:

- No A-frames should be permitted in historic districts (except for wayfinding)
- A-frames should be allowed outside of historic districts on private property

Public Comment:

Kenny Peskin, International Sign Association: The organization is running a webinar that would benefit discussion. Cannot allow more flexibility to non-commercial businesses, pointed out smaller digital signs not mentioned that are present; happy to help with workarounds with City regarding alternatives.

Elinor Coleman, Vintage Mirage: Welcomes new pole wayfinding idea. Thinks bolting wayfinding signs to ground is good idea. Sign companies should be in charge for bolting and changing signs. Must regulate A-frames at restaurnats, not fair

Cathy Puskar: Thinks we should focus on new development centers like Oakville, etc. that will have wider sidewalks. A-frames might be appropriate in other neighborhoods outside of Old Town. Doesn't understand argument of who gets on signs. Digital signage: Birchmere example, doesn't mind changing signs. Carve out opportunities for special events. Okay brightness.

Gloria Bodry, artist at Torpedo Factory: Explained examples of signs and decorations in New Orleans, La. Passed around photos of examples of NOLA signs that are attractive as examples of wayfinding sign ideas for Old Town.

Betsy Rosenbaum, Old Town resident: expressed support of wayfinding 2-pole signs but is not in support of A-frames in Old Town: cause clutter, monument posts have potential.

Cosmo Catering: A-frames are dangerous. Agreed with wayfinding idea though. Should use digital signage as advantage for city.

Amy Slack, Del Ray resident: digital signage is too much. Consider the amount of street furniture. Her business in Del Ray doesn't have A-frame but is hurt severely by parking reduction

Katy Canady, resident of Rosemont: not enthusiastic about A-frames. Thinks people should rely more on the internet. Doesn't like idea of digital or animated signs. Argued that City does not need to accommodate these signs just because they use new technology.

Kenny, Murphy's Irish Pub: Spoke in favor of A-frame signs for individual storefronts in Old Town. He stated his business spent a lot of money on its sign, which reflects the restaurant's brand. Said customers come in solely because of what A-frame is advertising at that time: sports game, etc. Stated that signs are not hazardous. Argued that he has increased staff thanks to business that A-frame brings. Would like to have known about meetings earlier, so that the businesses like his could take stand.

Robert Lusk, OT Signs: Points out that Old Town is such a charming place to live and work and believes in supporting small business and knows these signs are effective and important. Created new design that he wants staff to consider. Passes drawing around.

John Rosenbaum: Thinks it's exaggeration for business to say they'll go out of business because they were fine before A-frames.

Hugh, Refuge Restaurant (email read by Mr. Torrez) A-frames are essential for business for passersby to enter restaurant. Pay taxes, let them keep signs is all they ask. Mr. Rosenbaum asserts that sign has been complained about numerous times and signs are ridiculous.