

**Ad Hoc Group on Digital and A-Frame Signs  
Meeting #2 Notes  
June 18, 2015**

Group Members Present:

Nate Macek (Chair), Barbara Belmont, Lynn Bostain, 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

The Meeting Opened with Audience Comments:

*Jon Rosenbaum, Old Town resident:* Believes the signs are totally out of control; has reported to BAR several times, and that they are even on City property. He mentioned Old Town Deli's sign board blocking the sidewalk at King Street and N. Washington Street. He pointed out that The Parsian restaurant (now closed) put two signs out. He has been in favor of the Waterfront Plan, and likes overall direction of the city, but thinks the A-frame signs are tacky, making Old Town look like Ocean City. He added that sign boards make walking on the sidewalk like walking through a mine field.

*David Fromm, Del Ray resident:* Made distinction between signs on private property versus signs in public right-of-way. The ROW signs pose problems, and there need to be more clear regulations. In Del Ray, the sidewalk varies dramatically, so restrictions in general will not work. Allowing A-frame signs will be problematic.

*Sarah Haut, Del Ray resident:* Has problem with A-frame signs, and thinks they should only be allowed on private property, if there is private property on which to put them, otherwise in tree wells. She mentioned that she runs with her dog, but others have baby strollers, etc... and the signs are always in the way. She mentioned one instance where she saw one smack-dab in the middle of the sidewalk.

*Katy Cannaday, Rosemont resident:* Went to Old Town for Irish Parade, and said she couldn't even walk up King Street and the signs that were meant to be on the corners were all over the sidewalk because they do not stay in place.

*Robert Lusk, Sign Professional:* Has worked in city for over 25 years. He believes there is a need in the city for A-frame signs. He wants to make himself helpful to the City and businesses to establish policies to benefit all parties.

*Elinor Coleman, owner of Vintage Mirage:* Mentioned that she was a volunteer at the Wayfinding Sign Program meetings. She advocated for the A-Frame Wayfinding Sign Program because it helps

businesses, like hers on a side street, to attract customers. She thinks the signs work wonderfully. She thinks it would be too tedious for the City to come up with another program alternative to A-frame signs. She encourages the City to work with local businesses in order to establish a mutually beneficial solution.

*Stan Protigal, Del Ray resident:* Mentioned the legal issue, referencing ADA compliance, and said there should be enough room for multiple people to walk down the street without having to weave in and out. He pointed out the *Commercial Sidewalk Regulations* for other municipalities handout, claiming that the examples given aren't comparative to Alexandria and those regulations cannot be compared to what we should be doing here. He stated he is not a supporter of A-frame signs for each storefront.

*Connie Derosiers, owner of Emma's Espresso & Wine Bar:* Stated that an A-frame sign is imperative to her brand new business. Signs are essential to those taking financial and lifestyle risk of opening small business on the street that she has. She claimed the community loves her store, and the A-frame sign at the corner of Mount Vernon Avenue directing people to her store is crucial to her business. She said that A-frame signs are essential to many businesses in Del Ray.

#### Presentation (Takeaways from Prior Meeting):

Staff presented the 'Four Takeaways' from the last meeting and explained to the public the main points that the Group discussed at the June 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting.

Mr. Dambach clarified the difference between the Wayfinding A-Frame Program and presence of A-frame signs at individual storefronts.

Mr. Macek pointed out that street poles should be considered with more thought, which they once were during the Wayfinding Program launch, and he thinks they should be reconsidered.

Mr. Dambach went over *Drafted Standards for Storefront A-Frame Signs in Alexandria* handout. He explained the standards and their goal to make sure that signs would be of a size and in locations such that people would not need to weave around them on sidewalks. He gave the example of the Outdoor Dining Program, which has strict regulations for outdoor dining furniture etc. He explained potential material and design regulations for the historic districts that would be more restrictive.

#### Discussion from Presentation:

Ms. Belmont asked whether the wayfinding signs proposed under the drafted regulations would be for specific purposes, or if they would be to generally advertise stores, etc. Mr. Dambach responded that the City doesn't wish to regulate content. Ms. Romanetti interjected stating that her business was not allowed to put any sort of temporary material in its signage via the current administrative BAR approval process.

Mr. Porterfield said while he is against the A-frame signs in general, if there were to be signs, they should be advertising temporary, changeable material *only*. He thinks static, permanent signs are lazy advertising on behalf of the store owner.

Mr. Milone agreed with Mr. Porterfield saying that small businesses should be able to include temporary details. He gave the example of the Old Town Flower Shop that advertises small and charming things on their A-Frame sign.

Ms. Romanetti pointed out that restaurants can put menu signs up but she can't.

Mr. Smeallie said that he is even stronger in his opposition of the signs now than he was at the first meeting after walking around the streets in Old Town and the West End lately. He again pointed out that the city was built on a Federalist/Georgian style, and that the appearance should keep to those features. He said that when he went out and was actually looking at the signs, he noticed how unpleasant their appearance really is. He doesn't think the City should completely deem them illegal, but thinks they should require BAR approval in historic districts.

Mr. Benavage pointed out that the regulations need to address the differences between Old Town and other areas. He also said that 'A-frame' implies a temporary sign that should only be up during hours of operation. He produced a drawing of a signage idea, which depicts small individual business signs that can be added to or removed from a permanent fixture, like a lamp post, as a wayfinding mechanism. Mr. Macek pointed out that this idea was an option originally for the Wayfinding committee, but that Group went with A-frames instead. Mr. Benavage's drawing was passed around, and the overall reaction from the Group was that they like the lamp post idea.

Mr. Benavage further stated that businesses need signage other than the sign on the building, but there need to be regulations to make sure signs are close to the building or not in the way. He emphasized that it is possible to go overboard. The purpose of advertising is to inform and persuade, and too much on a sign defeats that. He said that well-organized, simple signs will be the ones to get the most business, not the cluttered ones. He remarked that it is unfortunate members of public weren't at the first meeting for this Group when staff spotlighted the fact that Transportation & Environmental Services (T&ES) claims that the City has not received any complaints from members of the public about injury due to the signs. He mentioned that regulations are needed to prevent selective enforcement of signs, and that the City must enforce regulations, and they must be uniform across the board, instead of by neighborhood (but that doesn't include current BAR restrictions).

Mr. Torrez indicated that every part of Alexandria is different. He doesn't want to reinvent the wheel or give more work to staff, but suggests the school district map as a potential reference point as guidance to identify different areas of the city where sign regulations could be catered to specific neighborhoods. He argued that corners of sidewalks should be off limits to all signs except for wayfinding signs, and that signs should not cause pedestrians to have problems walking down the sidewalk. He gave the example of Columbus Street and King Street, where businesses had three A-frame signs lined up right next to the wayfinding sign on that corner. He thinks different businesses in one building should come together to have one sign for the building. Business owners should be given different options depending on their 'district.' Those options would reflect different neighborhoods, different demographics, etc...

Mr. Macek asked how the Group could come up with an idea to make it easier for businesses to have special advertising without needing A-frame signs. He pointed out that retail stores are disadvantaged

because they can't do menu boards, can't do outdoor dining, and can't have advertising content. He indicated that the emerging Group consensus is that businesses should be able to advertise on their signage. He called attention to staff's draft *Standards for Storefront Signs* as a beginning point, but points out that they are not set standards. He thinks it will be difficult for Group to come to conclusion because it includes members from such a diverse background. How does the Group address wayfinding? Should the City continue with the A-frame Wayfinding Program or enact lamp posts like Mr. Benavage suggested?

Ms. Romanetti commented that wayfinding is only in Old Town, so the rest of the city needs different distinctions for future regulations.

Mr. Smeallie emphasized that Alexandria is not only Old Town, but has several very diverse regions. He believes the City should keep the ban on A-frames in Old Town unless stores like Ms. Romanetti's get concessions from the City as to what's allowed. He doesn't think Group should discuss the wayfinding program at all, because he believes that Old Town needs them.

Mr. Torrez emphasized his support for an alternative similar to or the same as Mr. Benavage's depiction of the lamp post with the small, hanging signs and pointed out that once the Group decides on wayfinding signs they can move on to discussing private advertising signs and content.

The Group asked Ms. Derosiers (owner of Emma's Espresso & Wine Bar) exactly where her sign is. She indicated that it is off-site on Mt. Vernon Avenue, and said her logo has won national award for its design. She claimed no one would see her store if there wasn't a sign.

Mr. Torrez suggested as a way to incentivize businesses that the City look into how much it would cost for it to put up the lamp post signs in other neighborhoods, like Arlandria. Businesses would benefit to know the City is investing in certain neighborhoods.

Ms. Miller drew attention to the fact that the City's Wayfinding Program is already fabricating lamp post wayfinding signs. City staff, Nancy Williams, clarified that the proposed non-commercial wayfinding lamp post signs would be every block. Alex Dambach added that the Wayfinding Program also intends to install kiosks along King Street in Old Town, which would be wayfinding and directional, not commercial. He reiterated the Wayfinding Committee's decision to go with the A-frame design for commercial wayfinding. He acknowledged the downside of A-frame wayfinding signs is that they are not interchangeable.

Mr. Benavage asked where the lamp posts are supposed to be located, and asserted that businesses could benefit from them too, rather than their purpose being solely wayfinding.

Ms. Belmont said the lamp posts are a great idea---anything to get the A-frames off the sidewalk. She has seen some chalkboards on storefront A-frame signs that haven't been cleaned in a year. She emphasizes that not all signs are created equal around town.

Presentation (Alternatives to A-Frame Signs):

The following alternative ideas for stores to market on the sidewalk were presented:

- Welcome mats on sidewalk at storefront
  - There was very little discussion on this idea
- Guerilla Marketing: chalk/art or rain-repellent display on sidewalk
  - Group did not seem to support this idea
- Small Pole Signs: example of King Street Standard in Charleston is given
  - Group members acknowledged awareness of the Little Theater, which uses a similar signage approach
- Spotlight Signs: signage projected onto the sidewalk using spotlights
  - Group did not seem to support this idea
- Others?
  - Time was left for group members to propose other ideas, but none were submitted.

Mr. Smeallie expressed opposition to the ideas using paint or spotlights, saying they are not appropriate for Old Town, but small pole signs could work.

Ms. Romanetti stated that businesses in Old Town should be able to use their windows.

Al Cox (BAR staff) clarified that restaurants can get approval administratively for menu boards in the historic districts.

Mr. Torrez asked what the reasoning is behind the regulation of businesses only being able to have what is more than 50% of their business on signs. Mr. Dambach responded by explaining that the Board of Architectural Review (BAR) is currently revising administrative regulations for signs in historic districts.

#### Main Takeaways:

Mr. Macek reads back main takeaways:

- Wayfinding: investigate alternative of lamp posts; think about doing opposite corner placement of where kiosks would be. Staff should work on this for next meeting
- A-frames: support voiced for not having A-frames in historic districts; concern RE special event days; if allowed, must be permitting process
- Special Advertising: info on what could you do in windows, how it would work in context of admin approvals for BAR
- Expand wayfinding to places outside of Old Town

Mr. Milone mentioned that the current wayfinding A-frame signs need to be on all 4 corners because each sign is assigned to a specific block.

#### Public Comment:

*Mr. Rosenbaum:* whatever is decided, the city must have enforcement of signage. He questions whether any of the Group's efforts will be effective.

*Ms. Rosenbaum:* Thinks the whole discussion is baffling because people who can read should be able to read a store sign walking up and down the street.

*Mr. Fromm:* Insists that the City prioritizes what decisions need to be made, including clarifying regulations for signs in public ROW and on private property, because telling stores what they must do on their property is tough. Menu boards are helpful, but shouldn't be restricted to restaurants. He voices his surprise that signs in windows are not allowed in the historic districts because they are everywhere. He mentions that Del Ray does not allow backlit signs, and that the regulation seems to be working there, so the City should be able to regulate and enforce its policies as well. Regarding A-frame signs in Old Town: when too many A-frame signs are present, they begin to be something you learn to ignore. He thinks A-frames should require administrative approval. Otherwise, the City must enforce their illegality immediately.

*Ms. Haut:* Believes wayfinding signs should be all over city, and that regulations should be kept simple for sign guidelines.

*Ms. Cannady:* While she likes the idea of keeping regulations uniform, she understands that the Old & Historic Alexandria historic district needs special treatment in regard to signs.

*Mr. Lusk:* Pointed out Old Town has always had special rules. He doesn't think removing A-frames from Old Town is what anyone wants. Actions should be taken on currently displayed signs that are ugly and tacky. Some signs should be allowed, but he wants to think of good options that are attractive that he and businesses can work with City to agree upon.

*Ms. Coleman:* Pointed out the struggle the Wayfinding Program had originally, and that there's a reason the committee came up with the guidelines they did. She thinks there should be a uniform look that makes Old Town look classy and traditional. She applied to the BAR for additional signage once and was denied. She agrees that the City should work with local sign companies like Mr. Lusk's to come up with a creative alternative, if BAR won't allow additional signage of certain types. She wants the City to come up with specific guidelines that all Old Town businesses can abide by that is attractive.

*Mr. Protigal:* Thinks retail businesses should be allowed to have advertising signs like the restaurants are allowed.

*Ms. Derosiers:* She likes the attraction of A-frame signs from a consumer standpoint. She then mentioned that from a marketing/advertising standpoint, whether we like the signs or not, we all like the message they give us, inevitably alluring us to the particular business or not. She encourages the Group to be sensitive to new businesses, and the fact that signs bring them business they wouldn't otherwise receive. Signs can serve both foot traffic and motor traffic.

Points for Staff to Consider:

- Expanding pedestrian-oriented wayfinding signage outside of Old Town
- Private property regulations vs public space

- Enforcement of current A-frame signs that are illegal. Once new policies are in place, the City needs to give assurance that signs will be regulated so the program survives and stays in place. Enforcement for educational purposes has to start with City.