# City of Culver City

## Staff Report

**File #:** 25-1296, **Version:** 2 **Item #:** PH-1.

**PC - PUBLIC HEARING: Consideration of a New Comprehensive Sign Ordinance (Citywide)**

**Meeting Date**: June 25, 2025

**Contact Person/Dept:** Gabriela Silva, Associate Planner
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**Phone Number:** 310-253-5736 / 310-253-5727

**Fiscal Impact:** Yes [ ] No [X] **General Fund:** Yes [ ] No [X]

**Public Hearing**: [X] **Action Item:** [ ] **Attachments:** Yes [X] No [ ]

**City Council Action Required:** **Yes** [X] **No** [ ] **Date** [07/14/25]

**Public Notification:** (Email) Public Notifications - Planning Commission (06/20/25), Meetings and Agendas - Planning Commission (06/20/25), Interested Parties (06/20/25); (Posted) City website (06/20/25), (Published) Culver City News (06/05/25)

**Department Approval**: Mark E. Muenzer, Planning and Development Director (06/12/25)

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## RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission adopt a resolution recommending the City Council:

1. Make a finding that the project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)((3) (Common Sense Exemption); and
2. Approve a proposed new Sign Ordinance as detailed in Resolution No. 2025-P009.

## PROCEDURES

1. Chair calls on staff for a staff report and Commission poses questions to staff.
2. Chair opens the public hearing, providing the public the opportunity to speak.
3. Chair seeks a motion to close the public hearing after all testimony has been presented.
4. Commission discusses the matter and arrives at its decision.

## BACKGROUND

Culver City Municipal Code (CCMC), Chapter 17.330 (Sign Ordinance or the “Ordinance”) provides standards and procedures for the regulation of signs in the City. Additional sign regulations are also included in CCMC Chapter 13.02 Offenses Against Property and CCMC Chapter 17.550 Variances, Administrative Modifications and Reasonable Accommodations. Historical signs are regulated under CCMC Chapter 15.05 - Historic Preservation Program, although no changes are proposed to the Historic Preservation Program.

The Sign Ordinance was last updated in 2005. Since that time, new case law has clarified how sign code regulations must be written to be “content neutral” and to avoid restricting noncommercial speech where commercial speech is allowed. Also, evolving technologies have created more signage options, and business needs continue to shift regarding desired signage.

Therefore, staff have prepared an update to the Sign Ordinance to address current requirements and practice. In addition, the Sign Code update incorporates the latest sign terms/definitions and best practices for sign regulations, as well as simplifies and clarifies provisions by re-organizing, reformatting, and adding graphics to illustrate terms and standards.

In June 2024, the City Council approved Zoning Code Amendment P2024-0083-ACA to amend CCMC Sections 7.330.015- Definitions and 17.330.040 - Signs in the Public Right-of-Way as they related to digital wayfinding kiosks on public property. These regulations are not being revisited as part of the Sign Code Update.

On September 24, 2024, the Planning Commission held a study session to discuss the Sign Code update. Staff and the City’s consultant, MIG, presented ideas for new content and received comments from the Commission and the public. The Commission offered the following direction:

*Iconic Signs* - The Commission supported the concept of an iconic sign program for signs with some cultural and/or historical merit that would not qualify as historical resources according to Chapter 15.05 (Historic Preservation Program) of Title 15 (Land Usage). The iconic sign program should allow replacement of copy and be considered for non-conforming signs. There was discussion of whether a tenant should be able to retain the iconic sign and have another sign to denote its business.

*Signs on architectural elements extending above a roof* - The Commission supported these types of signs in general with limitations and in certain areas of the City.

*Creativity in signs* - The Commission was in favor of allowing flexibility and creativity in signs as part of regular sign standards.

*Temporary signs* - The Commission supported the use of A-frame signs in non-residential areas, providing they do not obstruct walkways, and with clear guidance on when and where they can be used. The Commission also supported allowing pennants and inflatable signage if part of a special event permit, and neon signs. Special event and temporary signs put up before a permanent sign is installed are acceptable with time limits on duration and frequency in a year.

*Non-conforming signs* - The Commission was in favor of extending the time a non-conforming sign should be removed when a business has stopped operation from 90 to 180 days of cessation of business.

## ANALYSIS

The following summarizes the Zoning Code Amendment (Title 17: Zoning) for the Sign Ordinance in its re-organized form, and related Municipal Code Amendments to Title 13: Offenses Against Property, as it relates to signs. The new Sign Ordinance is included as Exhibit A to Attachment 1 and a brief summary of key changes to the Ordinance is included as Attachment 2.

### Chapter 17.330: Signs

Section 17.330.005: PURPOSE

The intent of the Sign Code has been simplified and reorganized for clarity under, “Purpose.” The purpose now includes additional items, such as consistency with the General Plan; maintaining content-neutrality in non-commercial and commercial sign messaging by regulating only time, place, and manner in signs; and maintaining high standards for signs while also allowing for flexibility and creativity. Provisions for regulatory interpretations have been moved to Section 17.330.060 Administration and Enforcement.

Section 17.330.010: APPLICABILITY; SUBSTITUTION CLAUSE

This Section replaces existing Section 17.330.010 APPLICABILITY and indicates where the sign regulations apply in the City, that a sign permit is required for certain sign types, and that all signs that meet the definition of, “structure” per the California Building Code (CBC) may also require a building permit. It also provides that in the case of a conflict between the text and any figure or graphic or picture, the text shall govern. Lastly, it contains a provision that commercial speech is not favored over non-commercial speech, and a non-commercial message may be substituted for any commercial message or other non-commercial message on a sign without approval.

Section 17.330.015: SIGN DEFINITIONS

Definitions in Chapter 17.330: Signs have been revised to reflect current terms and technology (e.g., “electronic message sign,” and “inflatable sign” instead of “balloon sign”) and definitions added for new terms used in the updated Sign Ordinance (e.g., “commercial message,” “wall painted sign,” and “foam letter sign”). Terms that refer to sign content, such as, “public information sign” and “holiday sign” have been removed since signs cannot be regulated by their content, or message.

If a definition is already provided in the general definitions portion of Title 17, Section 17.700.010 Definitions of Specialized Terms and Phrases, then Section 17.330.015 simply cross references that definition rather than repeating the text in two places. In some cases, changes to the existing definitions in Section 17.700.010 are proposed to reflect the Sign Code update, as noted below under, “Chapter 17.700: Definitions.”

Section 17.330.020: GENERAL RESTRICTIONS

The general restrictions address prohibited signs and restricted signs, the latter being signs that while generally prohibited, may be allowed in certain locations, under certain circumstances, or with special approval. Changes of note include specifically allowing A-frame signs as temporary signs on an ongoing basis (previously identified as “portable signs” and only allowed for temporary or special events).

Roof signs would be specifically prohibited, except the provision for allowing roof signs that are theater marquee and theater above roof identification signs (typically vertical signs) with an approved master sign program. Roof signs that qualify as historic signs per Chapter 15-05 (Historic Preservation Program) would continue to be allowed. “Balloon sign” has been reclassified as part of, “inflatable sign,” and is not listed as restricted, but standards for its allowance, including only as part of a special event, addressed in Table 3-14 of Section 17.330.050 TEMPORARY SIGNS.

Other changes include adding the following to the list of prohibited signs: abandoned signs, foam letter signs, billboards, off-site signs, pole signs, vehicle signs, signs that interfere with building access or traffic, signs that resemble traffic signs or traffic lights, signs attached to trees, light or traffic fixtures, and utility poles, and signs on public property except as required and authorized by a governmental agency. Such signs are commonly considered to add to visual clutter and are obtrusive or can cause circulation conflict and hazards.

In the current Ordinance, “billboard” is not mentioned, although new freestanding billboards are not permitted. The Sign Code update specifically lists “billboard” as prohibited.

Moving signs, previously prohibited except as approved with a master sign program, are identified in the Sign Code update as either “electronic message signs” and only permitted on public property, or as “active signs,” in which case they continue to require a master sign program.

Section 17.330.025 SIGN PERMITS

Currently, the Sign Ordinance provides that permits shall be required for all signs meeting the definition of “structure” in the CBC; those included in a master sign program and multiple-business sign program; signs requiring a Conditional Use Permit (CUP), Variance, or Modification; and temporary banners. This section of the Sign Code update provides clear direction and further detail on the types of approvals needed for specific signs and exempts several types of signs from sign permits.

*Sign Permit for Permanent Sign*

The Sign Code update simplifies that a sign permit is not needed for the following permanent signs: blade, window, and (business) directory, providing such signs meet the maximum number, maximum sign area, maximum height, and location listed in Table 3-10. If a sign does not comply with the standards listed in Table 3-10, then it is not allowed, unless it may qualify for and is granted an administrative modification or master sign program.

The standards for maximum number of signs per type, size of sign (sign area), and maximum height are

generally similar to those in the existing Ordinance, with some changes to reflect best practices and more flexibility and simplification. For example, the maximum window sign area remains 25 percent of the total window area, while the maximum height allowed for a directional sign is proposed at four feet, a departure from the current provision of referencing the height limit of the physical type of sign (e.g., a directional sign that is a wall sign).

A sign permit is not needed to change the copy on the face of the sign, and to conduct normal maintenance and repair. This section also lists permanent signs exempt from a sign permit without any limitations to include commemorative plaques, site address signs, flags, etc. Therefore, a sign permit is required for most types of permanent signs, such as wall, parapet, false mansard, canopy, awning, monument, and pylon.

*Sign Permit for Temporary Sign*

The Sign Code update stipulates that a sign permit is not needed for the following temporary signs: A-frame, various yard signs (commercial and non-commercial messages, on residential and non-residential property, and for limited and non-limited time periods), and construction signs providing such signs meet the maximum number, maximum sign area, maximum height, and maximum duration listed in Table 3-11. Rather than specify holiday signs, the update allows yard signs and banners signs generally.

The Sign Ordinance has been substantially restructured to remove certain categories of signs (e.g., “new business sign,” “real estate,” “public information” and “future occupancy signs”) and instead utilize the banner sign category or create various yard sign provisions to not favor some content types over others, and to allow for real estate, election, temporary sales, and other non-commercial messages.

Real estate signs are allowed in the public right-of-way due to the nature of these sales, which do not have expansive physical advertising options and have a limited duration. Such signs will be permitted on weekends and Tuesdays pursuant to a yearly permit.

The addition of “A-frame” as a temporary, ongoing sign allowed without a sign permit (with certain provisions - see Section 17.330.040 TEMPORARY SIGNS below) reflects the City’s desire to codify a type of sign that is already prevalent and used for everyday business. If a sign does not comply with the standards listed in Table 3-11, then it is not allowed.

Administrative modifications and sign programs do not apply to temporary signs.

*Comprehensive Sign Programs (Master Sign Program, Multiple-Business Sign Program)*

Many of the existing provisions of the master sign program are unchanged in the Sign Code update, but a few key provisions have been added. Standards have been added for the Director to consider prior to approving or disapproving an application for a master sign program, such as not impairing pedestrian and vehicular safety. A master sign program may be granted for provisions less restrictive than the regulations of the Sign Ordinance; the update includes a list of potential allowances, although the list is not exhaustive (e.g., active signs, freeway-oriented signs, certain theater signs).

Minimal changes are proposed to the multiple-business sign program provisions. However, the requirement for a multiple business sign program has changed from a multi-tenant development occupied by two or more to four or more separate business, to reflect a desire to create such regulations only for larger multi-tenant developments. The process has also been simplified.

*Sign Modification*

The existing reference in Section 17.330.050 REVIEW PROCESS AND APPEALS to Conditional Use Permits (CUP) has been removed since no sign would require a CUP. Modifications to signs may be allowed in accordance with the existing administrative modification provisions of Subsection 17.550.020.005-020 (Administrative Modification) of the Code. Pursuant to proposed Section 17.330.025(B)(1)(b), a modification may only be allowed for an increase in sign area identified for permanent signs by no more than ten percent.

*Variance*

The existing provisions for hardship exemptions have been replaced with a reference to the existing Variance provisions of Chapter 17.550 (Variances, Administrative Modifications and Reasonable Accommodations) for streamlining purposes. The Variance provisions address the key components of the hardship exemption provisions.

Section 17.330.030 GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ALL SIGNS

Standards that apply to all signs in all areas are provided in this section, and address the following: content neutrality, illumination; sign area measurement; sign height measurements; construction; maintenance; and design. Illumination standards have been augmented by specifically prohibiting temporary sign illumination, and by requiring lighted signs adjacent to residentially zoned areas (not including mixed-use zoned areas) to be controlled to reduce glare that creates a nuisance for residential buildings in direct line of sight to the sign.

The current Ordinance prohibits beacon and strobe lights and allows exterior klieg lights with a Police Department permit. All three lighting types are not usually part of a sign; therefore, the Sign Code update includes text that specifically prohibits beacon, spot, or stroboscopic sign lighting, and the general provisions for beacon, strobe, and klieg lights have been removed.

Methods of measurement for sign height and sign area are similar to the current Ordinance, with more detail and clarity provided in the Sign Code update, including graphic depictions. For example, measurement methods for specific types of signs, such as freestanding and building sign, are provided.

Provisions have been added to supplement the existing maintenance and construction standards, including ensuring that no part of a sign creates a physical or visual obstruction resulting in a traffic or pedestrian hazard, and stipulating durable, long-lasting sign materials. Additional design standards are proposed, including ensuring sign legibility and visibility from pedestrian access to building entries and in consideration of street trees, as well as requiring that multiple signs on a building façade be scaled in a clear hierarchy and

address different viewer orientations and audiences.

Section 17.330.035: PERMANENT SIGNS

This section includes standards for various permanent sign types, such as maximum number, maximum sign area, and maximum sign height by zoning district and land use. Standards for residential uses in residential zoning districts and mixed-use zoning districts, and for residential uses in Planned Development Districts not regulated by a Comprehensive Plan are provided in Table 3-12 for ease of reading. The table is separated into two parts: 1) single-family residential development (monument signs only); and 2) multi-family residential development (monument, wall, and driveway/directional).

Table 3-13 addresses standards for nonresidential uses in residential zoning districts (building signs only); nonresidential uses in mixed-use, residential, and special purpose zoning districts; and nonresidential uses in Planned Development Districts not regulated by a Comprehensive Plan (signs on awnings, canopies, walls, parapets, and false mansards, and monument, pylon, and directional signs). As with residential signs, the table is followed and augmented by text with additional standards by sign type.

The permanent sign standards by type include much of the existing Ordinance text, although reorganized for greater clarification, with some additions and revisions. As noted, separate classifications for “monument” and “pylon” signs have been created as opposed to referring to both as “freestanding” signs. The rationale is that monument signs tend to be lower in profile and less visually obtrusive than pylon. Therefore, the permitted sizes and design considerations are different.

Standards for various sign types include many of the existing provisions of the Ordinance, which are updated and simplified, as needed. For example, for non-residential areas, the wall sign standards for maximum sign area and maximum number of signs remain the same, while the maximum sign height standard has been simplified to only require that the sign be at least six inches below the roof edge of eave. Canopy and awning signs are proposed to be limited to one per building frontage for a single tenant and one per tenant space for a multiple tenant building, while currently there is not limit on such signs.

A sign allowance is established for permanent signs. A given building or tenant space may be allowed a wall, parapet, false mansard, canopy, and awning sign, but the total sign area allowance cannot exceed the maximum allowable sign area for building signs. In other words, if a business proposes a sign on an awning and a wall sign, the permitted amount of area for a wall sign is reduced accordingly. The purpose of this provision is to prevent too much signage and visual clutter, especially for sign types that serve the same type of viewer.

As in the current Ordinance, the Sign Code update provides updated standards for permanent signs for specific uses of property that typically have unique signs, including for drive-through establishments (menu boards); fueling stations (fuel price signs, fueling island signs, and fueling canopy signs); theaters (marquees and above roof identification signs - vertical); and auto dealerships (monument, banners/flags/pennants).

The only place electronic messaging is permitted besides on public property (see Section 17.330.050) is for fuel price signs at fueling stations, consistent with State law. Fueling island signs are permitted one video sign integrated into each fueling station with a maximum area of two square feet. The Sign Code update provides that changeable copy on signs is only allowed at theaters, fueling stations, and drive-through establishments. Note that government buildings and schools that are public are not regulated by the City, including the Sign Ordinance, therefore, changeable copy can continue to be allowed in these cases.

Section 17.330.040: TEMPORARY SIGNS

The Sign Code update augments the existing Ordinance with general provisions for temporary signs, including that only one temporary sign may be displayed at a time, unless authorized in conjunction with a temporary use permit or special event. Table 3-14 provides standards for size, height, maximum number, and duration of temporary signs for nonresidential uses in residential zoning districts; nonresidential uses in mixed-use, residential, and special purpose zoning districts; and nonresidential uses in Planned Development Districts not regulated by a Comprehensive Plan.

The signs include banner, feather, pennant, inflatable/balloon, and real estate open house. The table is followed and augmented by text with additional standards by sign type. The standards for banner signs include allowances for new businesses and future occupancy, as well as temporary special events. Real estate open house signs would require a temporary sign permit permitting multiple signs that would be valid for one year, and such signs would be allowed only on Tuesdays and weekends starting one hour before the event and no later than one hour after the event.

Section 17.330.045 HISTORICAL SIGNS

This section references Chapter 15.05 (Historic Preservation Program) for sign regulations on culturally designated buildings or structures, and signs approved as cultural resource designations. The Sign Code update does not include any new or amended regulations for historical signs.

Section 17.330.050: SIGNS ON PUBLIC PROPERTY

The City Council adopted Ordinance No. 2024-006 in June 2024, amending Section 17.330.050 (Signs on Public Property) regarding wayfinding kiosks (Subsection 17.330.050(B)(8). No changes to kiosks are proposed as part of the Sign Code update.

Section 17.330.055: NONCONFORMING SIGNS

The existing provisions of the Nonconforming Signs Section of the Ordinance remain, with some minor changes in the Sign Code update. The amount of time an abandoned nonconforming sign can remain is proposed to change from 90 days to 180 days, to allow additional time for a new business to occupy the site before the sign must be removed.

Section 17.330.060: ADMINISTRATION AND ENFORCEMENT

Minimal substantive changes are proposed to the existing Sign Ordinance regarding administration and enforcement, although the provisions have been simplified and condensed. This Section now includes regulatory interpretations, clarifying that the enforcement responsibility and reviewing authority is the Director. Chapter 17.640 (Appeals) is referenced for appeals of Director sign permits and other sign approvals. Provisions for permit expiration and revocation have been added.

**Chapter 17.700: Definitions**

To ensure consistency with the provisions and terms in the Sign Code update, the following definitions are proposed for revision: “canopy, structural,” “business frontage,” “false mansard.” Since these definitions are currently provided in Section 17.700.010, the revisions are to that Section, and the definitions cross referenced in Section 17.330 (Signs).

**Chapter 17.550 Variances, Administrative Modifications and Reasonable Accommodations**

Table 5-2 Administrative Modifications is proposed to be amended to add an increase in the sign area of a permanent sign as a type of administrative modification allowed, with a maximum adjustment of 10 percent. This corresponds to Subsection 17.330.025(A)(1)(b) of the Sign Code update. No more than 10 percent of the total sign area allowed may be exceeded, including applicable cumulative sign area, such as for wall signs.

**Chapter 13.02 Offenses Against Property**

This existing Chapter of the Zoning Code very briefly addresses signs in the public right-of-way and signs on residential and non-residential lots. Minor changes to this Chapter have been made for clarity and to consolidate provisions. The revisions confirm that no person shall construct, affix, place, or post any display or medium of communication in the public right-of-way except as provided in the Sign Ordinance and for certain City signs and news racks.

**Future Amendments**

Creative Signs and Iconic Signs have been removed from the proposed Ordinance. Further study is necessary to determine appropriate findings and standards. Staff will revisit the issue and possibly bring back an amendment at a later date.

**ENVIRONMENTAL DETERMINATION**

Pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) statutes and CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3)(Review for Exemption), a project is exempt from CEQA if it is covered by the commonsense exemption that CEQA only applies to projects that have the potential for causing a significant effect on the environment. The

project is an update to the City's Zoning Code, specifically the Sign Ordinance. The Ordinance provides standards and policies for installation of signs and is not in and of itself a development or physical change in the environment. The Ordinance does not provide for or allow new signs that are not currently allowed or similar in nature to those currently allowed or alter specific sign standards with the potential to have a significant effect on the environment. There would be no potential for an environmental impact to result from the proposed Ordinance. Therefore, pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3), project would be covered by the Common Sense exemption, as it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment, and the activity is not subject to CEQA.

## PUBLIC OUTREACH

In addition to the Planning Commission Study Session, City staff and its consultant conducted nine interested party interviews during May and June 2024 to understand any concerns that the development community, local businesses, sign industry representatives, and other interested parties have about the current Culver City sign regulations and to identify any changes they would like considered. In summary, consensus was that the code provide various sign options, is consistent with those of other cities, and allows for flexibility in the scale of allowed signage. Some identified issues with ordinance categories, including temporary signs, digital signs, nonconforming signs, and sign programs. See Attachment 2 for a summary of the interested party comments.

Comments Received During Public Comment Period

As of the writing of this report, staff has not any public comments in response to the public notification for the public hearing.

## FISCAL ANALYSIS

The Sign Code update has no anticipated fiscal impact to the City.

## CONCLUSION

The proposed amendments will establish sign regulations that are content-neutral, clear, and flexible, and reflect best practices and evolving technologies, while maintaining a high-quality design aesthetic in the City.

Based on the analysis contained herein staff asserts the findings for the Zoning Code Amendment as outlined in Proposed Resolution No. 2025-P009 (Attachment 1) can be made and recommends the Planning Commission recommend to the City Council approval of the amendments to the City's Sign Ordinance.

## ATTACHMENTS

1. Proposed Planning Commission Resolution No. 2025-P009 (P2025-0125-ZCA) with Exhibit A: New Comprehensive Sign Ordinance
2. Summary of Key Changes to the Sign Code
3. Summary of Interested Party Interviews

## MOTION

That the Planning Commission adopt Resolution No. 2025-P009, recommending that City Council make a

finding that the project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15061(b)(3); and approve the proposed Sign Ordinance (Attachment 1).