



City of Arts & Innovation

Land Use Committee

TO: LAND USE COMMITTEE MEMBERS **DATE: DECEMBER 9, 2024**

FROM: COMMUNITY & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT **WARDS: ALL**

SUBJECT: WORKSHOP – EXISTING SIGN ORDINANCE AND POLICY (RIVERSIDE MUNICIPAL CODE CHAPTER 19.620)

ISSUE:

Review and provide feedback on the existing sign regulations within Chapter 19.620 of the Riverside Municipal Code (RMC).

RECOMMENDATIONS:

That the Land Use Committee:

1. Review and provide feedback on the potential amendments to Chapter 19.620 of the Riverside Municipal Code (RMC); and
2. Provide direction to prepare all, some, or none of the amendments for Planning Commission consideration and recommendation.

BACKGROUND:

On August 25, 2015, the City Council adopted a comprehensive update to Chapter 19.620 – General Sign Provisions of the Riverside Municipal Code (RMC). The amendments involved:

- Re-organization and consolidation of existing Code provisions;
- Creation of new sections to address design principles, prohibited signs, and exempt signs;
- New or modified development standards related to building mounted signs, freestanding signs, special use signs and temporary signs;
- New or modified procedures for reviewing temporary signs, sign permits, and sign programs;
- Creation of a procedure to allow applicants to request minor deviations from the sign requirements; and
- Revisions to the sign definitions (clarifying, adding, and removing).

The comprehensive update resulted in today's existing sign code (Attachment 1). Since then, minor updates have been made for clarification purposes.

On September 9, 2024, City Staff conducted a workshop with the City Council Land Use Committee to examine the current sign code as it is today and any opportunities for streamlining, amendments, or general feedback. The Committee expressed interest in revisiting and refreshing the sign code and provided Staff with direction to return to the Committee to discuss the following potential Code

amendments.

- Window sign standards, particularly for vacant storefronts;
- Standards for blade signs;
- Standards for Electronic Message Center signs/digital displays;
- Codification of certain Design Guidelines, including expanding prohibited materials/sign types, standards for illumination , etc.; and
- Special tools for technical assistance like toolkits, handouts, etc.

The Committee also discussed enforcement of existing codes and regulations related to signage as well as other matters; separately, an update on current enforcement and citation policies and processes will be presented to the Committee by the Code Enforcement Division.

The report below will discuss these topics in detail for the Committee's consideration and direction.

DISCUSSION:

To create a holistic picture of best practices for sign policy amongst peer cities, Staff surveyed and compared sign codes from 10 different jurisdictions using a cross-jurisdictional matrix of best practices, including the Riverside Municipal Code (RMC) (Attachment 1). The matrix allows for a snapshot comparison of sign policies the Committee expressed specific interest in and should be used as a reference for discussion.

Window Sign and Wrap Standards

Currently, the RMC permits window signage up to 25% of the sign area. Of the 10 cities surveyed, all cities permit and regulate window signage through the Zoning Code. Half of the cities surveyed have the same requirements, with one city allowing for up to 50% of window coverage during the holiday season (City of Redlands, November 15 – January 10). Two cities permitted greater window area signage with the City of Atascadero permitting up to 50% of the window area and the City of Palm Springs permitting up to 40% of the window area only in the Downtown.

Separate from window signage, window wraps are an opaque film used to cover most, if not all, of a window area, blocking transparency, and are often printed with artistic designs, graphics, or images. Window wraps that do not use commercial messaging such as business names, product listings or imagery, or contact information are not considered signage, are not regulated by the RMC, and are therefore considered allowed, but have no applicable standards. Similarly, none of the jurisdictions surveyed have standards or code language regulating window wraps.

Recommendation

1. The cross-jurisdictional survey showed that the current window sign standards within the RMC are consistent with peer cities in the region. Therefore, staff recommends no change to window sign standards.
2. Alternatively, Staff could support modifications to window sign standards to encourage flexibility and creativity.
3. Window wrapping is not commonly regulated by the zoning codes within the region. The RMC may be amended to create standards to regulate window wraps at the direction of the Committee.

Blade Sign Standards

The RMC currently defines blade signs as “a double-sided sign oriented perpendicular to the building wall on which it is mounted;” however, only provides minimal standards and is only applicable to historic areas where appropriate and period-specific. This has created challenges in

permitting creative signs of this type throughout the City. Of the cities surveyed, six adopted objective standards that permit and regulate blade signs. These standards include maximum number (typically one per street frontage), maximum size (proportionate to the lineal frontage of the building), maximum projection, and location. The City of Long Beach has adopted objective standards as well as design requirements, including a preference for individual channel letters and a prohibition on plastic-faced cabinet signs.

Recommendation: Staff recommends amending the RMC to permit and regulate blade signs in Commercial and Mixed-Use Zones.

Electronic Message Center Sign Standards

The RMC defines Electronic Message Center Signs (EMCs) as “a sign that uses digital display to present variable message display by projecting an electronically controlled pattern and which can be programmed to periodically change the message display.” Currently, EMCs are permitted in commercial complexes 10 acres or larger and on parcels with Assemblies of People - Entertainment uses (e.g., movie theaters and events venues) 15 acres or larger. Eligible properties must be located along an Arterial Street as designated in the General Plan and are subject to the approval of a Conditional Use Permit.

Of the 10 zoning codes surveyed, seven prohibit EMCs with exceptions for time and temperature displays, gasoline pumps or ATMs, or freeway-oriented digital displays. The City of Riverside and the City of Long Beach were the only jurisdictions that conditionally permit EMCs subject to eligibility requirements based on property size, use, and street type frontage. Lastly, the County of Riverside is the only jurisdiction proposing to amend their zoning code to permit EMCs and digital displays in commercial and industrial zones. The proposed text amendment, initiated by a private property owner, would allow on-site digital displays for a portion of the allowable area for signage, subject to specific development and illumination standards and the approval of a discretionary permit. At the time of the Riverside County Planning Commission public hearing for this item, six public comments were made in opposition (including two peer cities), asking for greater restrictions placed on the allowable size and illumination to minimize any aesthetic impacts to sensitive receptors. In response, the amendment was updated to prohibit digital displays in the Wine Country Policy Area and the Palomar Observatory Policy Area. The final amendment is scheduled for a Public Hearing with the Board of Supervisors on December 5, 2024.

Recommendation: The cross-jurisdictional analysis shows that Riverside’s current EMC standards are as or more permissive and flexible than several peer cities. Therefore, staff recommends maintaining the existing standards for EMCs to appropriately allow and regulate digital displays within the City.

Codification of Design Guidelines

The Citywide Design and Sign Guidelines (Guidelines) were adopted in 2007 as an appendix to the General Plan 2025. The Guidelines are meant to encourage quality sign design and preserve the and enhance the aesthetic and economic values of the City. A major limitation of guidelines of any kind is compliance is not obligatory. After surveying peer cities, the following modifications to the RMC could address this limitation by requiring or prohibiting certain design elements:

- **Prohibition of cabinet wall signs:** Cabinet signs are defined as an internally illuminated sign consisting of frame and face(s), with a continuous translucent message panel. Three of the 10 cities surveyed prohibit cabinet signs, while one jurisdiction “strongly discourages” them. Currently, the City of Riverside Design Guidelines strongly discourage the use of acrylic cabinet signs, but the RMC still permits this sign type. The City of Long Beach includes amortization standards of cabinet signs, allowing for existing cabinet signs to be

reconstructed and replaced with another cabinet sign so long as it features push-through letters to create the effect of three-dimensional individual channel letters.

- **Prohibited materials:** The cross-jurisdictional analysis revealed only two cities to expressly prohibit certain materials: City of Riverside (plywood, pressed board, non-exterior grade wood products) and City of Long Beach (flat plastic cabinets, unfaced foam). Six jurisdictions do not expressly prohibit specific materials, but rather have a requirement for durable, weather resistant materials. One jurisdiction does not prohibit any specific materials, but rather requires all permanent signs to be constructed of metal, concrete, natural stone, glass or acrylics.
- **Prohibition of exposed raceways and/or electrical conduits:** Raceways and electrical conduits are necessary mechanical elements for illuminated signs. While the Design Guidelines require the concealment of electrical raceways and conduits, the RMC does not include any language requiring the concealment of this equipment to ensure the integrity of the sign design. Six of the zoning codes surveyed include provisions to require the concealment or camouflaging of raceways, conduits, and other mechanical elements of signage.
- **Regulation of product listings:** The primary purpose of on-premise signs is tenant identification, and listing of products or services may result in unnecessary sign clutter. Of the jurisdictions surveyed, eight do not regulate product listings including the City of Riverside. The City of Tustin permits product listings up to 25% of the allowable sign area. The City of Long Beach permits up to two products or services available on-premise. At the Committee's direction, the code may be amended to regulate product listings and address sign clutter.
- **Illumination:** While the RMC does not expressly prohibit neon or other architectural lighting methods, there are no standards to regulate this illumination method. Six of the 10 cities surveyed include standards specific to exposed neon signage and tubing, including maximum size, maximum footcandle power, and placement and location requirements. The City of Palm Springs specifically permits the use of neon signage for food or entertainment related uses only. It should be noted that none of the jurisdictions surveyed expressly require specific illumination techniques; however, the City's current Riverside Sign Design Guidelines identify and encourage internally lit, externally lit, halo lit, and appropriate use of neon. At the Committee's direction, the code may be amended to require, encourage, or prohibit specific illumination techniques.

Recommendation:

The cross-jurisdictional analysis shows several zoning codes include some level of adopted design standards. At the Committee's direction, the RMC may be amended to include all, some, or none of the above design standards, or others that the Committee would wish to see.

Flexibility and Superior Design

In addition to codifying certain design guidelines, cities may create alternative processes to allow for increased sign area if high quality signs or superior design is provided. The cross-jurisdictional analysis found that six cities offer modifications through discretionary review processes. While most cities have these processes strictly for flexibility, two leverage modifications to promote high quality signage. The Cities of Long Beach and Pasadena offer a Creative Sign Permit that an applicant may apply for in order to request approval of modifications to development standards. In return, the final sign shall constitute a substantial aesthetic improvement, be of unique design and exhibit a high degree of creativity.

Recommendation:

Offering flexibility to the required development standards allows the code to be business friendly and malleable to the needs of small businesses. Further, modification processes can be useful tools to promote superior sign design. Staff recommends the RMC be amended to allow for modifications to development standards in exchange for creative sign design.

Special tools for technical assistance

In addition to regulations and guidelines, a sign handbook or toolkit distills policy into digestible information easily understood by the public and provides step-by-step guidance on how to apply for and obtain required permits. Attachment 2 includes three examples of sign toolkits or handbooks used by cities to provide technical assistance for new signage. The City of Atascadero's sign handbook and the Village of Arlington Heights, Illinois, Sign Tool Kit for Local Area Businesses specifically offer technical guidance for new commercial signage. Although not specific to signage, the City of San Diego published a Mural Tool Kit to ensure artistic merit and quality of the built environment. A Sign Handbook can be a useful economic development tool to interpret standards and requirements. A mid-term (12-18 month) effort, creating a sign handbook would require the professional services of a sign or design consultant for development, public outreach and business engagement, and publishing. Depending on the contract amount, City Council approval may be required.

Recommendation:

Although technical assistance specific to signs are not common amongst peer cities, they can be useful tools for both practitioners and the public. At the direction of the Committee, staff can initiate the process to create some level of technical assistance to assist the general public with the sign permit process.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This item contributes to **Strategic Priority 3 – Economic Opportunity** and **Goal 3.3** – Cultivate a business climate that welcomes innovation, entrepreneurship and investment, and **Strategic Priority 5 – High Performing Government** and **Goal 5.3** - Enhance communication and collaboration with community members to improve transparency, build public trust, and encourage shared decision-making.

This Project aligns with the following Cross-Cutting Threads:

1. **Community Trust** – The workshop is presented at an open public meeting and contains transparent information on City processes and regulations.
2. **Equity** – The workshop promotes discussion on business-friendly regulations and solutions to maintain aesthetic quality in a feasible and practical manner.
3. **Fiscal Responsibility** – The workshop will not have any fiscal impact to the City.
4. **Innovation** – The workshop is to discuss and encourage innovative, creative, and high-quality signage within the City.
5. **Sustainability & Resiliency** – The workshop addresses existing sign regulations in place to reduce environmental, visual, and aesthetic impacts on surrounding communities.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no fiscal impact related to receiving this report.

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availability of funds: Kristie Thomas, Finance Director/Assistant Chief Financial Officer
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Attachments:

1. Cross-jurisdictional matrix
2. Sign Handbook and Toolkit Examples
3. Presentation