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Memorandum

TO: Emily Stadnicki, City of Culver City

FROM: Laura Stetson, MIG
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SUBJECT: SIGN CODE UPDATE STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW SUMMARY

To understand the concerns that the development community, local businesses, sign industry representatives, and other stakeholders may have about the current Culver City sign regulations and to identify any changes they would like considered, MIG conducted seven stakeholder interviews during May and June 2024 (via teleconference). The interviews summary below presents comments made by participants, organized by topic. Some comments conflict, representing the diversity of opinions shared.

Ease of Understanding the Sign Code

- The sign code is easy to use and interpret, and the structure is good.
- The commenter appreciates the subsections specific to zoning districts and specific sign types.
- The sign code is comprehensive.

What Works Well

- The provisions for temporary signs are consistent with those of other cities.
- The scale of allowed signage seems good, given varied land uses and the fact that various uses abut one another.
- The code provides multiple and various sign options (e.g., canopy).

What Needs Improvement

- Little flexibility is built into the sign permit approval process.
- The types of signage that are allowed and the overall language are outdated.
- The provisions often require a multi-tenant sign program, which creates tedious processes for subsequent tenants.

- The code should require smaller signs that do not take over the visual field. Signs should be "lean and clean." Should reduce allowance for wall sign square-foot area from a maximum of 40% of the building wall to a maximum 30% coverage.
- The sign restrictions are unreasonable.
- The City should not have discretion regarding lighting, such as whether the sign is front or back lit/how it is illuminated. The key consideration should be that lighting does not impede safety. The code should regulate light colors and brightness.
- Because the City is eclectic, it should not have "cookie cutter" lighting requirements.
- Artistic/decorative elements on a building that are related to the type of business (even with no branding) are considered signs and thus are infeasible or limited due to maximum allowed sign size. Provisions should allow for these types of building features not to be considered signs.
- The definition of "sign" in the code could be improved to explain better what is considered a sign. This should include how murals are and are not defined as signs.

Temporary Signs

- Most temporary signs are interim signs before the permanent sign is installed. Identify how long a temporary sign can be used so the owner can determine whether it makes economical sense to have one or just wait for the permanent sign.
- Sandwich board signs are fine, as they have a charm and can activate the sidewalk, which is good. They should be small and no higher than the allowed front yard fence height.
- The code should have an expedited process for a temporary banner (e.g., 30-day banner). The City requires too much detail about materials and specification sheets, and requires an inspection. By the time this occurs complete, the permanent sign would have been approved.
- "Grand Opening" temporary signs should follow the same rules as permanent signs (with size and materials allowed).
- Temporary signs should be allowed for longer time periods.
- The code does not allow posters and other types of signage for upcoming events – but should.

Digital Signs

- Digital signs are good to use for schools, churches, gas station price signs, and public buildings, but no uses beyond these.
- Digital signs look chaotic; limit their use.
- Most cities have not codified digital gas signs.
- Digital and changing copy signs are okay if they are small and at the pedestrian level (be careful of the scale of digital signs).

- Digital, electric, and giant moveable or static visual signs should not be allowed, and no LEDs should be permitted. Residential homes are tucked in between commercial buildings and so such signs would be "abusive."
- The code should allow digital displays, including both static, moving and rotating. Larger is okay.
- Static rotating images should be allowed.

Nonconforming Signs

- Regulations should require that if the use or tenant changes, the sign needs to be brought into conformance. However, a new tenant may not want to be responsible for a free-standing sign he/she had nothing to do with installing. Be clear on who is responsible for removing the sign.
- There needs to be good communication between the owner and City regarding nonconforming regulations and processes.

Sign Programs

- Use the sign code, when feasible, and not sign programs, because the former is more flexible.
- It would be helpful to have the various sign programs approved in the City to be accessible online. Business owners could then use those programs as a guide to determine what a given approved sign program allows, as it is sometimes difficult to get information from property owners and managers.
- Owners often do not know about their own sign programs, which can cause confusion with tenants not knowing what is allowed/what they can do until they talk to City staff.
- The code should have more flexibility to change a sign program.

Experience Working with City Staff and Sign Permit Process

- City staff is fantastic, gives clear direction/communication, and turns applications around quickly.
- The City needs more staff.
- Approval time could be improved, but understandably staff has a heavy workload.
- Amending a sign program can be slow.
- Where things have deviated from the sign code, applicants have been able to work through the items with staff.
- The City should not have two different inspections at different times – one for electrical and one for building permit. Often, they are not scheduled close together, and the sign company/applicant must wait all day in some cases. Consider one inspector that can do both.
- City processes should allow sign permits to be obtained online, with digital sharing back and forth of sign documents.
- It would be good to have an expected turnaround/timeline for applicants regarding sign permits posted on the City's website.

- Would be helpful to have a "Cliff's notes" version of the regulations posted online for those not familiar with sign codes.
- Sometimes staff is not available at the Public Counter to issue a permit (need to come back later).
- Interpretations on the sign code from staff are very clear.
- The City should have more enforcement of unpermitted signs, with repercussions. It is hard to tell a tenant what he/she cannot do for a sign when someone else illegally put up a similar sign. More enforcement would ensure cohesive application of the code.
- The sign permit approval process is fairly good. It is always better when things can be processed faster. Use more graphics to show requirements, have a PDF of the rules, etc.
- The City's online application is good.
- The City is one of the easier/better ones to work with.
- Improve timeline for getting signs on large advertising panels approved, since it takes a long time to print the ads out and then post them once the City approves. The graphics are costly to print, so applicants would rather not have too many changes on the part of the City.
- The City is fairly quick to review sign applications, but the process could always be more efficient, nimble, and flexible.

Other

- It comes down to good zoning – whether certain signs are appropriate or not.
- Signage on buildings should be small and not dominate the architecture/building.
- Historic signs should be grandfathered. Consider historic landmark status for them.
- Consider having pre-determined selections of sign items (type, size, colors, and materials) that an applicant can choose from. This would help unify signs in the City. Because the City is diverse, there can be variation. A sign company should create the pre-determined selections with a design review board pre-approving them. Then, these signs should be fast-tracked through the process.

Changes to the Sign Code Recommended by Interviewees

- Provide a section that lists exempted signs.
- Clarify whether a building must have street frontage to have a wall sign. Other cities allow buildings with parking lot frontage, although not necessarily on the street, to have wall signs).
- After final sign approval, there should be some flexibility for staff to determine that a minor change is generally in conformance. That should be built into the approval/review process (e.g., a slight change in the name on the sign – but still the same business).
- Allow curb signs/sandwich board signs because they are understated.
- More restrictions on sign lighting are needed. Lighting should make the sign visible from the street but not light up the sky. Lighting should be useful, not overstated.
- Allow artistic/decorative additions to a building without classifying them as signs.
- Expand square footage allowance for signs per linear foot, especially as some buildings are large but street frontage is small.
- Provide allowances for off-premises advertising, which currently are not allowed in the sign code.